
The Soul of Du Bois' Black Folk

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Soul, (sōl) noun

1a: the immaterial essence or substance, animating principle, or actuating cause of life

3a: the immortal part of man having permanent individual existence

4a: a seat of real life, vitality, or action

4b: an animating or essential part

4c: moving spirit

[Addenda] *soul*

1: a strong positive feeling (as of intense sensitivity and emotional fervor) conveyed especially by black Americans

b: Soul Music (*herein*)

c: Soul Food (*herein*)

d. Soul Brother (*herein*)

(*Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged*)

W.E.B. Du Bois' classic 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, explores the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of black people's souls, as well as those "soul" feelings that intimately bind black people together. Du Bois takes us on two complementary journeys: first, an examination of the roots of African American religious thought, and secondly, an assessment of community in African American culture. *The Souls of Black Folk* weaves the sacred

and the secular, thus providing its reader with a "soulful" literary model in which to express and reconcile the warring ideals of the African American "soul."

Du Bois is commonly cited for his descriptors of the traditional African American church: "the Preacher, the Music, and the Frenzy," and for his depiction of the Southern Negro revival: "a sort of suppressed terror...a pythian madness, a demoniac possession" (138).¹ Of course, his analysis of the black church tradition is much more nuanced than those brief expressions. In one slim volume, Du Bois highlights three hundred years of African and American religious heritage. First, he asserts that African descendants came from a clearly defined social and religious environment; underscoring the point that prior to any contact with American religion, black people had a religious "soul." Concerning traditional African religion, Du Bois writes: "under the headship of the chief and the potent influence of the priest, his religion was nature-worship, with profound belief in invisible surrounding influences, good and bad, and his worship was through incantation and sacrifice" (140). Silencing the commonly-held notion (even in the twentieth century) of Africans and their descendants as heathens, Du Bois goes on to assert that these native beliefs were initially disguised by a thin "veneer of Christianity" during the slave trade (142). This veneer, which combined elements of the African along with the Western, was sufficiently

¹ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). All parenthetical references to DuBois' text are from this source.

malleable to allow for African religious retentions, specifically those notions enforcing the "spirit of revolt and revenge" against the institution of slavery (143). Du Bois makes it clear that enslaved African people had retained elements of the "soul" of their motherland, particularly in this area of religion.

As slave owners gradually came to realize that nothing suited slavery better than "the doctrines of passive submission embodied in the newly learned Christianity," Du Bois writes that African courtesy became slave humility, and "moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering" (144). Challenging the role of the American church during slavery, Du Bois writes that it was "religious propaganda" which aided slave masters, who sought to emphasize those characteristics of the African "which made him a valuable chattel" (144). It was in 1845 that Frederick Douglass denounced "slave-holding Christianity" as the "sanctifier of the most hateful frauds," an institution under which the "darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds" of slavery had found protection.² In 1903, Du Bois continues Douglass' charge, careful to note that it was "under the very shadow of the Church" where the worst characteristics of slave life were displayed; the form of Christianity, as practiced in America, attempted to erase and destroy the very souls of African American people (144).

In describing the current state of the black Christian church in the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction periods, Du Bois calls it the "social, intellectual, and economic centre" of Negro life; he writes that "the church often stands as a real conservator of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority on

what is Good and Right" (140). He gives credit to the African American Christian Church as being a place of refuge and strength for black souls, the place for true expression of a people's "sorrow, despair, and hope" (138).

And yet, for Du Bois, twentieth-century African American religion is also intimately impacted by "double-consciousness," that duality of "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body," which governs much of African American life (9). Du Bois writes that for those who blame the failure of the black church to address social, political, and economic inequities, their religion, instead of worship, has become "a complaint and a curse, a wail rather than a hope, a sneer rather than a faith" (146). Du Bois posits that for others in the black church, religion continues to be "wedded to ideals remote, whimsical," and perhaps "impossible of realization," with little or no attention paid to the realities of everyday life (147). He situates the souls of the mass of black people as belonging to churches, which have become "groups of cold, fashionable devotees;" instead of being religious organizations, these churches are actually "business institutions" which try to avoid "unpleasant questions both within and without the black world" (149). The souls of the majority of African Americans, Du Bois summarizes, embody the expression "*dum vivimus, vivamus*," or loosely translated, "let us live (and enjoy life) while we live."

Du Bois' critique of African American religion begs the question: "wherein shall we locate the souls of black folks in the twentieth-century?" If the heart, the soul, the very center, of African American life has always been the traditional black church, what will happen to that great majority of Negroes whom Du Bois claims are now "seeking in the great night a new religious ideal" (149). I want to suggest that Du Bois is locating the true souls of black folks in all things, sacred and secular, which foster the perseverance and continuity of a distinctly African American cultural community. One product of this community, the "sorrow songs," or African American spirituals, Du Bois calls the "the greatest gift of the Negro people"

² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 117.

(181).

Besides using musical bars of spirituals to frame each of his chapters, Du Bois concludes *The Souls of Black Folk* with an essay on the richness and perseverance of this musical form, and the ensuing cultural legacy produced by people who live beneath the Veil. The sorrow songs are not only the "most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas," but Du Bois also contends that spirituals are the only distinctly "American music" form (180). These songs are not mere words set to music, but they are poetry, folklore, history, theology, celebration, sorrow, and soul. These spirituals, like the people who created them, are "African... Afro-American... Negro... Negro and Caucasian" (184).

The "sorrow songs," as Du Bois describes them, are a microcosm of the achievements of African descendants in America; songs, which, like their composers, have been refined by the fires of American slavery, injustice, and oppression. These songs are the "music of an unhappy people," and the creations of "children of disappointment;" and yet, they are also prayers which breathe hope and "a faith in the ultimate justice of things" (188). The cultural expressions of black folks that Du Bois describes in the spirituals, reflect a secondary, but highly significant, definition of the word "soul," namely, those emotions of community and cohesion that thrive in the often unexamined corners of black life. And here, Du Bois' own life serves as a primary example.

Born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts during the Gilded Age, and raised in a town with fewer than fifty African Americans, Du Bois had little preparation for community life among rural all-black communities, in the North or the South. His chapter "On the Meaning of Progress" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, details the first summer he spends teaching school in a small black town in Tennessee, while an undergraduate student at Fisk University. The town and the people therein were extremely poor; existing almost entirely on sharecropping, this town was a place where people "lived and died in the shadow of one blue hill" (50). When Du Bois secures permission to teach there, and

is shown the dilapidated schoolhouse, with its rough plank benches and small blackboard, he is haunted by a "New England vision of neat little desks and chairs," like the ones in his own childhood schoolhouse (51). And while Du Bois was initially a wary stranger to this place, and this setting, there was something about the soul of this community, peopled by "plain and simple" black folks, which reached out and touched his soul.

Maybe it was the *soul food* that he ate there, in abundance. Despite the utter poverty, Du Bois writes that there was always "plenty of good country fare" (53). He was encouraged to "take out and help myself to fried chicken and wheat biscuit, meat, and corn-pone, string-beans and berries" (53). Maybe it was the *religious soul* of the community which connected with Du Bois' own sensibilities. He notes that this was a place of "old time religion," with the entire town centered around the "twin temples of the hamlet, the Methodist, and the Hard-Shell Baptist churches" (54). And though there were "frenzied priests at the altar," the faith of the people Du Bois encountered gave him a sense of welcome and belonging (54). Maybe it was the *soul music*, which Du Bois grew to love, that tied him to this little Tennessee hamlet. There, the "soft melody and mighty cadences of Negro song fluttered and thundered" (54).

Perhaps the soul food, religious soul, and soul music of this rural place all combined to create in Du Bois a sense that this was also his community. Alexandria, Tennessee was so far removed from the well-tended and genteel New England town in which he grew to manhood, and yet Du Bois writes of feeling connected to this community within the inner recesses of his soul. Although it was only "half-awakened," in this town there existed a "common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief, at burial, birth, or wedding; from a common hardship in poverty, poor land and low wages; and, above all, the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity" (54). The use of the word "us" firmly ties Du Bois to a place where he becomes an integral member.

After two summers of teaching in Alexandria,

Tennessee, Du Bois does not return for another ten years. In that interim period, Du Bois finishes his Bachelor's degree at Fisk; earns a second Bachelor's and a Master's degree at Harvard; becomes the first African American to be awarded a Ph.D. from Harvard; travels throughout Europe; publishes his first book; accepts a professorship at Atlanta University; and takes his place as one of the most prominent twentieth-century "Race Men." And yet, ten years later, while delivering a keynote address at Fisk, he is reminded of the small, rural school that was his first foray into Southern black culture. He writes that there "swept" over him a "sudden longing to pass again beyond the blue hill, and to see the homes and the school of other days, and to learn how life had gone with my school-children" (55). And so, Du Bois returns. Some of his students and friends have left Tennessee, others are dead and buried, but many familiar faces remain. And despite his ten-year absence, he is welcomed and treated with the love usually bestowed upon a prodigal son.

With this touching autobiographical account, the reader is privy to the multiple considerations of the souls of black folks in Du Bois' classic text. The word "soul" is certainly rooted and grounded in specific religious principles. For generations, African Americans fought to prove that they had souls, which could receive Christian salvation, in hopes of elevating the social status of the enslaved from chattel to human being. And yet, for Du Bois, "soul" is not just a term to refer to that immaterial religious substance which we cannot see. "Soul" is that rural all-black community in Tennessee; "soul" is that sorrow song which guided countless slaves to freedom; "soul" is the poetry contained within the words of the Sunday sermon; "soul" is the recognition of an interconnected community which lives, labors, and loves in this present world. It is "soul" that causes a writer to take up pen to express the inexpressible.

The *Souls of Black Folk* combines, among other forms, classic elegy; autobiographical sketches; sociological studies; short fiction; theology; political protest; musicology; historical profiles; biblical allusion; and Greek mythology. Notwithstanding the

brilliance of a volume that weaves cross-disciplinary magic, at its center is a writer, who acknowledges that he is a "soul brother;" that he is "bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil" (5).

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