The Souls of Black Folk

I

Of Our Spiritual Strivings[1]

O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.

Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.

ARTHUR SYMONS.

Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of rightly framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then, instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say, I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville;[2] or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the

1. Revised from "Strivings of the Negro People," *Atlantic Monthly* (August 1897): 194–98. The verses are from *The Crying of Waters* (1903) by Arthur Symons. The music quotation is from the Negro spiritual "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen."
2. Site of a Civil War battle of June 1862, near Richmond, Virginia.

boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word.

And yet, being a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic[3] winds between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance.[4] Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot-race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should not keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head,—some way. With other black boys the strife was not so fiercely sunny: their youth shrunk into tasteless sycophancy, or into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?[5] The shades of the prison-house closed round about us all:[6] walls strait and stubborn to the whitest, but relentlessly narrow, tall, and unscalable to sons of night who must plod darkly on in resignation, or beat unavailing palms against the stone, or steadily, half hopelessly, watch the streak of blue above.

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,[7]—a world which

3. River that runs through Du Bois's hometown of Great Barrington, Massachusetts.
4. In *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (1968) he reports that this incident took place during his high-school years.
5. An ironic rewriting of Exodus 2.22, in which Moses declares, "I have been a stranger in a strange land."
6. Reference to William Wordsworth's Ode *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.*
7. In African American folklore, seventh sons as well as those children born with a caul, a membrane that sometimes covers the head at birth, are reported to have special abilities, such as predicting the future and seeing ghosts.

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,[8] 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.

The 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. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.

This, then, is the end of his striving: to be a co-worker in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation, to husband and use his best powers and his latent genius. These powers of body and mind have in the past been strangely wasted, dispersed, or forgotten. The shadow of a mighty Negro past flits through the tale of Ethiopia the Shadowy and of Egypt the Sphinx. Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness. Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man's turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness,—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. By the poverty and ignorance of his people, the Negro minister or doctor was tempted toward quackery and demagogy; and by the criticism of the other world, toward ideals that made him ashamed of his lowly tasks. The would-be black *savant*[9] was confronted by the paradox that the knowledge his people needed was a twice-told tale to his white neighbors, while the knowledge which would teach the white world was Greek to his own flesh and blood.

8. See below, p. 236, Dickson D. Bruce Jr.'s essay on the origins and meaning of double-consciousness.
9. A learned scholar.

The innate love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion and doubt in the soul of the black artist; for the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised, and he could not articulate the message of another people. This waste of double aims, this seeking to satisfy two unreconciled ideals, has wrought sad havoc with the courage and faith and deeds of ten thousand thousand people,—has sent them often wooing false gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves.

Away back in the days of bondage they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites.[1] In song and exhortation swelled one refrain—Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had Freedom in his right hand. At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. With one wild carnival of blood and passion came the message in his own plaintive cadences:—

> "Shout, O children!
> Shout, you're free!
> For God has bought your liberty!"[2]

Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre sits in its accustomed seat at the Nation's feast. In vain do we cry to this our vastest social problem:—

> "Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble!"[3]

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.

1. Following their Egyptian captivity, the Israelites reached Canaan, the Promised Land, after forty years of wandering in the wilderness.
2. Refrain of the freedom spiritual "Shout, O Children!"
3. *Macbeth* 3.4.102–3. Du Bois symbolically represents the American character as guilty and blood-stained, like the central character of Shakespeare's tragedy.

The first decade was merely a prolongation of the vain search for freedom, the boon that seemed ever barely to elude their grasp,—like a tantalizing will-o'-the-wisp,[4] maddening and misleading the headless host. The holocaust of war, the terrors of the Ku-Klux Klan,[5] the lies of carpet-baggers,[6] the disorganization of industry, and the contradictory advice of friends and foes, left the bewildered serf with no new watchword beyond the old cry for freedom. As the time flew, however, he began to grasp a new idea. The ideal of liberty demanded for its attainment powerful means, and these the Fifteenth Amendment gave him.[7] The ballot, which before he had looked upon as a visible sign of freedom, he now regarded as the chief means of gaining and perfecting the liberty with which war had partially endowed him. And why not? Had not votes made war and emancipated millions? Had not votes enfranchised the freedmen? Was anything impossible to a power that had done all this? A million black men started with renewed zeal to vote themselves into the kingdom. So the decade flew away, the revolution of 1876 came,[8] and left the half-free serf weary, wondering, but still inspired. Slowly but steadily, in the following years, a new vision began gradually to replace the dream of political power,—a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided, another pillar of fire by night after a clouded day. It was the ideal of "book-learning"; the curiosity, born of compulsory ignorance, to know and test the power of the cabalistic[9] letters of the white man, the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan;[1] longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life.

Up the new path the advance guard toiled, slowly, heavily, doggedly; only those who have watched and guided the faltering feet, the misty

4. A delusive or misleading goal.
5. Secret society formed in 1866 by Confederate veterans with the stated intent of protecting white, Protestant interests. It rapidly became a terrorist organization responsible for widespread violence against African Americans.
6. Northern politicians and businessmen who entered the South following the Civil War. Portrayed as carrying their belongings in cheap, fabric valises (carpetbags), they were seen as enriching themselves at the cost of a defeated Confederacy.
7. Ratified March 10, 1870; it granted voting rights to men regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Although the amendment was a moderate measure and did not outlaw qualification tests for voters, it allowed Congress to enforce the law through federal sanctions.
8. The results of the presidential elections of 1876 were disputed by Louisiana, Florida, and South Carolina, three states that backed Democrat Samuel J. Tilden against Rutherford B. Hayes. Some Southern Democrats threatened a "revolution" of secession from the Union. Republicans, in their attempt to mollify the Democrats, significantly reduced their support of the freedmen.
9. Mystical. The cabala, or Kabbalah, is a body of esoteric Jewish doctrines dealing with the manifestations of God. Written between the third and the sixteenth centuries, these books are difficult to interpret.
1. The Promised Land. Du Bois is reinforcing his identification of African Americans with the Israelites during their years of Egyptian captivity and their forty years of wandering in the wilderness.

minds, the dull understandings, of the dark pupils of these schools know how faithfully, how piteously, this people strove to learn. It was weary work. The cold statistician wrote down the inches of progress here and there, noted also where here and there a foot had slipped or some one had fallen. To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however, the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. In those sombre forests of his striving his own soul rose before him, and he saw himself,—darkly as through a veil;[2] and yet he saw in himself some faint revelation of his power, of his mission. He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem. He felt his poverty; without a cent, without a home, without land, tools, or savings, he had entered into competition with rich, landed, skilled neighbors. To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. He felt the weight of his ignorance,—not simply of letters, but of life, of business, of the humanities; the accumulated sloth and shirking and awkwardness of decades and centuries shackled his hands and feet. Nor was his burden all poverty and ignorance. The red stain of bastardy, which two centuries of systematic legal defilement of Negro women had stamped upon his race, meant not only the loss of ancient African chastity, but also the hereditary weight of a mass of corruption from white adulterers, threatening almost the obliteration of the Negro home.

A people thus handicapped ought not to be asked to race with the world, but rather allowed to give all its time and thought to its own social problems. But alas! while sociologists gleefully count his bastards and his prostitutes, the very soul of the toiling, sweating black man is darkened by the shadow of a vast despair. Men call the shadow prejudice, and learnedly explain it as the natural defence of culture against barbarism, learning against ignorance, purity against crime, the "higher" against the "lower" races.[3] To which the Negro cries Amen! and swears that to so much of this strange prejudice as is founded on just homage to civilization, culture, righteousness, and progress, he humbly bows and meekly does obeisance.[4] But before that nameless

2. 1 Corinthians 13.12: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."
3. During the Enlightenment, philosophers such as Kant and Hume were convinced that certain races could be ranked hierarchically according to their psychological and moral characteristics as well as their bodily traits.
4. An attitude of deference or homage.

prejudice that leaps beyond all this he stands helpless, dismayed, and well-nigh speechless; before that personal disrespect and mockery, the ridicule and systematic humiliation, the distortion of fact and wanton license of fancy, the cynical ignoring of the better and the boisterous welcoming of the worse, the all-pervading desire to inculcate disdain for everything black, from Toussaint[5] to the devil,—before this there rises a sickening despair that would disarm and discourage any nation save that black host to whom "discouragement" is an unwritten word.

But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparagement, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate. Whisperings and portents came borne upon the four winds: Lo! we are diseased and dying, cried the dark hosts; we cannot write, our voting is vain; what need of education, since we must always cook and serve? And the Nation echoed and enforced this self-criticism, saying: Be content to be servants, and nothing more; what need of higher culture for half-men? Away with the black man's ballot, by force or fraud,—and behold the suicide of a race! Nevertheless, out of the evil came something of good,—the more careful adjustment of education to real life, the clearer perception of the Negroes' social responsibilities, and the sobering realization of the meaning of progress.

So dawned the time of *Sturm und Drang*:[6] storm and stress to-day rocks our little boat on the mad waters of the world-sea; there is within and without the sound of conflict, the burning of body and rending of soul; inspiration strives with doubt, and faith with vain questionings. The bright ideals of the past,—physical freedom, political power, the training of brains and the training of hands,—all these in turn have waxed and waned, until even the last grows dim and overcast. Are they all wrong,—all false? No, not that, but each alone was over-simple and incomplete,—the dreams of a credulous race-childhood, or the fond imaginings of the other world which does not know and does not want to know our power. To be really true, all these ideals must be melted and welded into one. The training of the schools we need to-day more than ever,—the training of deft hands, quick eyes and ears, and above all the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts. The power of the ballot we need in sheer self-defence,—else what shall save us from a second slavery? Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek,—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty,—all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each grow-

5. Toussaint L'Ouverture (1746–1803), leader of the black forces during the Haitian Revolution that overthrew French rule. After Napoleon tricked him into going willingly to France in 1800, L'Ouverture died there in 1803.
6. Literally, storm and stress (German). The term characterizes a German literary movement that valorizes emotional experience and spiritual struggle. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Du Bois's favorite author, was a leading figure in this movement.

ing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack. We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness. Will America be poorer if she replace her brutal dyspeptic blundering with light-hearted but determined Negro humility? or her coarse and cruel wit with loving jovial good-humor? or her vulgar music with the soul of the Sorrow Songs?

Merely a concrete test of the underlying principles of the great republic is the Negro Problem, and the spiritual striving of the freedmen's sons is the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity.

And now what I have briefly sketched in large outline let me on coming pages tell again in many ways, with loving emphasis and deeper detail, that men may listen to the striving in the souls of black folk.

II

Of the Dawn of Freedom[1]

Careless seems the great Avenger;
History's lessons but record
One death-grapple in the darkness
'Twixt old systems and the Word;
Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne;
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above His own.
LOWELL.

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the Civil War; and however much they who marched South and North in 1861 may have fixed on the technical points of union and local autonomy as a shibboleth,[2] all nevertheless knew, as we know, that the question of Negro slavery was the real cause of the conflict. Curious it was, too, how this deeper question ever forced itself to the surface despite effort and disclaimer. No sooner had Northern armies touched Southern soil than this old question, newly guised, sprang from the earth,—What shall be done with Negroes? Peremptory military commands, this way and that, could not answer the query; the Emancipation Proclamation seemed but to broaden and intensify the difficulties; and the War Amendments[3] made the Negro problems of to-day.

It is the aim of this essay to study the period of history from 1861 to

1. Revised from "The Freedmen's Bureau," *Atlantic Monthly* (March 1901): 354–65. The verse is from James Russell Lowell's *The Present Crisis* (1844). The music quotation is from the Negro spiritual "My Lord, What a Mourning!"
2. A common saying or idea.
3. Amendments to the U.S. Constitution associated with the Civil War. The Thirteenth, ratified in 1865, abolished slavery; the Fourteenth (1866) provided "equal protection under the law"; and the Fifteenth (1870) granted the right to vote to black males.

He leaned back and smiled toward the sea, whence rose the strange melody, away from the dark shadows where lay the noise of horses galloping, galloping on. With an effort he roused himself, bent forward, and looked steadily down the pathway, softly humming the "Song of the Bride,"—

"Freulig geführt, ziehet dahin."[2]

Amid the trees in the dim morning twilight he watched their shadows dancing and heard their horses thundering toward him, until at last they came sweeping like a storm, and he saw in front that haggard white-haired man, whose eyes flashed red with fury. Oh, how he pitied him,—pitied him,—and wondered if he had the coiling twisted rope. Then, as the storm burst round him, he rose slowly to his feet and turned his closed eyes toward the Sea.

And the world whistled in his ears.

XIV

The Sorrow Songs[1]

I walk through the churchyard
  To lay this body down;
I know moon-rise, I know star-rise;
I walk in the moonlight, I walk in the starlight;
I'll lie in the grave and stretch out my arms,
I'll go to judgment in the evening of the day,
And my soul and thy soul shall meet that day,
  When I lay this body down.

NEGRO SONG.

They that walked in darkness sang songs in the olden days—Sorrow Songs—for they were weary at heart. And so before each thought that I have written in this book I have set a phrase, a haunting echo of these

2. An adaptation of the opening line of *Lohengrin's* "Wedding March." Du Bois has changed *treulich* (faithfully) to *freulig*: "Joyfully led, pass along to that place."
1. The verse is from the Negro spiritual "Lay This Body Down." The music quotation is from the Negro spiritual "Wrestlin' Jacob."

weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men. Ever since I was a child these songs have stirred me strangely. They came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine. Then in after years when I came to Nashville I saw the great temple builded of these songs towering over the pale city. To me Jubilee Hall[2] seemed ever made of the songs themselves, and its bricks were red with the blood and dust of toil. Out of them rose for me morning, noon, and night, bursts of wonderful melody, full of the voices of my brothers and sisters, full of the voices of the past.

Little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom; the human spirit in this new world has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than in beauty. And so by fateful chance the Negro folk-song—the rhythmic cry of the slave—stands to-day not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.

Away back in the thirties the melody of these slave songs stirred the nation, but the songs were soon half forgotten. Some, like "Near the lake where drooped the willow," passed into current airs and their source was forgotten; others were caricatured on the "minstrel" stage[3] and their memory died away. Then in war-time came the singular Port Royal experiment[4] after the capture of Hilton Head, and perhaps for the first time the North met the Southern slave face to face and heart to heart with no third witness. The Sea Islands of the Carolinas, where they met, were filled with a black folk of primitive type, touched and moulded less by the world about them than any others outside the Black Belt. Their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power. Thomas Wentworth Higginson hastened to tell of these songs, and Miss McKim[5] and others urged upon the world their rare beauty. But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers[6] sang

2. Jubilee Hall, a building at Fisk University in Nashville, was completed in 1875. The building was built with the proceeds from the Fisk Jubilee Singers' international singing tour.
3. A staged entertainment in which white performers in blackface sang and spoke in black dialect. Minstrels relied heavily on racial stereotypes.
4. See n. 2, p. 19.
5. Lucy McKim Garrison (1842–1877), daughter of an abolitionist. She collected and transcribed the lyrics of slave songs in South Carolina during the Civil War. Higginson (1823–1911) was a Union army officer who became the commander of a black regiment, The First South Carolina Volunteers. An abolitionist, he also wrote one of the first serious studies of black music, *The Spirituals*, (1867).
6. Chorus organized at Fisk University in 1867. Originally only eleven members, the group sang all kinds of music, but their fame was based on their presentation of the spirituals in stylized form.

the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again.

There was once a blacksmith's son born at Cadiz, New York, who in the changes of time taught school in Ohio and helped defend Cincinnati from Kirby Smith.[7] Then he fought at Chancellorsville and Gettysburg[8] and finally served in the Freedman's Bureau at Nashville. Here he formed a Sunday-school class of black children in 1866, and sang with them and taught them to sing. And then they taught him to sing, and when once the glory of the Jubilee songs passed into the soul of George L. White,[9] he knew his life-work was to let those Negroes sing to the world as they had sung to him. So in 1871 the pilgrimage of the Fisk Jubilee Singers began. North to Cincinnati they rode,—four half-clothed black boys and five girl-women,—led by a man with a cause and a purpose. They stopped at Wilberforce, the oldest of Negro schools, where a black bishop blessed them. Then they went, fighting cold and starvation, shut out of hotels, and cheerfully sneered at, ever northward; and ever the magic of their song kept thrilling hearts, until a burst of applause in the Congregational Council at Oberlin[1] revealed them to the world. They came to New York and Henry Ward Beecher[2] dared to welcome them, even though the metropolitan dailies sneered at his "Nigger Minstrels." So their songs conquered till they sang across the land and across the sea, before Queen and Kaiser, in Scotland and Ireland, Holland and Switzerland. Seven years they sang, and brought back a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to found Fisk University.

Since their day they have been imitated—sometimes well, by the singers of Hampton and Atlanta, sometimes ill, by straggling quartettes. Caricature has sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real. But the true Negro folk-song still lives in the hearts of those who have heard them truly sung and in the hearts of the Negro people.

What are these songs, and what do they mean? I know little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase,[3] but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world. They tell us in these eager days that life was joyous to the black slave, careless and happy. I can easily believe

7. Edmund Kirby Smith, Confederate general, led an invasion of Kentucky in 1862 that threatened Cincinnati.
8. Town in southern Pennsylvania. One of the bloodiest and most important battles of the Civil War, fought on July 3, 1863. Chancellorsville, Virginia, was the site of another battle in 1863.
9. Vocal music teacher at Fisk University. He founded the Jubilee Singers.
1. On November 15, 1871, the Fisk Jubilee Singers gained renown for their performance at a meeting of the National Council of Congregational Churches at Oberlin College.
2. Abolitionist (1813–1887) and brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, was pastor of Plymouth Church in New York. His invitation to the Jubilee Singers to sing at his church increased their popularity.
3. Although not a musicologist, Du Bois knew more than a little about music. He was a member of Fisk's Mozart Society and sang in Handel's *Messiah*.

this of some, of many. But not all the past South, though it rose from the dead, can gainsay the heart-touching witness of these songs. They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.

The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development. My grandfather's grandmother[4] was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody[5] to the child between her knees, thus:

Do ba - na co - ba, ge - ne me, ge - ne me!
Do ba - na co - ba, ge - ne me, ge - ne me!
Ben d' nu - li, nu - li, nu - li, nu - li, ben d' le.

The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so 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 may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.

This was primitive African music; it may be seen in larger form in the strange chant which heralds "The Coming of John":

> "You may bury me in the East,
> You may bury me in the West,
> But I'll hear the trumpet sound in that morning,"[6]

—the voice of exile.

Ten master songs, more or less, one may pluck from this forest of melody—songs of undoubted Negro origin and wide popular currency, and songs peculiarly characteristic of the slave. One of these I have just mentioned. Another whose strains begin this book is "Nobody knows

4. Tom Burghardt, Du Bois's grandfather's grandfather, was married to the ancestor Du Bois refers to here.
5. Unidentified.
6. From the Negro spiritual "You May Bury Me in the East," also called "I'll Hear the Trumpet Song."

the trouble I've seen." When, struck with a sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfil its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept.

The third song is the cradle-song of death which all men know,—"Swing low, sweet chariot,"—whose bars begin the life story of "Alexander Crummell." Then there is the song of many waters, "Roll, Jordan, roll," a mighty chorus with minor cadences. There were many songs of the fugitive like that which opens "The Wings of Atalanta," and the more familiar "Been a-listening." The seventh is the song of the End and the Beginning—"My Lord, what a mourning! when the stars begin to fall"; a strain of this is placed before "The Dawn of Freedom." The song of groping—"My way's cloudy"—begins "The Meaning of Progress"; the ninth is the song of this chapter—"Wrestlin' Jacob, the day is a-breaking,"—a pæan of hopeful strife. The last master song is the song of songs—"Steal away,"—sprung from "The Faith of the Fathers."

There are many others of the Negro folk-songs as striking and characteristic as these, as, for instance, the three strains in the third, eighth, and ninth chapters; and others I am sure could easily make a selection on more scientific principles. There are, too, songs that seem to me a step removed from the more primitive types: there is the maze-like medley, "Bright sparkles," one phrase of which heads "The Black Belt"; the Easter carol, "Dust, dust and ashes"; the dirge, "My mother's took her flight and gone home"; and that burst of melody hovering over "The Passing of the First-Born"—"I hope my mother will be there in that beautiful world on high."

These represent a third step in the development of the slave song, of which "You may bury me in the East" is the first, and songs like "March on" (chapter six) and "Steal away" are the second. The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody, as "Swanee River" and "Old Black Joe."[7] Side by side, too, with the growth has gone the debasements and imitations—the Negro "minstrel" songs, many of the "gospel" hymns, and some of the contemporary "coon" songs,[8]—a mass of music in which the novice may easily lose himself and never find the real Negro melodies.

7. Stephen Foster (1826–1864), who wrote both of these songs, was the most famous songwriter of his day.
8. Racist songs that were used in minstrel shows. They featured a character called Zip Coon.

In these songs, I have said, the slave spoke to the world. Such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate. Words and music have lost each other and new and cant phrases of a dimly understood theology have displaced the older sentiment. Once in a while we catch a strange word of an unknown tongue, as the "Mighty Myo," which figures as a river of death; more often slight words or mere doggerel are joined to music of singular sweetness. Purely secular songs are few in number, partly because many of them were turned into hymns by a change of words, partly because the frolics were seldom heard by the stranger, and the music less often caught. Of nearly all the songs, however, the music is distinctly sorrowful. The ten master songs I have mentioned tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End.

The words that are left to us are not without interest, and, cleared of evident dross, they conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody. Like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Nature's heart. Life was a "rough and rolling sea" like the brown Atlantic of the Sea Islands; the "Wilderness" was the home of God, and the "lonesome valley" led to the way of life. "Winter'll soon be over," was the picture of life and death to a tropical imagination. The sudden wild thunder-storms of the South awed and impressed the Negroes,—at times the rumbling seemed to them "mournful," at times imperious:

"My Lord calls me,
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds it in my soul."[9]

The monotonous toil and exposure is painted in many words. One sees the ploughmen in the hot, moist furrow, singing:

"Dere's no rain to wet you,
Dere's no sun to burn you,
Oh, push along, believer,
I want to go home."[1]

The bowed and bent old man cries, with thrice-repeated wail:

"O Lord, keep me from sinking down,"

and he rebukes the devil of doubt who can whisper:

"Jesus is dead and God's gone away."[2]

Yet the soul-hunger is there, the restlessness of the savage, the wail of the wanderer, and the plaint is put in one little phrase:[3]

9. From the Negro spiritual "Steal Away."
1. From the Negro spiritual "There's No Rain to Wet You."
2. From the Negro spiritual "Keep Me from Sinking Down."
3. From the Negro spiritual "My Soul Wants Something That's New."

Over the inner thoughts of the slaves and their relations one with another the shadow of fear ever hung, so that we get but glimpses here and there, and also with them, eloquent omissions and silences. Mother and child are sung, but seldom father; fugitive and weary wanderer call for pity and affection, but there is little of wooing and wedding; the rocks and the mountains are well known, but home is unknown. Strange blending of love and helplessness sings through the refrain:

> "Yonder's my ole mudder,
> Been waggin' at de hill so long;
> 'Bout time she cross over,
> Git home bime-by."[4]

Elsewhere comes the cry of the "motherless" and the "Farewell, farewell, my only child."

Love-songs are scarce and fall into two categories—the frivolous and light, and the sad. Of deep successful love there is ominous silence, and in one of the oldest of these songs there is a depth of history and meaning:[5]

Poor Ro - sy, poor gal; Poor Ro - sy.
poor gal; Ro - sy break my poor heart.
Heav'n shall - a - be my home.

A black woman said of the song, "It can't be sung without a full heart and a troubled sperrit." The same voice sings here that sings in the German folk-song:

> "Jetz Geh i' an's brunele, trink' aber net."[6]

4. From the Negro spiritual "O'er the Crossing."
5. From the Negro spiritual "Poor Rosy."
6. From the German folk song "Jetzt gang I ans Brunnele," "Now I'm going to the well, but I will not drink."

Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters, perhaps—who knows?—back to his ancient forests again. Later days transfigured his fatalism, and amid the dust and dirt the toiler sang:

> "Dust, dust and ashes, fly over my grave,
> But the Lord shall bear my spirit home."[7]

The things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases. "Weep, O captive daughter of Zion," is quaintly turned into "Zion, weep-a-low," and the wheels of Ezekiel[8] are turned every way in the mystic dreaming of the slave, till he says:

> "There's a little wheel a-turnin' in-a-my heart."[9]

As in olden time, the words of these hymns were improvised by some leading minstrel of the religious band. The circumstances of the gathering, however, the rhythm of the songs, and the limitations of allowable thought, confined the poetry for the most part to single or double lines, and they seldom were expanded to quatrains or longer tales, although there are some few examples of sustained efforts, chiefly paraphrases of the Bible. Three short series of verses have always attracted me,—the one that heads this chapter, of one line of which Thomas Wentworth Higginson has fittingly said, "Never, it seems to me, since man first lived and suffered was his infinite longing for peace uttered more plaintively." The second and third are descriptions of the Last Judgment,—the one a late improvisation, with some traces of outside influence:

> "Oh, the stars in the elements are falling,
> And the moon drips away into blood,
> And the ransomed of the Lord are returning unto God,
> Blessed be the name of the Lord."[1]

And the other earlier and homelier picture from the low coast lands:

> "Michael, haul the boat ashore,
> Then you'll hear the horn they blow,
> Then you'll hear the trumpet sound,
> Trumpet sound the world around,
> Trumpet sound for rich and poor,
> Trumpet sound the Jubilee,
> Trumpet sound for you and me."[2]

7. From the Negro spiritual "Dust and Ashes."
8. See Ezekiel 1.15–28.
9. From the Negro spiritual "There's a Little Wheel a-Turnin'."
1. From the Negro spiritual "My Lord, What a Mourning!"
2. From the Negro spiritual "Michael, Row the Boat Ashore."

Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins. Is such a hope justified? Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?

The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent toward Time and ignorant of the deeds of men. A thousand years ago such an assumption, easily possible, would have made it difficult for the Teuton to prove his right to life. Two thousand years ago such dogmatism, readily welcome, would have scouted the idea of blond races ever leading civilization. So wofully unorganized is sociological knowledge that the meaning of progress, the meaning of "swift" and "slow" in human doing, and the limits of human perfectability, are veiled, unanswered sphinxes on the shores of science. Why should Æschylus[3] have sung two thousand years before Shakespeare was born? Why has civilization flourished in Europe, and flickered, flamed, and died in Africa? So long as the world stands meekly dumb before such questions, shall this nation proclaim its ignorance and unhallowed prejudices by denying freedom of opportunity to those who brought the Sorrow Songs to the Seats of the Mighty?

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims[4] landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centred for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation's heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts

3. Ancient Greek poet and playwright (525–456 B.C.E).
4. The pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, in 1620. In Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, the first Africans landed in North America. They were either slaves or indentured servants.

worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?

Even so is the hope that sang in the songs of my fathers well sung. If somewhere in this whirl and chaos of things there dwells Eternal Good, pitiful yet masterful, then anon in His good time America shall rend the Veil and the prisoned shall go free. Free, free as the sunshine trickling down the morning into these high windows of mine, free as yonder fresh young voices welling up to me from the caverns of brick and mortar below—swelling with song, instinct with life, tremulous treble and darkening bass. My children, my little children, are singing to the sunshine, and thus they sing:[5]

Let us cheer the wea - ry trav - el - ler,
Cheer the wea - ry trav - el - ler, Let us
cheer the wea - ry trav - el - ler A -
- long the heav - en - ly way.

5. From the Negro spiritual "Let Us Cheer the Weary Traveler."

And the traveller girds himself, and sets his face toward the Morning, and goes his way.

The After-Thought

Hear my cry, O God the Reader; vouchsafe that this my book fall not still-born into the world-wilderness. Let there spring, Gentle One, from out its leaves vigor of thought and thoughtful deed to reap the harvest wonderful. Let the ears of a guilty people tingle with truth, and seventy millions sigh for the righteousness which exalteth nations, in this drear day when human brotherhood is mockery and a snare. Thus in Thy good time may infinite reason turn the tangle straight, and these crooked marks on a fragile leaf be not indeed

THE END

CONTEXTS

1919

Eve L. Ewing

Haymarket Books
Chicago, Illinois

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The report contains recommendations, which, if acted upon, will make impossible, in my opinion, a repetition of the appalling tragedy which brought disgrace to Chicago in July of 1919.
(*The Negro in Chicago*, xiv)

And she called his name Moses: and she said, Because I drew him out of the water.
(Exodus, Chapter 2, Verse 10, King James Version)

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This book is a story.

When I was doing the research that would eventually go into my second book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings on Chicago's South Side*, and I was writing about segregation in Chicago, one of the most helpful documents I encountered was a report from 1922 called *The Negro in Chicago: A Study on Race Relations and a Race Riot.* Just the title alone enticed me; it was so direct and made such a bold claim on totality. How could someone claim to tell the story of Black people in this city? The whole story? This report was prepared by a committee appointed by the governor, made up of six Black men and six White men, all deemed by their peers to be upstanding and respectable citizens. Its stated purpose was to dissect the 1919 race riot that had happened in Chicago three years prior, to analyze its causes, and try to prevent something like that from happening again. In order to figure out the race riot, the authors reasoned, what they really had to figure out was the reality of everyday life for Black people in their era, and so that's what they set out to do.

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For my writing of *Ghosts*, I needed one specific thing from *The Negro in Chicago*, and that was information about housing segregation at the beginning of the Great Migration. But as I was doing my research, I kept getting sucked into other parts of the report, things that were tangential to my work but were so fascinating. They gave me a view into Black life in my city a century earlier, and so many things struck me as being either radically different or completely unchanged. And even though this was a government-commissioned report, many of its passages immediately made me think about poetry. They were so narrative, so evocative, so imagistic. The report was like an old tapestry with loose threads sticking out, and I wanted to tug on them and see what I could unravel, see what new thing I could weave.

And then, there was the matter of the race riot itself. I knew that 1919 had been known as the Red Summer for the wave of race riots that swept across the United States. But, like many aspects of Black history, this was something I didn't learn much about in school, and only then when I was very far along in my academic career. Most of what I knew about 1919, I learned through self-study when I was in graduate school. As a lifelong Chicagoan, I didn't often hear people discuss the race riot that had occurred in our city a century ago, and I wasn't sure that most people knew about it. Chicagoans tend to be enthusiastic and vocal discussants of our own history. But 1919 didn't seem to make it into the timeline alongside titanic stories about Fort Dearborn, Jean-Baptiste Point du Sable, the World's Columbian Exposition, the 1968 riots, Richard J. Daley, or Harold Washington.

This collection of poems is meant as a small offering, an entry point into a conversation about a part of our history that I think is worth talking about much more than we do. Almost every poem in this collection is in conversation with a passage from *The Negro in Chicago*. You'll see those passages written in italics at the top of the page. The page number in parentheses represents the place where you can find the passage in *The Negro in Chicago*. The report is a publicly available document.

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I like to use poems as what-if machines and as time-traveling devices, and I'm grateful to have had the chance to do that with this project. I learned a lot, and I hope you learn something too and then go tell someone else about it.

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keeping house

White persons are generally uninformed on matters affecting Negroes and race relations. . . . This same ignorance applies to Negroes, though not to the same degree; for they know white people in their intimate personal and home relations and in connection with their work in factories and stores. They read their books and papers and often hear their discussions. (436)

'do not steal,' she said
'and you can stay here for months.
years, even.' her mouth
a red line, she never asked
if I wanted to stay there.

*

each room has secrets.
in the parlor, an urn rests
near the windowsill
1905. and beneath:
1917. a psalm.

*

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she weeps in the tub.
steam crawls beneath the door and
creeps up the window
as I scrub soot from the wall.
dirt still finds the rich.

*

I waited four months.
and now I do steal. small things.
a porcelain mouse.
a black stone from the garden.
she only checks the cupboard.

*

my mother taught me
to be silent in their homes.
they forget you're there.
this way, you pass as a ghost.
come and go as you please, hushed.

*

I learn much this way:
of the city, its powers.
its promises made.
I scour pots and whisper
my plans as water rushes.

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*

after seven months
I begin to steal food, too.
a cup of flour.
a brown egg in my bosom.
she no longer speaks to me.

*

at night, when I wait
in the dim hallway to wash,
I touch the black stone.
I wonder at my fortune—
that something like this is mine.

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City in a Garden

after Carl Sandburg

The Negro crowd from Twenty-ninth Street got into action, and white men who came in contact with it were beaten. . . Farther to the west, as darkness came on, white gangsters became active. Negroes in white districts suffered severely at their hands. From 9:00 p.m. until 3:00 a.m. twenty-seven Negroes were beaten, seven were stabbed, and four were shot. (5)

o my ugly homestead,
blood-sodden prairie.

urbs in horto. meaning:
if it grows, it once came from dirt

o my love, why do you till the ground with iron?
o my miracle, why do you fire in the dark?
you, thief of dusk, you, captain of my sorrows. you, avarice.
your ground is greedy for our children, and you take them as you please.
the babies come from you, the train car orators, and the beloved hustlers.
they die. and then you send forth more. you, who makes a place
in a middle land. you, ruthless. you, seed ground.
you bear the best of us and the worst in equal measure.

o my garden, which am I?

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this is a map

Samuel Bass, on account of the street-car strike, was walking the five and one-half miles from his work to his home when a gang of white men knocked him down three times, and cut gashes in his nose and cheeks with their shoes. Bass hid behind freight cars till a Jewish peddler took him in his cart to State Street. A doctor was visited, but when he learned that Bass had no money, he turned him away without treatment. (659)

this is a map of my city
here are the places in my city where I dare not go
here is where the electric wires gave out and here
is where I still had to make it home,
and here is the first mile, where I whistled
the way my granny taught me, to keep away the haints
and here is where a baby waved to me from a window
and here is the second mile, where I heard the calls,
and on this map there is no third mile
in this, my city, where I first prayed to die,
and then, hearing a single cardinal over the din of their threats,
changed my mind, and prayed to live,
and this is a map of my neighbor's city
where he traces a way through the mud each day,
the squeal of old wood on iron heralding his arrival,
a king of the streets, a conquering hero of nowhere, and
this is a map of my body

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this is the blood of my rivers
this is the bruise of my marshland
this is the sinew of my furthest ridge, and
this is a map of the railroad.
and if I could stand and walk I could make it all the way back
to my granny, pinching snuff and humming
and if she looked up she would say *boy, my baby*
where you been all this time

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