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Contemporary Aesthetics

*Volume 11 (2013)*

2013

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# The Violence of Post-Racial Memory and the Political Sense of Mourning

*Alfred Frankowski*

**Abstract**
In this paper I argue that "post-raciality" entails a way of remembering that depoliticizes the social meaning of memory and thus of history. Through aesthetic critique, I attempt to show how the hyper-production of memory obscures the very real forms of violence directed toward non-whites. By developing the aesthetic critiques of W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter Benjamin, I argue that representing former violence as social memory fails to adequately address subtle forms of cultural and residual violence. Furthermore, I argue that post-racial memory produces sites and representations of the past only to enact a type of social forgetting in the present. I develop a political sense of mourning as a form of resistance against the violence of post-racial memory.

**Keywords**
Benjamin, Du Bois, mourning, post-racial, social forgetting

### 1. Post-racial aesthetics and the violence of social forgetting

An old adage of political wisdom holds that those who do not remember the failures of the past will be doomed to repeat them in the present. This wisdom has become convenient at best. If the atrocities of the past are in danger of being forgotten, then we would need to counter this by memorializing these events in order to resist the inertia of forgetting. But at present, forgetting, in precisely this sense, is not the sign of danger for us in the way it is usually imagined. Despite the convenience of the adage, we already live in a time awash with reminders of the injustices of the past. Where we fail is in measuring the meaning of our former violence against how we forget even in a time of abundant memory.

Social forgetting is far more political than we might initially think since it includes not only what is forgotten, but also the way in which events are remembered. I think this is especially true in terms in the present where the remembering and forgetting of anti-black violence takes on an altogether different political meaning. In the summer of 2011, *The New York Times* ran an article that discussed the "obscure" race riot of 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The article recalled that in 1921 a mob of white Tulsa citizens attacked and lynched blacks indiscriminately and U.S. military planes were used to bomb and destroy the forty blocks of the city known as Black Wall Street. After eighteen hours of carnage, an estimated three hundred black citizens had been lynched and 8,000 black citizens had lost their homes.[1] Businesses were burnt to the ground and the bodies of men, women, and children littered the streets, hung from trees and bridges, or were stuffed in barrels and other containers.[2]

By all measures, Tulsa, Oklahoma is the site where the most destructive anti-black violence was carried out over the

shortest time period in American history, and yet this mass lynching is still configured as a type of forgetting despite its very public record. What this says about how we relate to entrenched cultural violence in the present has everything to do with the role that social forgetting plays in underscoring violence even when the problem of forgetting seems to be resolved.

Addressing how we forget is an issue of how aesthetics relates to the political. The violence of Tulsa, Oklahoma was meaningful not only for the people of Tulsa who survived that violence. The remembrance as well as the forgetting of violence of the past is only possible because it unfolds in a particular environment. The mass lynching in Tulsa in 1921 is meaningful for us now because it is now (as before) because it is continually and actively forgotten. Forgetting, in this particular sense, requires an aesthetic critique in place of a political critique because it is in relation to an aesthetic critique that one can capture the social aspects of formative violence. I use *aesthetic* in its broadest and most critical sense to refer to the conditions of the possibility of our sensibility. An aesthetic critique refers to the conditions under which something appears or can be made to appear and, conversely, the conditions under which something does not appear or can be made not to appear. In this sense, the violence of Tulsa is not only a past phenomenon that appears now with only historical import; it is also a present phenomenon that discloses a type of violence particular to post-raciality. Thus the meanings of the ways in which some things appear or do not appear are open for interrogation.

While the term 'violence,' in a broad sense, can refer to either explicit acts of violence committed by some people against other people, animals, and environments, or implicit acts of violence that are implied by traditions, embodied in institutions, or operative in laws, I employ this term to refer to systematic violence only. Explicit violence does not appear in a vacuum but is precipitated by social environments or sets of traditions that harbor implicit forms of violence latent within them. Implicit violence does not end at the cessation of the most grotesque and abhorrent manifestations of that violence; rather, it often continues on in residual and systematic ways. An aesthetic critique addresses not only the explicit manifestation of violence but also the conditions that retain and maintain violence in its residual forms. And it is this type of violence, this relationship to aesthetics, that is at play in both the relationship of remembrance to forgetting the mass lynchings of Tulsa in 1921 and, more generally, to post-racial memory itself.

By giving an analysis of post-raciality along aesthetic lines, I am not proposing that this supplants the importance of political critique. I do not want to reduce the importance of coming to grips with the actual violence of anti-black violence by focusing on this aesthetic form of violence. But I do hold that we can do little to actually come to grips with anti-black violence unless we also broaden our analysis of violence to include aesthetic violence. This requires that we consider how violence is not only immediate but establishes traditions, relations, and continues despite legal redress and the dismantling of its core institutions.

In remembering Tulsa's mass lynching, for example, it is not enough to attempt to address this violence through memory; we also need to consider how memory and forgetting are commensurate with a type of residual and aesthetic violence. First, we might assume that the event is forgotten because no one is around to tell the stories or everyone left or kept quiet about the events. There is some truth to this, but at present there are forty people living in Tulsa who were witnesses to the mass lynching. The survivors do tell their stories and this serves as a type of remembering. Second, we might assume that there is no memory because there has been no public recognition of the mass lynching. However, there have been larger projects to support the memory of what happened in Tulsa as well as the history of the black community that existed before the riot. These are the efforts of the *John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation,* which serves as a museum, memorial, and park. Despite the existence of the park and its museum, few people really know what it is meant to memorialize. Part of the reason for this may be that the event has never been taught in schools and the memories themselves have never been contextualized in history. But this has been addressed more recently, and 2012 marks the first time the mass lynching has been taught in schools. It is hard to say that it has not been recognized in a political sense if recognition requires a political form of address. Third, we can maintain that the mass lynching is forgotten in the sense that there have never been larger forums for representation and redress. But the Tulsa mass lynching has been the subject of several prolonged lawsuits, several books, and at least two documentaries.[3] The question that Tulsa 1921 prompts is not about memory at all, but it has everything to do with how memory supplies a type of social forgetting that supports the violence of post-raciality.

In what follows, I will explore how aesthetic discontinuity reveals a domain of social memory that actually supports the philosophical claims of post-racial discourse and, in doing this, insulates political analysis from disclosing post-racial memory's violence. I will argue that post-raciality has a particular type of memory that remembers only as forgetting. To do so I will combine analyses of contemporary critiques of social memory and racism to the more systemic aesthetic critiques of memory, racism, and history found in W.E.B. Du Bois and Walter Benjamin.

### 2. Social forgetting as post-racial memory

What legitimates the claim that we are currently in a post-racial moment? Let me begin by laying out what post-raciality's philosophical claims are in a minimal sense and consider how they relate to the aesthetics of social memory and forgetting. Post-raciality is defined as the term that makes sense out of the claim that in our society we are presently seeing signs that we are "beyond race and racism."[4] To be beyond race and racism means that the old stigmas and structures that oppressed non-whites no longer apply to our society. Post-raciality is often associated with the assertion that our society has arrived at that long-forecasted moment in history when race simply does not matter. Examples of blacks occupying leading roles in society abound as self-evident proof of this claim, but these cases occur in contrast to statistics and

material reality. For instance, the election of President Barack Obama is represented as a sign of "how far we have come" socially in abandoning our racist social past. But this ignores statistical data that show that violence against blacks and other, economic, forms of discrimination against non-whites have increased during his Presidency. The representation is not only at odds with the material reality; it completely displaces it.

There is a more general claim about post-raciality that requires us to consider the way aesthetics and politics are at play in it. A post-racial society is not one that conceals or omits the memory of its racist past but rather the contrary. Thus the claims of post-raciality are tied to the proliferation of memory, and we need to uncover what the social meaning of this proliferation is. The claim is that contemporary American society is at a point where we can recognize the violence of the past and talk openly about the history of American race and racism. This is a broad claim that requires that the antipathy toward non-white communities and to their history can be addressed in a way that does not distort the way in which whites have benefited from, and continue to benefit from, institutions, traditions, and practices that have been based on the exploitation of non-whites.

The problem is not simply one of representation. Black History Month, Martin Luther King Jr. memorials and various other memorial days may be well-placed and necessary, along with museums to the history of racist images. But they are not signs of social progress when images of the social reform achieved through civil rights legislation overlay the regresses that silently took shape a mere decade after the civil rights movement.[5] The signs of achievement are two-fold because they work as signs of memory, but they also set up the conditions for the possibility of becoming socially numb to the past or of socially forgetting the totality of former and present violence.

Memory often makes the present comprehensible, but to remember the forgotten simply makes the present strange. As in the case of the history of Tulsa's mass lynching, it is strange to talk about any lynching as being something *forgotten* when there is not even a historical record that has been suppressed. For instance, here is the newspaper description of the 1934 lynching of Claude Neale, a black farmhand who was accused of raping and murdering a young white woman in Florida:

> First they cut off his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it. Then they sliced his sides and stomach with knives and every now and then someone would cut off a finger or a toe. Red hot irons were used on the nigger to burn him from top to bottom. From time to time during the torture a rope would be tied around Neale's neck and he would be pulled over a limb and held there until he almost chocked to death, when he would be let down and the torture begun all over again. Neale's body was tied to the rear of an automobile and dragged over the highway to the Cannidy home. Here a mob

> estimated to number somewhere between 3,000 to 7,000 people from eleven southern states was excitedly waiting his arrival…. A woman came out of the Cannidy house and drove a butcher knife into his heart. Then the crowd came by and some kicked him and some drove their cars over him. What remained of the body was brought by the mob to Marianna, where it is now hanging from a tree on the northeast corner of the courthouse. Photographers say they will soon have pictures of the body for sale at fifteen cents each. Fingers and toes from Neale's body are freely exhibited on street-corners here.[6]

For our public imagination, lynchings are private, random, and isolated. We forget how public they are even when they are described in an accurate light. This aspect of lynching is "whitewashed" from memory as much as can be, but it is the public dynamics of the lynching that provide the aesthetics of the conditions that makes it meaningful. There is no such thing as a private lynching since the practice is meant to put the results of its violence on display. And yet in reducing it to the private, isolated, and random, a mode of social forgetting is at work.

The public dynamics of lynching are not simple; their meaning shifts relative to how they are retained. Neale's lynching continued to be represented aesthetically and politically from it he moments preceding his death onward. Not only is the lynching itself a public event, it takes place in two towns. Furthermore, the body is hung for a period of time in front of the court house. His fingers, toes and other parts were displayed and photographs were available for purchase at the corner store. Moreover, the article first appeared in a Florida newspaper in 1934. It likely appeared as a report to amuse curious readers, but its publication both expanded the space over which the lynching could reach and extended the time over which the lynching cast its shadow. We can see how this document has the effect of *needing* to appear in a way that reaffirmed the political normativity of white supremacy. In addition, it provided the needed information as to where to find the material evidence of this supremacy.

The public dynamics of Neale's lynching do not end there. In 1997, the newspaper account appeared again in Angela Davis' *Blues Legacies* as part of her discussion of Billie Holiday's song, "Strange Fruit." This time the account of Neale's lynching illustrated the whites' inhumanity to blacks as it depicted the horrors of lynching. In its historical context, the text about Neale's lynching further illustrated blacks' vulnerability because they could be murdered at any time for any reason. Davis' point is that the way aesthetics relates to politics is to allow an awakening of race/political-consciousness against a background of the normative *status quo*.

Davis argued that *aesthetics* reveals the extent to which general sensibility has been politicized or depoliticized.[7] In the newspaper's account as well as in Davis' account, the lynching is not merely a matter of remembering what happened to Neale but also a matter of bringing a type of violence into view in a way that shows exactly what was out of

view before. The public nature of Neale's lynching can only appear in relation to one or another political context. It appears by indicating exactly what form of aesthetics must be out of play. It is not memory but *forgetting* that frames the two discourses of violence here. This frame requires a particular structure of knowledge. It frames a discourse in which something is absent, unknown, or too obscure to appear, and one that is simply barred from appearing legitimately and thus forms an illegitimate discourse or trivial knowledge. In either case, it consists in what we continually fail to recognize or fail to know.

Forgetting, in this sense, supports a type of political relationship to what is recognized as known or worth knowing. In his essay "White Ignorance," Charles Mills examines this aspect of forgetting in relation to a particular form of epistemology called "white ignorance." He argues that *ignorance* establishes just this sort of limitation by being an absence of correct knowledge, on the one hand, and adherence to false knowledge, on the other.[8] He holds that knowledge and ignorance are socially contextual, and socially developed.[9] Therefore, the social significance of memory can be read as a type of social index of the present. Mills writes, "If previously whites were color demarcated as biologically and culturally unequal and superior, now through a strategic 'color-blindness' they are assimilated as putative equals to the status and situations of nonwhites on terms that negate the need to repair the inequalities of the past."[10] What is implied in his argument is that white social epistemology is the prop that conceals a type of white memory that doubles as white amnesia. He also holds that this is a type of memory that disarticulates white social advantages by eliminating the present's social relation to a long history of structural violence. This is what Mills refers to as *the management of* memory, a practice that reinforces violent traditions explicitly or implicitly. He argues that this management results in a type of amnesia that is selective at best, but stops short of calling such management itself a type of violence.[11]

Mills' argument implies two additional claims. He claims that there is a type of amnesia that attaches itself to history, which is politically driven, and that there is another type of amnesia that is *felt* or *sensed* in a way that shapes our cultural memory. Mills employs both meanings when he holds that the general population seems ignorant to the point of being amnesiac about even the most well-known forms of discrimination, such as the Jim Crow laws or the lynch laws or the history of the one-drop rule.[12] However, the problem seems to be more complicated than may first appear. If *amnesia* were the issue, then we might be able to correct this faulty relationship with appropriate reminders. For instance, a reconciliation park that functions as both a memorial and a museum that stores images of a 1921 mass lynching would be the right type of reminder, but the type of social forgetting that Mills identifies seems to resist such ways of addressing this type of problem.

If we retain the metaphor of "amnesia," then we must further examine how it is resistant to the immediate aesthetic presentation that contradicts it. The type of epistemology

Mills is working with cannot be disentangled from a social form of aesthetics since, according to Mills, memory is not only about what we know but about what we perceive and how we perceive what we retain as perception or representation. What is missing is the context of post-raciality. At present, we see a proliferation of sources of memory. The books, articles, and online resources make old school ignorance nearly impossible, since there is no want for representations or other forms of aesthetic evidence. But this is the heart of Mills' point, in that *white ignorance* forms a special theory of knowledge. White ignorance knows exactly what it claims not to know.

Contrary to the psychological form of amnesia, the cultural amnesia of white ignorance appears on the back of a systematic form of forgetting that puts certain aspects of the past out of play over and over again. This is not only an epistemological point; it is also an aesthetic one since it concerns not only the way knowledge is established or fails, but also how history appears or fails to appear. It requires that we develop (a) an aesthetic sense of post-racial memory that holds that representations allow for the type of forgetting that is needed in order to justify the idea that we are living in a post-racial society, and (b) that we consider how post-racial memory continues a form of violence while making history more accessible than ever. This form of *amnesia* is not continuous with memory but makes memory stand in for social forgetting.

To gain some perspective on how aesthetics and history relate to post-raciality, I will refer to Du Bois and Benjamin's ideas on history, memory, forgetting, and mourning. I think we need to reframe these muted questions so that they take aim at a concept of history that becomes clearly problematic when politics and aesthetics intersect.

## 3. The aesthetic critique of history

In this section I will focus on how Du Bois and Benjamin's critiques of history engage the aesthetics of social memory and forgetting as a way of critiquing residual systematic violence. History emphasizes its aesthetic relationship to the collective lives and deaths of a community, but it does not do so without equally entering into the political. By following how they problematize history, we will be able to re-examine the aesthetic-political relationship of forgetting to the social violence of post-racial memory. Moreover, what is particularly relevant about reading Du Bois and Benjamin in this context is seeing how their aesthetic works argue for a way of reading the intersection between politics and aesthetics as a type of refashioning (*Umfunktionierung*) of the present toward violence to which it has become numb. Both of them problematize history in order to broach the question of refashioning our concept of history as an oppressive system via I will start with Du Bois, since he offers a general critique that will serve us well in highlighting the problematic structure with which we are dealing.

Du Bois' critique of the concept of history appears in the closing chapter of *Black Reconstruction in America* entitled "Propaganda of History." Du Bois describes the book as a materialist history that seeks to expose the material conditions that forged class and race struggle in America. However, the

last chapter of the book further problematizes the way *neglect* (or social forgetting) constitutes the material conditions for historical representation as a whole. He writes, "The chief witness in Reconstruction, the emancipated slave himself, has been almost barred out of court. His written Reconstruction record has been largely destroyed and nearly always neglected."[13] The problem is not simply one that can be settled by getting "history" right, nor is it one that can be settled by including more historical perspectives. Instead, the problem is more severe than it may first appear to be since his critique is aimed, not only at those who write history or at how we write history, but also at the social implications of embedding a type of forgetting within our concept of history itself.

What follows is that "history" is neither a scientific reconstruction of a collective set of events nor is it a benign activity of social memory: it is based on an active and deliberate form of neglect. Du Bois writes that the history of reconstruction shows that, "… the most unfair caricatures of Negroes have been carefully preserved; but serious speeches, successful administration and upright character are almost universally forgotten."[14] The tension between remembering and forgetting does not simply concern knowledge or the production of knowledge, but the aesthetic environment that maintains violence as a form of forgetting.[15] Du Bois argues, "The real frontal attack on Reconstruction, as interpreted by the leaders of national thought in 1870 and for some time thereafter, came from the universities and particularly from Columbia and Johns Hopkins."[16] Du Bois' critique holds that normative violence is a matter of misrepresentation to the point of neglect or selective forgetfulness. To counter this violence, he suggests that another type or order of question is needed, one that asks not only about the politics of history but also about the political in relation to our concept of history. What does it mean to think that remembrance itself performs the act of forgetting? I think this suggests that we have to suspend our tendency to simplify this proposition by considering how remembrance may also enact forgetting. When forgetting is not simply a sign of violence but comes to form the effect of memory, then the entire condition for discourse must be rethought as violence, and this must be done on a fundamentally aesthetic level.

To do this, I would like to examine the same critical point as it appears in Benjamin's *Theses* called "On the Concept of History." As with Du Bois' critique of history, Benjamin's critique focuses on the tension between the history of the victor and the history of the oppressed. Unlike Du Bois, he extends his argument to also suggest that the aesthetic critique of our concept of history requires a re-fashioning of our sensibility in a way that connects the violence of the past to the way in which we are unable to empathize with the way similar forms of violence are operative in the present. At the heart of Benjamin's critique of history is the notion of "refashioning." Irving Wohlfarth argues, for this reason, that for Benjamin history is written from "below" and not surveyed from above.[17] He emphasizes how Benjamin's critical notion of historical materialism is directed against all dominant forms of history and is not only applicable to history written by fascist regimes. But Wohlfarth's characterization of Benjamin

seems only partially true because his characterization implies that Benjamin's view poses a duality between history as something written from "above" and history as something written from "below." To hold that either pole could refashion the subject of history on its own would be absurd because a history from below, just like a history from above, derives its valuation from the same normative structure without problematizing this structure itself. The point is, therefore, not simply to shift the location of the analysis but also its method. We need new questions that cut to the core of oppression and not simply new voices that speak of their oppression.

I think what is further implied in Benjamin's thinking is that dominant traditions (whether they come from above or below) contain something like negative violence, a violence that violates its subjects by putting certain questions out of play. Benjamin writes, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency *(Ausname*)" in which we live is not the exception (*Ausname*), but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight."[18] *Ausname* is a term that can be used equally to state that something is the exception or that something is designated as an emergency, but essentially it designates that which remains undetermined or outside of the scope of being named. To put something out of the scope of naming is to say there is something to be said,but that words are inadequate to address or capture it—and yet, this absence indicates the unnamed even in failing to name it. And it is this failure that appears as a condition that precedes the liquidation of the insight of the oppressed.

What does it mean to fashion a conception of history according to the insight of the oppressed? To clarify this point I think it is necessary to review Benjamin's *Theses* on history according to his concepts of *Ursprung* and *Trauer*, which he develops in his *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (generally translated as *Origin of German Tragic Drama*). Benjamin argues that as *Trauerspiels* depart from tragedy, they make something appear that tragedies cannot conjure up. They problematize the broken in a way that requires a complete set of social and political interventions. To underscore the importance of the *broken* in its relation to history, Benjamin makes use of the term "Origin" (*Ur-sprung*). He takes the term *Ursprung* to have a dual sense. One the one hand, it refers to a source point, the place from which something has started. On the other, it refers to the closing off, the liquidation, of some tradition by means of that which breaks from that former tradition.[19] To rethink history as a type of tracing out of origins is to bring thought to bear on the point where a social order "jumps out" or breaks from tradition. To speak of an origin of *Trauerspiel*, for instance, is to tease out the tradition of mourning plays to where it breaks with the tradition of tragedy.[20] In doing this, Benjamin is highlighting the significance of mourning by showing how it fragments the tradition established by tragic drama. In the reduction of mourning to a de-politicized state, tragedy discloses a tendency to consolidate *Trauerspiels* as being a variation of the same art, placing its differences at odds with, and not in critique of, the tragic arts. This configuration merely moves violence into the hands of the critic as opposed to dismantling it from its root.

What is central to *Traurspiels* is mourning. Unlike *Trauerspiels*, what makes tragedies powerful is that, despite the fact that they stretch beyond social memory, they make sense of our current institutions and traditions. *Trauerspiels*, by contrast, are altogether different. David Krasner argues that for Benjamin, "*Trauerspiel* offers neither order nor closure. Expressions of grief are continuous, time is unfulfilled, and mourning is the only response to an incomprehensible injustice."[21] They present the forgotten as forgotten or the broken as broken. Thus, an aesthetic difference emerges where the normative is held only to illustrate what has broken from our sensibility and what continues to break in our normativity. This difference also amplifies a type of sensible numbness. Benjamin's sense of mourning concerns a refashioning of our sensibility toward the violence that is our shared violence, and it is this failure of a shared stake in past violence that constitutes post-racial memory *as* a type of violence.

The violence of post-racial memory firmly places the racial violence of our society in the past, but mourning, in Benjamin's sense, captures what is necessarily *untimely* and *out of place*.[22] *Trauerspiels*, he argues, is a form that is meant to unsettle. "Its intrusion could therefore be described as a disturbance of the peace and disruption of *law* and *order* in the arts," he says.[23] Mourning makes what remains disarticulated in the memory a point of agitation for the present. In Benjamin's particular sense of mourning, which bends the political into the aesthetic and the aesthetic into the political, a tension characterizes the present, casting our normativity in a new light. It is in this vein that he writes in his Theses that,

> Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, towards which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm.[24]

**4. Mourning as political**

Up to this point I have suggested that an aesthetic critique allows analysis of the contest between two varying traditions to appear without considering how the normative present limits our very ability to problematize the discord between the aesthetic domains of remembrance and forgetting. I am also arguing that this aesthetic critique forecloses how residual violence resists the aesthetic regime that forces memory to merely be recognized without further politicizing potentialities. Following Du Bois and Benjamin, I think that if we develop the political sense of mourning that opens the question of our response to our own normative violence. Mourning is a type of resistance in that it tarries with the aesthetic and political conditions that undergo from both spheres. In this way,

remembering is wrested from merely representing the past and put forward as a type of mourning that reconfigures the present. In this closing section I will argue that Du Bois' closing chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, called "Of the Sorrow Songs," enhances the way Benjamin articulates the political and aesthetic importance of mourning. I will argue that mourning requires that we rethink exactly those types of violence that have been put out of play as politically emergent crises only seen from the side of aesthetics.

In "Of the Sorrow Songs," Du Bois examines more pointedly the social aspects of the aesthetics of forgetting. Of these strange songs, which stand as the precursors to gospel music, he writes, "They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart."[25] I want to develop this point further because, as Du Bois argues, the sorrow songs are meaningful but they are *out of place*. The importance of these songs is not clear simply from the idea that they are spirituals or inspirational songs. They link the present to an oral tradition and this tradition serves as a replacement of both the broken memory and the distortions that have passed as memory. Shannon Zamir points out that, for Du Bois, the use of the sorrow songs and spirituals are a "living recollection that continues to speak to the disgraces of the present that has by no means severed its link" to the past.[26] Indeed, Zamir is correct to focus on what the memory may evoke, but the songs are songs of sorrow according to Du Bois, and not simply songs of remembrance.

Du Bois argues that the songs are the music of deep sorrow and struggle and that they are the inarticulate message of the slave to the world. Keith Byerman holds that these are the songs that contextualized slave expressions and that they are really counter-histories to dominant culture.[27] They serve as a representation to which the present community must respond. Likewise, Robert Gooding-Williams argues that in these songs the present is justified but only to the extent that it is asked to respond to this message. He writes, "To respond to the message of the sorrow songs, white Americans must acknowledge their implications in the lives of black Americans by heeding the message of the sorrow songs and extending to black Americans their civil and political rights."[28] Hence, in claiming that the meaning of these songs can be explained in the social realization of the civil rights movement Gooding-Williams ignores the disruptive and agitating way in which a new meaning of political relations is required.

The fact that the songs are and remain the inarticulate message of the slave to the world means they do not resolve themselves but maintain a tension. The songs preserve something historically effaced from social memory. Or we might say that they retain the form of brokenness. In any case, they do not represent anything that can be represented. Rather, they preserve a tension that frames structural violence in their preservation. Du Bois writes, "The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries"[29] and they are the "voice of exile."[30] But they *speak* to the present as that which is exiled in a particular sense. They are not simply a musical aesthetic of oppression but a music that makes audible the quietude of destabilization. To represent the inarticulate is to bring a tradition of violence into relation with the present as a

type of broken architecture.

By making brokenness thematic, our violence is opened as a question rather than closed as a fact of history. As Zamir argues, the sorrow songs are not memory but a form of resistance to *reconcile community* within a totalizing ideal.[31] When Du Bois wrote, "The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so for two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words mean, but knowing well the meaning of the music,"[32] these songs do not simply pass on tradition. They also condition the present toward a critique of its formative violence as mourning replaces memory. They condition the possibility of how to think of history or memory as a broken mechanism itself. They stand prior to the way we consider what it means to think of this breakage as a form of resistance itself. And, I think that it is this sense of mourning that liquidates the quiescence of memory that stands in contrast to post-racial memory. It is this shift that allows us to see post-racial memory as a type of violence.

Let me illustrate further the significance of amplifying the breaking point between memory and mourning given Du Bois and Benjamin's analysis with an interpretation of the 2004 film memorial, *The Untold Story of Emmitt Louis Till.* In the film much effort is made to represent the life of the young man, his tragic death, and the significant way his death was used as a catalyst for social change. The film retraces the events of the summer of 1955, when the fourteen-year-old Emmitt Louis Till, from Chicago, visited his relatives in Money, Mississippi for the first time. The film attempts to remember his life beyond the scope of his lynching. However, the film cannot work as a way of remembering his life without also mapping out the political sense of mourning.

The interviews in the film are meant to carve out a place for the memory of Emmitt Till. Each relative traces the boundary between memory and mourning in this collection of recollections. But the place of appearance is equally important as the displacement of appearance. His mother, Mamie Till, for instance, recalls that she was first informed that the body had been exhumed from the bottom of a river after it had been found tied by barbed wire to a cotton gin. She is told that the body will remain in Mississippi and she is forced to travel to Mississippi to be present at the trial. The cotton gin, Mississippi, and the trial all provide a memory that is punctuated by forgetting.

Mourning breaks the political in critical ways. Following Du Bois and Benjamin, we need to think how there is still something that appears de-politicized and that counts as a type of mourning, since mourning does not settle the issue but rather makes the limits of our sensibility questionable. Thus it is just as significant that Mamie Till insisted on having the body returned to Chicago as it is that she made a point of holding an open coffin funeral because each marked a type of refashioning. When she defended her decision to hold an open coffin funeral for Till, she said that the world needed to see what *they* had done to her son in order to begin to pose the question of what we are doing to ourselves. Each

displacement of the appearance of residual violence is resisted by a placement of memory, and, how memory becomes post-racial rests on placing memory.

What follows from a political sense of mourning is not a politics but rather a point of departure that allows for a chance to refashion our normative conceptions. It is precisely these normative concepts of post-raciality that need to be shown in a questionable light, a light that places politics at odds with the political and the normative at odds with its own violence. I think what this means is that post-racial memory signals a need to question how our memory is a type of progress and at the same time a fire alarm that rings every minute for sixty seconds.[33]

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Published on October 7, 2013.

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**Endnotes**

[1] John Hope Franklin and Scott Ellsworth. "History knows no Fences: An Overview." *The Tulsa Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race of 1921* (Oklahoma: The Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race of 1921, 2001), pg.22

[2] A. G. Sulzberger, "90 Years After a Bloody Race Riot, Tulsa Confronts its Past." (*The New York Time*s, June 2011). http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/20/us/20tulsa.html?_r=3&. Tulsa was important because it was the wealthiest black community in America and was known as Black Wall Street (or sometimes Little Africa). It had its own economy prior to its destruction.

[3] There are two documentaries, *The Tulsa Lynchings, 1921: A Hidden Story* and *Before They Die: Survivors of the Tulsa Race Riot 1921*. There are several books on the mass lynching. See Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Louisiana: Louisiana University Press, 1992). Tim Madigan, *The Burning: Massacre, Destruction, and the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2003). Alfred Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921: Race, Reparations, and Reconciliation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). James Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: America's Worst Race Riot and its Legacy* (New York: Mariner Books, 2003).

[4] Howard McGary, *The Post Racial Ideal* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 2012), pp. 9-10.

[5] See Derrick Bell, "Race Realism," *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds., K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, and K. Thomas (New York: The New York Press, 1995), pp. 302-312.

[6] Angela Davis, "Strange Fruit: Music and Social Consciousness," in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Press, 1999), pp. 188-189.

[7] Angela Davis develops Herbert Marcuse's notion of the aesthetic dimension. See Herbert Marcuse, "The Aesthetic Dimension," *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 172-196.

[8] Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed., S. Sullivan and N. Tuana, (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), p. 16.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[13] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860-1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 721.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] David Blight, "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for American Historical Memory," *History and Memory in African American Culture*, eds., G. Fabre and R. O'Meally, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 63.

[16] Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, p. 718.

[17] Irving Wohlfarth, "Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History," *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed., M.P. Steinberg, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 197.

[18] Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, volume 4, 1038-1940*, trans., H. Zohn, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 392.

[19] Wohlfarth, "Smashing the Kaleidoscope," p. 193.

[20] See John McCole's discussion of "Origin" in Ch. 3, "Allegorical Destruction." John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[21] David Krasner, "Walter Benjamin and the Lynching Plays: Allegory and Mourning in Angelina Grimké's *Rachel,*" *The Journal of Comparative Drama*, 18, (1997), 64-80 ref. on 72.

[22] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans., J. Osborne, (New York: Verso, 1999), p. 160.

[23] *Ibid.,* p. 177 (my emphasis).

[24] Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," p. 392. For historically important discussions of the image of the angel of history in Benjamin's *Theses* see Rolf Tiedemann, "Historischer Materialismus oder politischer Messianismus? Zur Interpretation der Thesen "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," *Dialektik im Stillstand: Versuche zum Spätwerk Walter Benjamins*. Also see Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* trans., C. Turner, (New York: Verso, 2005) and Greshon Scholem, "Benjamin and his Angel," trans., W. Dannhauser, in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed., G. Smith (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988). For a more recent but still important discussion see Giorgio Agamben, "Walter Benjamin and the Demonic: Happiness and Historical Redemption," *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy,* trans., D. Heller-Roazen, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[25] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," *Souls of Black Folk. W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings* (New York: The Library of America, 1986), p. 536.

[26] Shannon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 174.

[27] Keith Byerman, *Seizing the Word: History, Art and the Self in the Work of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994), p. 34.

[28] Robert Goodings-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 126.

[29] Du Bois, "The Sorrow Songs," *Writings,* p. 537.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 538.

[31]Zamir, *Dark Voices*, p. 181.

[32] Du Bois, "Of the Sorrow Songs," *Writings,* p. 538.

[33] I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. George Fourlas for his detailed and patient comments on earlier versions of this essay. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers at *Contemporary Aesthetics*. All critiques and comments were extremely helpful.