BAKHTIN IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY THEORY

BY DOROTHY J. HALE

The strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing and above all remembering his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative. This voice is striking because of what it relates, but even more so because the slave's acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape.

-- Robert B. Stepto

Rather than a rigidly personalized form, the blues offer a phylogenetic recapitulation -- a nonlinear, freely associative, nonsequential meditation -- of species experience. What emerges is not a filled subject, but an anonymous (nameless) voice issuing from the black (w)hole.

-- Houston A. Baker, Jr.

While the rest of us in the room struggled to find our voices, Alice Walker rose and claimed hers, insisting passionately that women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women had found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it.

-- Mary Helen Washington

What do we call a subject who is both more and less than an individual and stronger and weaker than a free agent? For all three of the authors I have quoted, and for many cultural critics over the past two decades, the answer is a "voice." Voice has become the metaphor that best accommodates the conflicting desires of critics and theorists who want to have their cultural subject and de-essentialize it, too. Fluid and evanescent yet also substantial and distinct, voice appeals to scholars as a critical term because it seems to provide a way of eliding the paralyzing dualisms that plague philosophical accounts of subjectivity. Thanks to its metaphoric flexibility, the term can describe human identity as
unproblematically both self-selected and socially determined, both individual and collective, natural and cultural, corporeal and mental, oral and [End Page 445] textual. In this essay I want to begin to theorize the conceptual role played by voice in recent cultural criticism by focusing on a line of argumentation that has its origin in African American studies but whose claims are currently influencing work in ethnic and gender studies generally: the move to make Du Boisian "double consciousness" synonymous with Bakhtinian "double voice."

W. E. B. Du Bois's theory that African Americans possess a "double" consciousness is the point of origin for much contemporary criticism of African American literature. According to Bernard W. Bell, for example, the African American novel has from its inception... been concerned with illuminating the meaning of the black American experience and the complex double-consciousness, socialized ambivalence, and double vision which is the special burden and blessing of Afro-American identity.

Yet if Du Boisian double consciousness has been hailed as the central theme of African American literature, another term and another theorist have often been invoked to explain how African American literature represents this theme. To a quite extraordinary extent, that is, African Americanists have glossed Du Bois by way of M. M. Bakhtin, and argued that double consciousness is most powerfully represented in African American literature by the Bakhtinian technique of "double voice." Michael Awkward, for example, has called "double voicedness" the "discursive corollary" to the Du Boisian model of African American identity. He discusses the role of double voice in texts like Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God as a Bakhtinian "narrative strategy" for representing each author's revised version of Du Boisian double consciousness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. declares double voice to be a "verbal analogue" for "double experience." So central is Bakhtin to Gates's own theoretical project that he prefaces his introduction to "Race," Writing and Difference with a quotation from 'Discourse in the Novel'; The Signifying Monkey opens with two epigraphs, one from Frederick Douglass and another from Bakhtin. And Gates defines the key term of this later work, the African American activity of "signification," by quoting Bakhtin's definition of a "double-voiced word."

For Gates and Awkward the relation between Du Boisian double consciousness and Bakhtinian double voice is even stronger than they often allow. When they describe double voice as a "verbal analogue" to or "discursive corollary" of double consciousness, Gates and Awkward imply that double voice is merely a literary technique, a mimetic strategy [End Page 446] for representing double consciousness. Yet both critics believe, and elsewhere explicitly state, that the double-voicedness of African American literature is more than a literary convention. As a strategy of representation, double voice would be controlled and designed by the authors who employ it in their fiction; yet Gates and Awkward speak of double voice as if it were beyond authorial control, a property not just of literature but of language itself. They treat voice, in other words, as the language that constitutes consciousness -- or rather, double voice as the languages that constitute double consciousness.

One might be tempted to blame this apparent confusion about Bakhtinian double voice -- the uncertainty whether it denotes a literary technique or linguistic identity -- on the interpreters and not
the concept; one might be tempted to say that the ambiguity comes either from misreading Bakhtin or from the inappropriateness of using Bakhtin's theory of language to gloss the nonlinguistic description of consciousness offered by Du Bois. Yet, while I will indeed show how influential theorists of African American identity have taken double voice out of context and how Bakhtin's language theory is not easily accommodated to a model of racial identity, my ultimate claim in this essay is that the African Americanists who invoke Bakhtin have in fact been far truer to Bakhtin than they know. Their confusion about "voice" comes not from a misinterpretation of Bakhtin but from a mistake about language that they share with Bakhtin. This mistake is as crucial for Bakhtinian identity theorists as it is for Bakhtin, because it seems to legitimate their shared attempt to theorize social identity by way of literary formalism -- a procedure I call "social formalism." 11

As I hope to make clear, Bakhtin's critique of linguists who abstract language from its social matrix paradoxically leads him to treat the matrix as if it resided within language. Since Bakhtin believes that language specially objectifies and materializes both personal and social identity, it is perhaps not surprising that he ascribes to literature, as an especially self-conscious form of language use, the ability to objectify and materialize the nature and operation of social language. Yet in Bakhtin's theory, language and literature are not the sole agents of meaning and identity; he describes individuals as both "voiced" and able to "voice": a person's identity may be constituted by the social languages that speak her, but she can nonetheless exercise control over her social positioning by "inflecting" the social identities manifested within the languages through which she is compelled to speak. If Bakhtin's social formalism leads him to describe social identity as materialized in and through language, it also encourages him to portray the people who use language as strangely immaterial, or rather materialized only in and through their language use. The ideal human agent for Bakhtin is the novelist who, as the master of linguistic mastery, is able to realize his own identity by displaying the linguistic identity of others, by giving voice to the social voices in language.

Only with a full understanding of Bakhtinian social formalism can we appreciate all that is at stake in reading Du Bois through Bakhtin. In the discussion of Barbara Johnson and Mae Gwendolyn Henderson that concludes this essay, I show how theorists of African American identity import the logic of Bakhtin's social formalism, but in the process make one important change: Johnson and Henderson attribute to the subaltern subject the linguistic mastery that Bakhtin reserved for the novelist. In reading Du Bois through Bakhtin, both Johnson and Henderson imply that the social discrimination that defines subaltern positionality is in fact the necessary condition for an epistemological privilege that in turn brings with it a new possibility for social and personal empowerment. The move from subaltern disempowerment to individual self-empowerment is accomplished in these arguments with the help of an idealized mediating term: voice is nothing less than the authentic de-essentialized self, made manifest. 12

In glossing double consciousness as double voice, theorists thus attempt to transform the Du Boisian crisis of subaltern invisibility into a Bakhtinian triumph of self-articulation. 13 The pyrrhic victory of this conversion, I will argue, helps us appreciate the Du Boisian terms in which it fails. If instead of reading Du Bois in terms of Bakhtin we read Bakhtin in terms of Du Bois, the emptiness of not just the Bakhtinian triumph but the Bakhtinian subject becomes evident. In the logic of social formalism, the "inflection" of social discourse may make individuality audible, but for all its tonal variety, inflection always signifies the same thing: a speaker's self-consciousness about the social identity expressed through his language. The Bakhtinian "heteroglot" novelist, like the silent Du Boisian African

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American, is defined by a negative capability: his self-consciousness about the social identities contained in language allows him to be more than the social languages that define him -- but that greater identity, formulated through the activity of distanciation, possesses no positive content of its own.

I

Although Du Bois has rightly been credited with providing an early account of socially constructed racial identity, if we look closely at the passage in which he introduces the term "double-consciousness," we can see that his formulation of the problem of African American identity is neither as self-evident nor as coherent as critics take it to be. In fact, the passage presents two distinct versions of socially constructed identity: an "ethnic" model that describes African Americans as defined by two (conflicting) cultural essences (African and American); and a "colonial" model that represents cultural identity not as something essential, but as the internalization of a subaltern social position dictated by hegemonic power relations. Du Bois's attitude toward the problem of socially constructed identity -- whether ethnic or colonial -- is complicated by yet a third model of identity also invoked in this passage: a version of transcendental individualism that expresses Du Bois's attachment to a more traditional -- and romantic -- American ideal of self-authorship.

In the opening pages of The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois describes the birth of his double consciousness as the moment when he first was made to feel his racial difference. A new (white) girl at school cuts him by refusing his visiting-card, "peremptorily, with a glance." The girl disdains him on the basis of what she can see (his skin color) and that refusal is expressed through a blind look that "rejects" Du Bois without knowing the person he believes he "really" is: someone who is no different from her or from anyone else, who is the same inside -- alike, as he puts it, in "heart and life and longing" (8). Du Bois describes this experience of alienation from white society as the feeling of being "shut out from their world by a vast veil" (8). In this formative moment he comes to know, in other words, that he was wrong to think that there is simply a true inner world of experience -- a soul -- that constitutes personhood. His identity as an African American does not simply reside within; who he is depends upon how he is viewed by a racist society, a society that thinks it sees him even as it "veils" him. This personal experience of racial discrimination becomes, at least as he presents it in Souls, the basis for his adult generalizations about the truth of the "Negro" condition:

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, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, -- a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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. One ever feels his two-ness -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. This history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, -- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. (8-9)

By defining African American identity in terms of a socially constructed consciousness, Du Bois...
implicitly combats the racist notion that the "Negro" is essentially different from the white. Yet racism nonetheless has such power over African Americans in this passage that it hides the "Negro" from the sight not only of history but of the "Negro" himself, who has yet to find his "better and truer self." The "veil" that white society has cast over the "Negro" does more than exclude him from white society: it creates a double consciousness within the "Negro," a split between his inner self and the self imposed by white society. If this outer self is false, it is, however, also the only self that the "Negro" can see: he is thus blind to himself, lacking any true self-consciousness.

And yet Du Bois says the veil also brings a gift and, what is more, a gift of sight, "second sight." Du Bois's motivating -- and deliberately age-old -- metaphor of "the veil" suggests that a position of social oppression has its compensations: what the subaltern lack in social power, they gain in knowledge. What can the "Negro" see that the white cannot? He can see that the white cannot see him; he is behind a veil that the white mistakes for him. And he can also see that he cannot see himself. There is a special knowledge granted to the "Negro" by his second sight, then, and it is the knowledge that his true self is unknown, by both white and black. What's more, the "Negro" alone knows that this ignorance is created by his socially imposed identity, his veil; he alone knows, that is, just how constitutive of identity, or rather deconstitutive, social positionality can be. And finally, he knows that the white does not know he possesses this knowledge. The "Negro" does have a special identity, then, and it is kept special, private, by the veil.

As we have seen, however, this inner self is not safe or whole inside the body that white society pities or despises; rather, it is divided, conflicted, self-blind. While thwarting the racism that would reduce the "Negro" to the black body, Du Bois's account of double consciousness internalizes the veil of socially imposed difference that Du Bois might otherwise have restricted to the body. The visionary power of "second sight" that now distinguishes the "Negro" is thus a power only to see the veil that white society has imposed, not to see what is beneath the veil; [End Page 450] for Du Bois, there is no alternative "Negro" identity that both escapes the encroachments of racism and remains visible to the "Negro" himself. Having refused to envision "Negro" identity as merely a physical property, Du Bois stops short, then, of characterizing the "Negro" spirit. Instead, he defines "Negro" identity -- "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" -- as nothing more than a point of view.

In denoting both the loss and gain of sight, double consciousness thus first arises in The Souls of Black Folk to describe the consequences that subaltern positionality has for racial identity. But this complex description of an impenetrable soul on the one hand and an incoherent colonized soul on the other is, in fact, only one version of double consciousness suggested in this famous passage. In the second half of the passage the colonial model of mediated identity is itself broken into two. The African American is torn between two incompatible national affiliations, what we might call two ethnicities. Indeed, these ethnicities are at war; the African American experiences his interiority as a struggle between equally compelling -- if only internally equal -- "souls." 17

Yet when Du Bois invokes a conventionally bifurcated ethnic model, not even this shift of paradigm can provide more solidity to "Negro" identity. His rhetoric downplays the constitutive features of each rival social identity as it emphasizes the experience of struggle itself. In other words, the fact of conflict becomes more compelling, or at least more legible, than what is in contest. Rather than elaborating the content of each term, Du Bois instead proliferates appositives that describe the feeling of division:
"two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings... two warring ideals." Moreover, since the opposing terms themselves, "Negro" and "American," are not clear logical opposites, the "twoness" of cultural essence seems not just de-emphasized but actually deconstructed. Why do African and American identity seem unsynthesizable? Du Bois implies it is because American identity is another name for racism. The "Negro" is ultimately not allowed to become American not because of his heritage, not because he is an immigrant -- not, that is, because of his hyphenated cultural identity -- but because of his color. "Negro" is dichotomous with "American" not because America cannot accommodate a synthesis of African American culture, but because American identity is withheld from someone whose skin color is black. The ethnic model thus is ultimately implicated in the hegemonic model and the results are the same: in both cases the twoness of the African American is not more but less; his double social identity results in the empty internal activity of self-division. [End Page 451]

It is at this point that the term Du Bois originally attempts to exclude, the essentially black body, returns. If Du Bois has up to now suppressed the body to show that color is an arbitrary signifier, this does not mean he imagines that "Negro" consciousness can exist apart from the "Negro" body. On the contrary, Du Bois's account of double consciousness culminates in a celebration of the "dark body" whose "dogged strength" keeps the "Negro" from being internally "torn asunder." This powerful body serves not only to "contain" a personal identity that otherwise threatens to explode but to compensate in some measure for the vulnerability to "Negro" consciousness. Yet Du Bois in this passage grants the "Negro" body only enough strength to suffer the pain of double consciousness, not to cure it. He offers the dark body not as a source of new meaning for "Negro" identity, but as at best a token of veiled inner resources, like the knowledge of self-blindness. If "Negro" identity remains contingent on social positionality, if "Negro" consciousness cannot change apart from social change, at least bodily strength will insure the "Negro's" survival throughout his struggle for change. 18

Through the figure of the veil and the metaphor of sight, Du Bois thus sets in motion, but leaves implicit, a variety of conflicting notions about how socially constructed identity might work and what its significance might be. For Du Bois, these ideas remain embedded in figurative language, I think, because the very idea of socialized interiority he briefly sketches here -- in all its different versions -- is itself in tension with an older model of identity that Du Bois takes for granted in The Souls of Black Folk, what we might call Emersonian transcendence. (Indeed, one of the sources of the term "double consciousness" seems to be Emerson's "Fate.") 19 In the famous passage on double consciousness, Du Bois turns almost imperceptibly in his second paragraph away from a radical vision of socialized interiority and toward the familiar romantic ideal of what Du Bois calls "self-conscious manhood." Self-conscious manhood might be another name for "Man Thinking." Like the Emersonian scholar whose office it is "to cheer, to raise, and to guide men by showing them facts amidst appearances," Du Bois's race leaders begin with self-improvement. 20 According to this model, social identity is something that is lived through, as it were, to ascend to a "better and truer self;" a self that is presumably beyond either culture or body, that is, quite simply, a free spirit. Social identity may thus be necessary, but it is not final; as Emerson puts it, "The one thing in the world of value is the active soul, -- the soul, free, sovereign, active." 21 Du Bois uses these same terms in describing the most important goal of "Negro education": [End Page 452]

Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass, must persist and
evolve that higher individualism which the centres of culture protect; there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammeled alike by old and new. (81-82)

Although much of *The Souls of Black Folk* is devoted to delineating the "physical, economic, and political" reform that will make these changes possible (203), social projects are thus subordinate for Du Bois to the goal of personal transformation -- the dream, as he says, of merging "his double self into a better and truer self." When society is changed, then the "Negro" can, like Emerson, feel that his individual identity is his own active creation, that he measures the world in terms of his "higher individualism," that rather than being a product of social positionality, his point of view defines the world in relation to himself. "Double consciousness" thus may hold some consolations for the "Negro" -- in a nation that institutionalizes social inequality it may offer a privileged kind of knowledge that compensates for lack of social power -- but, in the best of all possible worlds, double consciousness itself would be replaced by Emersonian transcendence. The unifying body in Du Bois's account thus becomes a foretype for the transcendental consciousness to come: the "better and truer self" is that which can sustain the dynamic internal division of autonomous self-definition.

II

If for Du Bois a divided identity is a specifically African American problem resulting from the particular social position of the "Negro" in America, for Bakhtin, all identity is divided, and that division is produced in and through language. This difference between Du Bois and Bakhtin is perhaps most easily grasped by way of a Bakhtinian parable concerned, as Du Bois's autobiographical anecdote is, with a coming into double consciousness. Bakhtin tells the story of an "illiterate peasant" who accepted his social position as simply a given. He failed to recognize the play of social forces that not only oppressed but divided him, forces that, for Bakhtin, were most noticeably manifested in the peasant's polyphony of languages, which he employed without even noticing how distinct and even rivalrous they were. As Bakhtin writes,

> Miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world, [the peasant] nevertheless lived in several language systems: he prayed to God in one language (Church Slavonic), sang songs in another, spoke to his family in a third and, when he began to dictate petitions to the local authorities through a scribe, he tried speaking yet a fourth language (the official- literate language, "paper" language). All these are different languages, even from the point of view of abstract socio-dialectological markers.

Eventually, however, the peasant becomes radicalized; he learns that even his rural world is saturated with power struggles and ideologies in conflict. This knowledge, it is crucial to note, does not come to the peasant through some economic disaster or political atrocity; however much Bakhtin may, throughout his work, declare his interest in concrete historical and social realities, these materialist specifics are conspicuously absent from his writings. Rather, the social forces that shape the peasant's identity are so fully rendered in the peasant's language use that he only needs to feel the friction created by his competing language systems in order to recognize his own dividedness:
As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur in the consciousness of our peasant, as soon as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages, that the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another -- then the inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages came to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began. (*DI*, 296)

In other words, the peasant learns to distinguish among the ideological systems to which he belongs thanks to the different linguistic forms they take. As Bakhtin says of social discourses, "Whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, [they] are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values" (*DI*, 291-92). The identity of Bakhtin's peasant may be as constructed and divided as that of Du Bois's "Negro," but, far from being hidden behind a "veil," every fragment of his identity can become fully visible, as it were, in language.

Bakhtin goes so far as to speak of "socio-ideological groups" and "contradictions" as being "given a bodily form" in language (*DI*, 291; emphasis added). The metaphor is a striking indication of the pressure Bakhtin exerts on language to make it seem material -- although my point, again, is not that Bakhtin wants to subordinate language to material conditions, but rather that he tries to make language take the place of material conditions. Hence the visible form or body that language supposedly gives to ideology is in turn subordinated to a form within the language form, a form that is barely a form, the "voice" in the language body that distinguishes one ideology from another. This concept of voice enables Bakhtin to postulate what has come to be regarded as one of his most important contributions to sociolinguistic theory: the notion that an apparently unitary language can actually contain diverse and even interpenetrating sociolinguistic points of view, and that a seemingly singular body of discourse, as restricted as an individual utterance, can contain multiple social identities. Indeed, the development of Bakhtin's work is distinguished by the increasingly complex activity he assigns to the inner life of language. In a text like *Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics* (1929), Bakhtin uses voice relatively straightforwardly, as a term for characterological discourse; he praises Dostoyevsky for allowing the various voices of his characters to be heard, a diversity that Bakhtin calls polyphony. Later, in "Discourse in the Novel," the text that is taken to be the definitive articulation of his language philosophy (and thus will be the primary text that I draw on for my discussion of social formalism), voices are found to reside in language aside from persons, so that subjectivity now becomes an effect of the voices that language speaks through characters.

If this theory seems at first far more radically constructivist than any proposed by Du Bois, the parable of the peasant nevertheless shows us that Bakhtin believes the incorporation of voice within language actually liberates individual agency. Rather than lurking undiscernibly beneath the Du Boisian veil of social objectification, the identity or identities imposed on the peasant are themselves so thoroughly objectifiable in language that the peasant not only can comprehend them but "actively" can choose his "orientation" among them. In other words, just as the voices of competing ideologies reside within the form or body of language, so individuality can itself be expressed through these voices. Bakhtin's vagueness about how this individuality manifests itself within the more primary forms of sociolinguistic identity is signaled by the abundance of figures he uses to describe it: the "orientation" practiced by the knowing peasant is elsewhere called "inflection," "refraction," "accent," or
"ventriloquization." His particular reliance on vocal metaphors, however, suggests a model of communication based on an ideal of spoken exchange that is immediate, responsive, and active. For Bakhtin the "passive" interpenetration of consciousness that Du Bois describes is transformed through self-consciousness into a linguistic activity. What Du Bois regarded as the obliteration of individual point of view -- having to "look at one's self through the eyes of others" -- Bakhtin formulates as a liberating ideological mobility -- "looking at one social language through the eyes of another." By making point of view a property of language and not individuals, by making looking the same as speaking, Bakhtin stresses that identity is never a matter of private interiority, but, on the contrary, is always a matter of social relation. In Bakhtin's model, African American identity might always be possible to manifest, even if were materialized "only" through mediation, through the inflection of hegemonic discourse rather than through its own autonomous social language.

If Bakhtin imagines that a form so localizable as a single utterance can embody the multiplicity of individual and social subjectivity, it is not surprising that he also imagines that this isolatable linguistic form facilitates cultural understanding by making subjectivity specially legible and thus optimally interpretable:

It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language. (DI, 272)

Language thus not only embodies the complexities of subjectivity, but it also locates them all in one place. That this dynamic meaning is not expressed by conventionally formal compositional markers does not deter Bakhtin. On the contrary, he imagines that the complex inner life of the utterance is evinced by the linguistic palpability of features like "refraction" and "voice" -- even if these traces of subjectivity are so subtle as to seem nonexistent, made visible or audible only by Bakhtin's highly original analysis of discourse. So attuned to the nuances of language does Bakhtin claim to be that he can even tell when one language, by drawing attention to the materiality rather than the intentionality of discourse, reifies another. Although Bakhtin's inquiry seems to rely on a systematic classification of discourse types, his interpretive method is so idiosyncratic and so dependent on metaphoric terms that it has spawned countless unresolvable debates among critics who attempt to conduct Bakhtinian micro-analyses of specific texts. 30

Perhaps not surprisingly, Bakhtin's social formalism has directed attention to the language of texts rather than of people. Although the example of the peasant might suggest that, like Du Bois, Bakhtin wants to correlate linguistic power with class position, Bakhtin does not explore the ramifications of social position, choosing instead to create a continuum of linguistic self-consciousness in which the illiterate peasant marks one extreme. The other extreme is marked not by the czar or general secretary but by the novelist -- the language-user most sensitive to the voices in the languages he uses. While "all languages of heteroglossia," writes Bakhtin, "encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people," they do so "first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels" (DI, 292). 31

The term "double-voiced discourse" is introduced in "Discourse in the Novel" as one of the complicated techniques employed by the novelist to represent this linguistic encounter:
Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings, two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they -- as it were -- know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. (DI, 324)

Because language is for Bakhtin an ideal social body, double voice can seem to solve the problem of double consciousness: it can equalize power relations simply through self-expression. In Du Bois's description of double consciousness, hegemonic mediation sunders the ideal unity of African American identity: the social conditions of racial discrimination turn even the positive content of ethnic affiliation into a negative self-relation -- "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals" -- resulting in the experience of internal division rather than the manifestation of double identity. By contrast, in Bakhtin's model, the unequal power relations between author and character are mediated, and thus transformed, in and through the capacious social body of language; language manifests two different subjectivities -- "two voices, two meanings, and two expressions" -- and even allows them a new relation to each other, a dynamic unity that preserves individual identity while promoting not just inter-subjective relation but, more powerfully, inter-subjective communion.

Author and character, like hegemonic and subaltern subjects, are initially characterized in this description of double voice by their unequal manifestation within the language body: the character's intention is directly expressed while the author's is refracted. But unlike Du Bois's description of social power relations in which social subjects are mediated only through each other, in Bakhtin's account of the novel, mediated subjects preserve their autonomy because they are equally mediated by language. Thanks to the materializing power of language, the difference between "direct" and "refracted" intentions is less important than the visibility of each. In, as Bakhtin puts it, "serving" two speakers equally, language thus not only expresses two different intentions, but ultimately converts these two intentions into a single shared intention. If character and author initially used the same language to say two different things, their cohabitation within the same language body leads them to speak equally to each other about only one thing: each other. The difference between character and author is simultaneously preserved and overcome by the dialogue within the language body.

Double-voiced discourse is not unique to the novel, but its operation in the novel is instructive because it makes clear the tenuousness of Bakhtin's larger claim that "prose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse, as well as its relativity, a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle" (DI, 331). Bakhtin so much believes that language is subjectivity that he sees no difference between the subjectivity of a fictional character and that of the author that created him or her. On the contrary, he imagines that language itself does not just manifest subjectivity but makes the subjectivity of the fictional character equal to the author's. Again what we might call the realities of point of view -- the ontological difference between a real author and her fictional characters -- is, like the difference between subaltern and hegemonic subjects,
nullified by the special representational power that Bakhtin accords language, the power to convert
the realities of social stratification into a linguistic utopia of intellectual and conversational community.

For Bakhtin, then, the novelist possesses two extraordinary capabilities: a godlike ability to represent
the self through the other, to occupy but not violate the autonomy of the "other," as well as a negative
capability to manifest himself through language but always to be more than language. In the first case,
the novelist can absorb his own social identity from discourse long enough to represent discourses that
are not his own: "It is impossible to represent an alien ideological world adequately without first
permitting it to sound, without having first revealed the special discourse peculiar to it" (DI, 335). Yet
the novelist [End Page 458] can also occupy the "alien" social discourse that he represents without
violating its integrity. He thus can be a benign colonist who, by operating within discourse, leaves its
native form intact:

He [the novelist] can make use of language without wholly giving himself up to it, he may
treat it as semi-alien or completely alien to himself, while compelling language ultimately
to serve all his own intentions....The prose writer makes use of words that are already
populated with the social intentions of others and compels them to serve his own new
intentions, to serve a second master. Therefore the intentions of the prose writer are
refracted, and refracted at different angles, depending on the degree to which the
refracted, heteroglot languages he deals with are socio-ideologically alien, already
embodied and already objectivized. (DI, 299-300)

The novelist's ability to speak "through" another's language enables him ultimately to be unconfined by
any one language, what Bakhtin calls "A freedom connected with the relativity of literary and language
systems":

Such forms open up the possibility of never having to define oneself in language, the
possibility of translating one's own intentions from one linguistic system to another, of
fusing "the language of truth" with "the language of the everyday," of saying "I am me" in
someone else's language, and in my own language, "I am other." (DI, 314-15)

Like the sovereign transcendental soul that Du Bois describes, Bakhtin's novelist thus seeks "a
freedom for expansion and self-development." But whereas for Du Bois this freedom would create a
more unified self, the "better and truer self" of the Bakhtinian novelist might be said to "seek to know
itself and the world around about it" through the activity of alteration, what Bakhtin calls an
"oscillation" (DI, 322). Indeed, we might even say that the Bakhtinian novelist fulfills his subjectivity
through a rhythm of regulation; self and other are distinguished less by any particular social attributes
than by the fruitful division of phenomenological noncoincidence.

III

What makes Bakhtinian theory immediately inviting for African Americanists are the points of
connection between Bakhtin's and Du Bois's descriptions of the socially constructed subject. They
each imagine personal identity to be determined by social identity, which both critics define as
membership in an identifiable cultural group. Because they believe that social identity is prior to and
constitutive of personal identity, [End Page 459] each describes individual consciousness as point of
view, a concept that stresses the nonessential "content" of consciousness and emphasizes the integral relation between a person's thought and the ideology of her subject position. In addressing the crisis of African American identity expounded by Du Bois, theorists rely in particular on two concepts from Bakhtin: the notion that social identity is embodied in language; and the belief that an individual can manifest those social identities through his or her own language use. By adding Bakhtin's account of language to Du Bois's model of the socially constructed racial subject, these theorists thus turn the "empty" identity of Du Bois's "Negro" into a negative capability produced by subaltern positionality.

As we have seen, Du Bois assumes that consciousness is the ideal site of identity. In his account, the catastrophe of hegemonic power relations is that they violate the inner sanctum of consciousness. Yet paradoxically, this very invasion gives the "Negro" a certain power over his colonizers, the power to represent, if only to himself, the limitations of hegemony as an objectifiable point of view. Since the "Negro" internalizes not just the white view of himself but also the hegemonic power relations that create the difference between "Negro" and white identity, the "Negro" cannot, by definition, see himself as whites see him, even when the white point of view resides within. This internal alienation from hegemonic vision allows him to know that he is more than the point of view that defines him but not to know the precise content of this hidden self. Thus "Negro" consciousness produces a "Negro" beyond hegemonic knowledge and control, even if it is only the activity of negative relation that constitutes an "authentic" "Negro" point of view.

Theorists like Gates, Awkward, Henderson and Johnson accept Du Bois's account of African American consciousness as divided, but they employ Bakhtin's theory of double-voiced discourse to transform the social conditions of self-alienation into the linguistic condition of self-articulation. In reinterpreting Du Bois's model of African American consciousness through Bakhtin's sociolinguistic definition of point of view, these African Americanists conclude that there is more than one kind of container for socially constructed identity. The dark body contains within it a form that manifests rather than veils social identity; the linguistic body. Bakhtin's description of language as a container for multiple social identities means that the invasion of the African American's physical body can be countered by the African American's own invasion of the hegemonic linguistic body. The activity of negative relation that defines African American identity can thus be expressed in and through language. And because language is externalizable, because the language [End Page 460] that constitutes consciousness can be formed outside of the mind, African Americans have a way of making their own point of view visible -- even if this point of view is no more than the process of negative relation, the inflection of hegemonic language. In reading Du Bois through Bakhtin, then, theorists discover a source of empowerment for the African American: he controls, if not the terms of his identity, then at least his own linguistic expression of that identity. Bakhtin's social formalism encourages theorists to declare, moreover, that the African American's externalization of negative identity has political consequences. The articulation of subaltern identity can subvert hegemony by making visible its limitations. 32

A pivotal moment in Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Writer's Literary Tradition," reveals how the capacity for linguistic alterity that, for Bakhtin, is the source of the novelist's power is now equated with the subaltern condition of internal division:

It is the process by which these heteroglossic voices of the other (s) "encounter one
another and coexist in the consciousness of real people -- first and foremost in the
creative consciousness of people who write novels," that speaks to the situation of black
women writers in particular, "privileged" by a social positionality that enables them to
speak dialogically racial and gendered voices to the other (s) both within and without. 33

Significantly, Henderson has made Bakhtin's agent at once more specific and more general. On the
one hand, the position of creative supremacy ("first and foremost") that Bakhtin accords the novelist is
expanded to include all writers; but, on the other hand, this creative capacity is explicitly linked -- in a
way that it is not limited in Bakhtin -- to a particular social positionality. Henderson's modification of
Bakhtin thus raises a question she never answers: is the black woman's identity as a writer part of her
subject position? Or is her subject position defined by race and gender and her creative
consciousness attributable to some inherent talent that belongs to writers? It is this ambiguity that
allows Henderson to imply that "social positionality" actually creates creative consciousness. She is
thus able to accomplish the startling conversion of social disempowerment into vocal privilege. 34

In her influential essay "Metaphor, Metonymy and Voice in Their Eyes Were Watching God "
(1987), Barbara Johnson's use of Bakhtin is more implicit, but it is nonetheless crucial for her account
of subaltern language and its political consequences. 35 Like Bakhtin, Johnson believes [End Page
461] that some people are specially capable of understanding, and thus expressing, the truth of self-
division. Like Henderson, she believes that social position, specifically that entailed by race and
gender, allows some social groups more than others, "blacks" more than "whites" and black women
more than black men, to be especially self-conscious of the socially constructed division that
constitutes their identity. 36 Because this social condition of alienation is expressed in and through
subaltern language, the subaltern voice, in literature as in life must "to be authentic... incorporate and
articulate division and self-difference." 37

To argue this thesis, Johnson quotes the Du Bois passage on double consciousness. Significantly, she
introduces it by way of a quotation from Henry Louis Gates in which he describes the "writer of
African descent" as belonging to "at least two traditions -- the individual's European or American
literary tradition, and one of the three related but distinct black traditions."

While Gates here seems
willing to admit that the cultural heritage of the African American writer is complex -- he belongs to
"at least" two traditions and one of these traditions can itself be divided into three -- he proceeds, in
the passage quoted by Johnson, to reduce the intricacies of ethnic relation to a simple dichotomy. In
Gates's description the African American writer's cultural heritage is reified in language, a division that
is instantiated, Gates ultimately asserts, through the "double-voiced" literary "utterance."

Johnson is certainly right to recognize that Gates's description of literary doubleness has in mind the
Du Bois quotation, but she does not see that Gates has also rewritten Du Bois through Bakhtin.
Without analyzing the Du Bois quotation itself, she seems to accept Gates's assumption that Du
Boisian double consciousness is defined only in terms of what I am calling the "ethnic" model: the
division between what Gates glosses as African and Euro-American cultural identities. Johnson does
not see how Du Bois problematizes the category of cultural heritage by obscuring the "essential"
characteristics of each group identity nor does she see how Du Bois's use of the term "Negro" further
destabilizes the notion of what might be termed cultural essence. 40 Although Johnson's own argument
is interested in how identity is constructed in and against hegemonic social forces, she also does not
see in the Du Bois quotation the complexities raised by his invocation of the "colonial model": his definition of "Negro" identity not simply as divided but as mediated by the hegemonic point of view. In other words, all Johnson sees in Du Bois is confirmation of the familiar deconstructionist paradox: that knowledge about the truth of self-division is empowering. And she sees in Gates's Bakhtinian gloss of Du Bois a way of making this [End Page 462] knowledge inseparable from the socio-linguistic identity of African Americans. That this buried allusion to Bakhtin seems hidden from Johnson herself, even as it plays such a crucial role in the development of her argument, shows exactly how much the Bakhtinian notion of voice is taken for granted by theorists of African American identity.

In reading Du Boisian double consciousness through Gates through Bakhtin, Johnson not only makes consciousness indistinguishable from language, but makes a certain kind of language use -- "double voicedness" -- synonymous not just with the positionality of African American literary texts (Gates's equation), but with all of African American identity. African Americans can know better and express more fully the truth of self-division because their divided social position allows them a privileged insight that is perfectly represented by their use in life and literature of double-voiced discourse. Like the Bakhtinian novelist, Johnson's African American can both resist and expose hegemonic appropriation simply through linguistic self-expression.

Through the concept of "voice," then, critics like Gates, Awkward, Henderson, and Johnson can describe African American identity as constituted by a social positionality that does not simply divide but splinters identity; indeed, according to these theorists, African American identity is so fragmented that neither any single piece nor any combination of pieces can accurately represent the whole. These critics thus imply that the best way to define African American identity is as an activity rather than an entity: African American identity is not fragmented but the very process of fragmentation. The category of race is thus retained but also redefined: instead of restricting African American identity by limiting it to either one kind of body or even one kind of social division, "race" now allows African American identity to be conceived of as infinitely fluid. 41

While this redefinition of African American identity may thus discover a freedom within social determination, it also risks making African American identity illegible and perhaps even imperceptible. 42 As I have tried to demonstrate, the social formalism that these identity theorists share with Bakhtin leads them to believe that Bakhtin's theory of language provides an answer to this problem. They imagine that language as Bakhtin describes it both preserves and reconciles what I have shown to be the two different models of African American identity -- the "ethnic" and the "colonial" -- that inform Du Bois's description of double consciousness. According to the logic of social formalism, the uniquely "two-toned" heritage of African American identity is instantiated in African American language, while African Americans as subalterns are [End Page 463] dialogically empowered within the hegemonic language through which they speak. These two models of double identity coincide for social formalists because the doubleness of "ethnic" African American identity derives not from any positive cultural content but from the negative capability inherent in subaltern positionality: the capacity of the African American not simply to accommodate but to know, practice, and instantiate linguistic self-division.

Yet this influential account of African American double-voicedness may leave us wondering exactly what kind of distinguishing "gift" it bestows in compensation for the pain of racial discrimination, the grounding assumption in the Bakhtinian rewriting of Du Bois. In fact, it seems that, by interpreting the
"gift" of second sight as self-conscious language use (double vision as double voice), the logic of social formalism introduces a new kind of crisis for African American identity: by reading Du Bois through Bakhtin, theorists have imagined a way that subaltern identity can distinguish itself from the hegemonic identity that defines it, but it has won African American self-definition at the price of making all subaltern difference the same. Since social formalists define African American identity not as positive content but only as linguistic oscillation, how can they distinguish African American expression from the similarly oscillatory discourse of any other subaltern group? Johnson's suggestion that some groups are more oppressed and thus more linguistically divided than others is one attempt to grant different subaltern groups a discursive autonomy. But even if Johnson is right that the subaltern position of black women, say, makes them "more divided" than black men, how are we to differentiate between languages that are both expressive only of an "ever-differing self difference"? African Americanists initially turn to Bakhtin because double voice seems to hold a special relation to African American identity; yet Bakhtinian social formalism ultimately works to divest African American identity from any privileged relation to double consciousness. When double vision is read as double voice, the distinguishing feature of African American identity comes to define all subaltern identity. Reading double consciousness as double voice thus may free the African American from any particular crisis of inexpressibility, but in doing so the particularity of African American identity is also lost: the African American is free to speak, but can utter only the subaltern language of empty self-expression.

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Notes

I would like to thank Elizabeth Abel, Charles Altieri, Stephen Greenblatt, Luciana Herman, Jeffrey Knapp, Steven Knapp, Carolyn Porter, Ralph Rader, Eric Sundquist and the members of the Bay Area Americanist Reading Group for their careful reading of and generous critical response to early drafts of this essay.


4. Arnold Rampersad goes so far to say that, in describing "the irrevocable twoness of the black American, he [Du Bois] laid the foundation of all future literary renditions of the subject. True to his gift, he both analyzed and simultaneously provided the metaphor appropriate to his analysis" ("W.E.B. Du Bois as a Man of Literature," Critical Essays on W.E.B. Du Bois, ed. William L. Andrews [Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985], 60). Other critics who identify double consciousness as the central or motivating theme of African American literature include Michael Awkward, Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels (New York: Columbia Univ. Press,
Dorothy J. Hale - Bakhtin In African American Literary Theory - ELH 61:2


6. Awkward (note 4), 56.

7. Awkward, 54-56.


10. Gates's "Signifyin'" and Awkward's "denigration" are first of all general linguistic practices and only secondarily literary techniques. See Awkward (note 4), esp. 8-10; and the "Introduction" to The Signifying Monkey (note 9).

11. Here I am in agreement with the estimation of Bakhtin offered by Vincent Pecora, Self and Form in Modern Narrative (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1989), esp. 20-21. Yet rather than conclude, as Pecora does, that Bakhtin is simply contradictory, I would emphasize the logic by which Bakhtin believes he has reconciled his formalism and materialism. It is precisely the relevance of this logic to contemporary debates about identity and not the a priori character of "pluralist, capitalist societies" that has made Bakhtin so important to African Americanists.

12. More than any other theorist, Henry Louis Gates has authorized the practice of describing African American identity in Bakhtinian terms. Awkward, Johnson, and Henderson -- along with Lyne, O'Connor, and Wald -- either cite Gates explicitly or else appear in collections of essays that he has edited.

13. Lyne (note 4) has trenchantly observed how Bakhtin has been used by recent critics to redefine double consciousness as a source of African American empowerment (31920). Lyne tries to counter this theoretical trend by showing that writers such as Ralph Ellison felt, like the African American subject described by Du Bois, constrained by double consciousness. Lyne's practical criticism, however, does run into his own theoretical difficulties. Since he does not explicate the Du Boisian definition of double consciousness, he both oversimplifies the concept and makes the mistake of using voice and consciousness as interchangeable terms.

14. Two recently published books have powerfully explored the complexity of Du Bois's notion of double consciousness. A collection of essays edited by Gerald Early -- Lure and Loathing: Essays on Race, Identity, and the Ambivalence of Assimilation (New York: Penguin, 1993) -- marks the first concerted effort to re-evaluate Du Boisian double consciousness. In Early's "Introduction," after he quotes the famous passage in which Du Bois defines double consciousness, he rightly asks, "Although this passage is endlessly quoted, have we ever been sure what it means?" (xviii). Early goes on to articulate the fissures of logic that characterize Du Bois's figurative language, but he concludes too hastily that the passage is not the "expression of a unified idea" but rather the "expression of a series of sentiments that are, more or less, rhetorically connected" (xx). Paul Gilroy in his The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1993) performs the crucial task of relating Du Bois's sense of the particular crisis of African American identity to the African European experience of double consciousness. His rich contextualization of Du Bois's intellectual development enables him to illuminate the philosophical tensions underlying the Du Boisian definition of double consciousness. Du Boisian double consciousness is for Gilroy "the unhappy symbiosis between three modes of thinking, being, and seeing" (127, see also 134). Before Early and Gilroy, Cooke, Stepto, and, more recently, Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. in his "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," American Literature 64 (1992): 299-309, illuminated if not the complexities of the passage then the complexities of the concept. See especially Cooke (note 4), 35; Stepto (note 1), 54; and Bruce, 301. Although all of these critics perceive the general terms of the logical tension within Du Bois's definition, Stepto is the only one who keeps the full problematic in play. Cooke reduces the problem of double consciousness to a problem of self-possession (19-20). Bruce contextualizes the concept in terms of Romanticism and contemporary psychological theory.
but he ultimately declares that Du Bois used double consciousness strategically to describe the conflict between African spirituality and American materialism set forth in *The Souls of Black Folk* (301). Awkward (note 4) asserts the same point that Bruce argues for (12). Double voice has otherwise been interpreted as "psychic duality" (Arnold Rampersad, *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* [New York: Schocken, 1990], 74; and Stewart [note 4]); "the struggle of self-consciousness" (O'Connor [note 4], 202); "ambivalence" toward white culture (Bell [note 5], 35; and Jones [note 4], 63); mediation by white culture (Wald [note 4], 79-80); and "masking" (Callahan [note 4], 26 and Baker [note 4], 85). My reading of double consciousness attempts to show how these different meanings are invited by the passage and how Du Bois's figurative language both illuminates and works to make compatible the larger philosophical issues that inform his description.

15. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Vintage, 1990), 8; further references will be indicated parenthetically in the text.

16. Because Du Bois's project is definitional, his discussion of racial identity can best be explicated by retaining his terms. By putting Du Bois's Negro in quotation marks, I want to emphasize the term's constructedness.

17. When Du Bois returns later in *Souls* to the concept of double-consciousness, he imagines the problem of "Negro" identity in yet another distinct way, related but not identical to the dual and dueling cultural identities he here describes. In this description, the veil now creates not divided consciousness but a division between authentic and inauthentic consciousness. The bifurcated social world produced in the south by the color line forces African Americans to live a double life, one whose duplicity cannot be sustained: "Such a double life, with double thoughts, double duties, and double social classes, must give rise to double words and double ideals, and tempt the mind to pretence or revolt, to hypocrisy or radicalism" (146).

18. The interest of Du Bois's position is, of course, that it attempts to fuse Romanticist and social evolutionist paradigms of identity, despite their incompatibility. For example, even when he most explicitly entertains the notion of social evolution, he defines the "survival of the fittest" in terms of transcendentalist values: "It is, then, the strife of all honorable men of the twentieth century to see that in the future competition of races the survival of the fittest shall mean the triumph of the good, the beautiful and the true; that we may be able to preserve for future civilization all that is really fine and noble and strong" (119-20). This conflict is put in a larger context by Anthony Appiah, "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race," in "Race," *Writing and Difference* (note 9), 21-37.

19. See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode (New York: Penguin, 1981), 372. For further discussion of the influence of Emerson on Du Bois, see Bell, *The Folk Roots of Contemporary Afro-American Poetry* (Detroit: Broadside, 1974), 16-31. Bruce (note 14) cites "The Transcendentalist," an 1843 essay, as one of the first uses by Emerson of the term double consciousness (300). Because "Fate" gives a particularly bleak account of how socially constructed identity debilitates the power of the individual, and because Emerson poses creative and controlled self-alternation as an unconvincing solution to the problem of ontological dualism, that late essay seems particularly apposite to Du Bois's concerns.

20. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *An Oration, Delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa Society at
Cambridge, August 31, 1837 (Boston, 1838), 19.


22. The fact that Du Bois famously embraced a number of radical and radically different political positions suggests that it was by no means self-evident what kind of political activism would accomplish the betterment of material conditions. As Manning Marable reminds us, Du Bois was at "various times a supporter of racial integration and voluntary racial segregation, an African nationalist, socialist, communist, and pacifist" (W.E.B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat [Boston: Twayne, 1986], xiv).

23. Joel Porte's description of double consciousness in his "Emerson, Thoreau, and the Double Consciousness," The New England Quarterly 41 (1968): 40-50, reminds us that for Emerson self-consciousness actually is a source of self-alienation. "Reason" may allow man to define himself in relation to himself, but it is this very condition that effects his alienation from nature, the standard of ontological unity as well as the opposing "other" against which human identity is defined (42-43).

24. Du Bois, of course, did make statements about the character and function of African American language. He calls, for example, his own tendency to rely on figures rather than logic a "tropical-African" style (quoted by Rampersad [note 4], 64). Yet if Du Bois feels that his language expresses traits that he associates with African character, he does not feel that his identity is limited or defined by the character of his language. Du Bois seems far more concerned with using language as a tool to accomplish his representational ends. For a thorough discussion of Du Bois's move from naive realism -- the attempt to represent, as Du Bois says in the "Note" to The Quest of the Silver Fleece, the truth of his own experience -- to a sweeping definition of all art as propaganda, see Rampersad, 196.


26. For a theorist like Graham Pechey, the peasant's step into relativization would be politically significant. The peasant knows what Pechey says the Bakhtinian novelist shows: "The truth that no rule is absolute." Pechey concludes that the "radicalism" of Bakhtin's position is that it reveals the "necessity of politics, of dialogical struggle, of power as struggle" ("On the Borders of Bakhtin: Dialogisation, Decolonisation," in Bakhtin and Cultural Theory, ed. Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd [Manchester: Univ. of Manchester Press, 1989], 66).

27. Ken Hirschkop in his introduction to Bakhtin and Cultural Theory (note 26), 1-38 is the only critic I know of who has fully appreciated the oddity of Bakhtin's materialism. His critical overview of Bakhtin is superb: it elucidates Bakhtin's complexities by identifying the larger philosophical and cultural movements that inform the different components of Bakhtin's theory. For insightful readings of Bakhtin's relation to marxism see David Forgacs, "Marxist Literary Theories," in Modern Literary Theory: A Comparative Introduction, ed. Ann Jefferson and David Robey, 2d ed. (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1986), 190-99; Robert Young, "Back to Bakhtin," Cultural Critique 2 (1985-86): 71-92; and especially Michael Gardiner's recent full length study of Bakhtin and ideology (The Dialogics of Critique: M. M. Bakhtin and the Theory of Ideology [New York: Routledge, 1992]). The attempt of these critics to gauge Bakhtin's connection to marxism stands in striking contrast to the
influential work of Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, who argue that Bakhtin simply used marxist discourse as a mask for theology (Mikhail Bakhtin [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984], 80).

Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson have recently admitted that marxism should be taken seriously as one of Bakhtin's influences, but they ultimately conclude that his "theories of language and literature were sociological without being Marxist; he answered the challenge of his friends with his sociology without theoreism" ("Introduction: Rethinking Bakhtin," Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges, ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson [Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1989], 49; repeated in Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1990], 119). This statement reveals how much Morson and Emerson equate marxism, not with economic materialism, but with systematization per se. Morson and Emerson ultimately want not to resolve Bakhtin's theoretical contradictions but to understand them instead as a liberating pluralism. Free from systematic logic, Bakhtin, according to Morson and Emerson, can thus enact through his own writing the "dialogics" that they take to be his primary contribution (see esp. Rethinking Bakhtin, 48): as they put it, "A fundamental tenet of Bakhtin's thought is that knowledge, to be genuine and valuable, does not have to be a system; neither does it have to describe its object as a system" (47). I would argue that Bakhtin's social formalism is indeed a system of thought that, however unpersuasive, characterizes not only the work signed by Bakhtin but also the "disputed texts" ascribed to members of the Bakhtin circle and that it defines their joint effort to find in literary formalism a stable ground for marxist ideology.

28. For Bakhtin, even political power is no more than a matter of linguistic form. The particular social conditions of any time or nation may make each individual's diverse cultural membership more or less problematic, depending on the ebb and flow of hegemonic forces that attempt "to preserve the socially sealed-off quality of a privileged community ('the language of respectable society'), or to preserve local interests at the national level" (DI, 382). For Bakhtin, in other words, political structures preserve their power by using language to centralize authority and suppress the diversity of one's social affiliations; thus, even the most multifarious cultural identities are finally politicized by one's participation in either of two dichotomous linguistic activities: hegemonic consolidation or subversive dispersal.


31. It is important to note here that "creative consciousness" means the capacity to activate, not invent. The novelist may be a genius, but not because he is original. He simply does better and more of what we all do some of the time; he maximizes the potential in language that is always already there. We might say that Bakhtin's novelist is imaginative, not in the fictions that he devises, but through his ability to see, to foster, and to represent linguistic encounters.

32. The political consequences of heteroglossia are implied throughout "Discourse," but they are treated most directly in the section entitled "The Two Stylistic Lines of Development in the European Novel" (DI, 366-422). Hegemony for Bakhtin is the attempt of a ruling faction to consolidate power by creating a "single unitary language." Subversion of this power can be achieved through the
expression of linguistic diversity. This "decentering" reveals the constructedness of hegemonic rule, exposing as arbitrary and self-serving what had been taken to be impersonal and necessary. As Bakhtin puts it, "This verbal-ideological decentering will occur only when a national culture loses its sealed-off and self-sufficient character, when it becomes conscious of itself as only one among other [his emphasis] cultures and languages. It is this knowledge that will sap the roots of a mythological feeling for language, based as it is on an absolute fusion of ideological meaning with language; there will arise an acute feeling for language boundaries (social, national and semantic), and only then will language reveal its essential human character; from behind its words, forms, styles, nationally characteristic and socially typical faces begin to emerge, the images of speaking human beings" (DI, 370).


34. Wald (note 4) and O'Connor (note 4) also imagine that double consciousness can be glossed as double voice in order to describe the special problem of woman's social construction and the special power of woman's self-consciousness. Wald declares that double voice opens "fixed and indisputable' language to inspection," allowing a "self-authorization that marks the subject's continuous efforts to choose consciously and actively among an interplay of differences" (80-81). O'Connor similarly concludes, "The more voices that are ferreted out, the more discourses that a woman can find herself an intersection of, the freer she is from one dominating voice, from one stereotypical and sexist position" (202).


36. That Henderson and Johnson regard African American women as particularly privileged by their social position should come as no surprise given the logic I have been tracing. If the subaltern position of all African Americans bestows upon them a double consciousness and a double voice, then the subaltern position of African American women, a group who are doubly excluded on the grounds of race and gender, results, according to Johnson and Henderson, in the doubling of double consciousness and double voice. Although in such arguments race and gender are taken to be the primary categories that define subaltern groups, Johnson's essay does briefly envision an endless field of social affiliation, one structured by an endless variety of significant hierarchical relations that might produce in turn an endlessly divided self (note 35, 169). For a stunning account of the relation of Johnson to other contemporary white feminists who theorize fiction written by African American women, see Elizabeth Abel, "Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation," Critical Inquiry 19 (1993): 470-98.


38. Johnson, 166.
39. Johnson, 166.

40. More recently, in her "Response" (39-44) to Gates's "Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told" (14-38), (in *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990's*, ed. Houston Baker and Patricia Redmond [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989]), Johnson has shown that she does not always accept Gates's position uncritically. She notes, for example, the doubleness of his own critical discourse, describing him as "driven by an empowering desire to have it both ways, to have his western theory and his vernacular theory too" (40).


42. We can see this danger in O'Connor's formulation of what she sees as the happy Bakhtinian solution to the Du Boisian problem: "Although consciousness may seem to be the ultimate goal -- one single definition of self by which to live -- this self must be one in constant transition because it is always in dialogue with other personalities who represent other social forces" ([note 4], 202).

43. Johnson ([note 35]), 170.