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Soul Craft as the Work of Sorrow and Hope: an analysis of “the inner life” in the practice of true religion

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SOUL CRAFT AS THE WORK OF SORROW AND HOPE: AN ANALYSIS OF "THE INNER LIFE" IN THE PRACTICE OF TRUE RELIGION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 2

INTRODUCTION 3

CHAPTER 1: Emily Dickinson's Divine Feminine Soul 10

Introduction 10

Religious Context 13

Poem Analysis 15

CHAPTER 2: Du Bois' Paradoxical Soul of Sorrow and Hope. 33

Sorrow and William James' Sick Soul 41

Journey of Education 46

Sorrow Songs 54

CHAPTER 3: Morrison's Embodied Soul of Tomorrow 60

The Beloved Trilogy 61

Jason Bivins and the Spirituality of Jazz. 67

Morrison's Embodied Soul of Tomorrow 74

CONCLUSION 83

BIBLIOGRAPHY 88

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INTRODUCTION

I recently read *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* by Audre Lorde. In this biomythography, a transgressive writing form that weaves together biography, myth, and history into an epic narrative, Lorde chronicles her life through the women who shaped her. She writes, "Every woman I have ever loved has left her print upon me, where I loved, some invaluable piece of myself apart from me — so different that I had to stretch and grow in order to recognize her. And in that growing, we came to separation, that place where work begins. Another meeting."[1] Every meeting existed as erupting elements of an electric storm: exchanging energy, sharing charge, and leaving Lorde reformed and reshaped for the better.[2] In this undergraduate thesis, intensely inspired by Lorde, I will perform an exploration of the soul that falls within the genre of biomythography. This process will begin with an introspective exploration of my prior understandings of soul before embarking on a journey of critical and literary analysis of the notion of inner spiritual life through the works of Emily Dickinson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Toni Morrison.

Although I have read *Zami* multiple times at this point, I have yet to identify how the "myth" in bio*myth*ography is related to Lorde's overarching life journey. Perhaps, in a work defined by her individual understanding of identity and the outside world's prescribed reactions to said identity, the myth is directly related to her Blackness and Queerness.[3] This inherent significance of identity, apparent in *Zami*, will guide my conceptions and assumptions relating to the term "soul." In my past, I have been implicitly and explicitly told to, in effect, "leave my identity at the classroom door." In academic contexts, objectivity is the goal, and any ounce of

[1]Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Pr., 1982), 255.
[2] Ibid., 253.
[3] Here there is an interesting discussion regarding Lorde's use of myth and the idea offered by mythologist Joseph Campbell of myth as a powerful, orienting story that often carries deep cultural or symbolic significance. One could interpret Lorde's biomythography as the story of the orienting truths and values in her own life.

my identity somehow affecting my classroom presence would beget a subjectivity that would corrupt and delegitimize any claims or assertions I made. Through this thesis process, I have challenged this deeply-ingrained practice and incorporated my "outside world-self" into the sphere of academia. With that in mind, I intend to fully incorporate my objective mind with my whole subjective self: perhaps Lorde's myth of a fully realized identity will align with my own personalized search for the soul.

Zami begins with the question, "To whom do I owe the power behind my voice, what strength I have become, yeasting up like sudden blood from under the bruised skin's blister?"[4] I choose to respond to this question with an exploration of my childhood. As the daughter of two ministers, the Christian Church shaped my youth: from early Sunday mornings, to New Year's Eve watch nights, Christianity played an instrumental role in my foundational years. Most importantly, during these early years, I began to develop my own understanding of "the soul." Church services were dominated by "soul music" and every service was followed by a lunch of "soul food." I had yet to define "soul," but I knew when it was tacked on to another word, an element of Blackness was added to the otherwise blandly grammatical noun. For example, when the rare re-rerun of "Soul Train" played on the television, I could count on the members of my family to attempt their best dance moves while proclaiming the show promoted "real" song and dance (as opposed to the music and dance of the early 2000s, I presumed). At this point, my concept of the soul was intrinsically tied to my observation that anything soul-related inspired and reinvigorated my Black community in a profound way.

My childhood understanding of the soul was one of positive affirmation in that the soul is tied to the body. In place of the "sins of the flesh" which defile the pure soul, resulting in a conflict between body and soul, in my young mind, because the soul positively affirmed the

[4] Ibid., 3.

Black community, this intangible essence was intrinsically linked to their transient forms: the Blackness of soul mattered within the context of Black bodies. It was unnecessary to decry the body as simply a transitory form that shies in comparison to the spirit: the soul is empowered and contextualized by the body.

One example of this comes from "soul music": songs that preach strength, resiliency, and the sense of belonging to a larger Black narrative. Such qualities are prominent in the repertoire of "The Queen of Soul," Aretha Franklin (To this day, my mom loves to tell the story of the first time she felt me move during her pregnancy: it was during an Aretha Franklin concert). There is a power and legacy of Ms. Franklin, especially in her rendition of Nina Simone's, "Young, Gifted, and Black." The dynamic lyrics highlight all the features of soul I have so far discussed and introduce a new element:

When you're feeling real low
Here's a great truth you should remember and know
That you're young, gifted, and black
You got your soul intact, oh and that's a fact.[5]

The phrasing, "great truth" reinforces the notion of the larger Black narrative: despite one's current trials and tribulations, you are a member of a community that overcomes. The fourth line, specifically the word "intact" leads me to wonder about the physical quality of soul. Young Black children have their souls *intact*, implying a whole and complete being that lacks any damage, alteration, or loss. There is an authenticity and inherent value of a soul that is intact, as it has been unchanged and unharmed despite the adversity of young Black life. Because an

[5] Aretha Franklin, "Young, Gifted, and Black." YouTube.

individual's core possesses innate resilience, which provides a stable foundation even in turbulent times, the authentic Black soul is one of inner strength and steadfastness. This power of the soul which is revealed in soul music is also evident in the gospel song, "Take me to the King," where Tamela Mann admits:

No strength to fight

No tears to cry

Even if I tried

But still my soul

Refuses to die[6]

Despite all the suffering, tears, and anguish, her soul refuses to die. Mann is at her lowest, where she lacks both the strength to fight and the tears to cry in an utter state of emotional and physical exhaustion. However, there is a resounding tone of empowerment and defiance. While the physical body may be weary and depleted, the core essence of the individual cannot be fatigued. I have grown up contextualizing the soul as a source of power which *refuses* to die, indicating a stubborn assurance of competence and capacity, which accords with the larger Black narrative of struggle and perseverance.

After this brief consideration of my childhood associations and understandings of soul — as a modifier attached to nouns (soul train, soul food, soul music) that somehow relates to a larger Black consciousness — I move forward to an academic study of soul. To reiterate, in this biomythography I will incorporate my whole self in this analysis of soul, inner life, and spirit: a navigation of the academic waters with a fully integrated head and heart.

[6] Tamela Mann, "Take me to the King." YouTube.

I will now provide an academic framework and methodology for this work which in many ways is a response to scholar Alain de Botton and his work *Religion for Atheists* which advocates the secular power of religion.

Methodology:

The 20th century thinker Alain de Botton argues for the utility of secular religious practice, analyzing the ways in which atheists can and should adopt principles and rituals from formal religion in order to foster greater harmony and balance. The "truth" of religion or God is irrelevant due to the beneficial nature of a non-religious religion; practices such as communion in Christianity and tea-drinking ceremonies in Zen Buddhism, when removed of their spiritual elements, provide atheists with the resources to heal, grow, and prosper.

In *Religion for Atheists*, Alain de Botton does not set out to disprove the existence of God: "The most boring and unproductive question one can ask of any religion is whether or not it is *true.*"[7] Instead of providing arguments for the death or impossibility of sacred divinities, de Botton identifies the two beneficial outcomes of religion as creating harmony and providing the means to cope with various pains such as troubled relationships, failure, or the passing of loved ones.[8] He seeks to reverse the process of religious colonization and separate the beneficial ideas and rituals of religion from the religious institutions to gate keep the benefits. De Botton claims the most useful aspect of religion is found in the objective outcome of religious practices, apparent in his commendation of the Christian sacrament of communion and the Zen Buddhist practice of tea-drinking.

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[7] Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A non-believer's guide to the uses of religion*. (New York: Pantheon Books., 2012), 11.
[8] Ibid., 12.

One of the central acts in Christian worship is Holy Communion, the ritual commemoration of Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples. De Botton views this sacrament — which intends to remind participants of the sacrifice and commitment of Jesus Christ — not as a ritual of addition that imparts divine grace, but instead as a ceremony of subtraction: he is inspired to create a Communion absent of this act of spiritual remembering. In its place, he proposes "The Agape Restaurant," a space where guests would, as in a church, "signal their allegiance to a spirit of community and friendship."[9] In lieu of a liturgical book, partakers would act according to the "Book of Agape" which directs conversations and actions in the pursuit of secular fellowship.[10] Similarly, the *chanoyu* ritual in Zen Buddhism, where every movement has a greater significance in the promotion of the Buddhist virtues of harmony, purity, and tranquility, is abstracted from its spiritual roots. In a ceremony where even the slow speed at which the tea is brewed attempts to humble humans by directly challenging the demands of the ego for immediate satisfaction,[11] de Botton attempts to find the source of meaning in an empty practice. In the statement "Religions are intermittently too useful, effective and intelligent to be abandoned to the religious alone,"[12] it is clear de Botton interprets a hostile and selfish possession of spiritual rituals by religious institutions. He believes these practices, when removed from their spiritual context, can positively impact the well-being of all humans, especially atheists.

I do not find de Botton's theory to be compelling: he disrespects religion in his assertion of a meaningful religious practice devoid of religion. I agree that religion is a matter of belief and an arationality which completely supersedes logic. However any attempt to dissect and

[9] Ibid., 43.
[10] Ibid., 46.
[11] Ibid., 142.
[12] Ibid., 312.

cherry-pick religion into disparate parts precludes any significant growth. De Botton pilfers belief systems, effectively emptying them of their content and completely removing them from the context that gives them purpose. Similarly to searching for water in an empty well, when a characteristic is removed from its origin, the entire meaning and truth is likewise excavated; when one oversimplifies religion and distills religious acts to their ends instead of their means, the ritual becomes a vacant imitation of a once vibrant and truth-affirming system.

In many ways, I am responding to de Botton and his argument on the separability of the religious and the secular. In my analysis of soul, I am not advocating a secularization of the term "soul," instead I examine the word as a lifeline that extends beyond the boundary and identification of religion. Through an analysis of three American authors, Emily Dickinson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Toni Morrison, whose works who are not explicitly tied to a religious tradition, I see a soul that is universalized beyond its traditional Christian associations. Although the Christian influence is undeniable in all three works, given the historical and social context of their respective time periods, the writers are not directly addressing religious denominations. Rather, their use of soul is grander than a terminology limited to their religious backgrounds. In this examination of inner life in true religion, I argue the significance and potency of the language of soul not only in the explicit religious manifestations, but also in secular works. In effect, the following thesis is a reaction to de Botton's belief in making secular the religious, and as I position the soul, as a piece of religious terminology, beyond demarcations of secular/religious and instead residing in the universal.

Chapter 1: Emily Dickinson's Divine Feminine Soul

"If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?"

Fig. 1
Emily Dickinson Daguerreotype. ca. 1847,
Emily Dickinson Archives & Special Collections, Amherst College.

Introduction:

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) was a 19th century American poet known for her distinctive and innovative poetry which explored complex themes of love, nature, immortality, death, and the human experience. Born in Amherst, Massachusetts in 1830, the poet was influenced by the social and political conflicts of her day, including rapid industrialization, civil strife and the suffrage movement. While many of her contemporaries addressed these historical

happenings through political rallies, protests, or other public displays, Dickinson directed her attention first and foremost to her poetry. Writing almost 1,800 poems during her lifetime — most of which were published after her death — verse became the site of her inner radical conflicts: internal meditations on marriage, education, and religion that pushed the boundaries of an unmarried woman's role in 19th century New England and mirrored the larger state of the political and social stage. Her vast body of work was made possible through her introspective nature, intense observation, and most infamously, her relative seclusion in which the eccentric chose to withdraw from the public eye.

Dickinson's unique use of language, punctuation, and form enables a profundity of thought to explore the depths of the human condition. Her status as a "recluse," a hermit who lived in elective isolation from the external world, affords her an intensity of thought and capacity for keen observations. Although the most misunderstood aspect of her identity, her voluntary separation from the outside world provided the space for my formal introduction to the poet and the first point of connection.

I was introduced to Emily Dickinson in an elective English class during my senior year of high school. I was familiar with her status as one of the great American poets, however beyond a superficial name recognition, I knew very little of Dickinson. That all changed in my spring semester of 2020, during the COVID pandemic, which brought lockdowns and the dreaded quarantine. In those uncertain times, especially during the first month as teachers and students adjusted to Zoom and asynchronous teaching, there was one class that nonetheless sparked my curiosity and excitement: an introduction to Emily Dickinson. In comparison to physics, comparative government, calculus, and moral philosophy (a close second), I felt a

connection to the poet who lived almost 200 years prior. Pointedly, her isolation mirrored my quarantine.

In a class of only 6 students, our teacher wanted us to feel connected to Dickinson. Beyond her words, the first connection he drew was the similarity of circumstance; on the first day of virtual learning, the teacher showed photos from the Emily Dickinson Museum, which featured a recreation of her bedroom. A simple room — featuring her smaller than twin-sized bed, dresser, nightstand, and most importantly her writing desk — it was nonetheless the place in which she resided and wrote for the majority of her life. As I sat behind my computer, at my desk in 2020, and stared at her 19th century desk, I first felt that shared confinement. Yes, hers was voluntary and mine mandatory; hers a proactive cultivation of a poetic environment and mine a reactive withdrawal from a deadly virus. Yet there existed a kinship. A tie I desperately needed during mandated social distancing. Even further, the museum displayed one of Dickinson's white dresses that she was known to wear in adulthood which, as my tour guide explained, was the "Victorian equivalent of a sweatshirt and sweatpants." In effect, she too was sequestered in her house, dressed in the most comfortable attire of the age, and accompanied solely by her immediate family and her endless string of thoughts. It was as if she was in our shoes, or rather us in hers.

Dickinson demonstrates a very personalized understanding of her seclusion as sabbath. Her chosen isolation becomes a sacred form of self-maintenance and literary inspiration, to the extent that it appropriates the honorific "sabbath." She frequently appropriates religious terms with a definitively secular connotation: the choice of sabbath to describe her nonreligious dedication to her home and the application of religious imagery to convey a quasi-religious fervor, such as her varied and complex use of soul to explicate aspects of human experience in

her poems. In this chapter, I will explore five poems, the first of which demonstrates the importance of home, and Dickinson's refutation of organized religion, the next three of which each contain the word soul and engage with the term in an effort to illustrate an ineffable aspect of the human condition, and the last of which answers the "So what?" question behind this chapter: the necessary powerhouse of hope as the motivation and inspiration behind each manifestation and visualization of the soul in her works.

However, before we engage in a discussion of Dickinson's use of sabbath and broader soul language, we must first discuss the religious context of the age.

Religious context:

Puritanism, a religious reform movement in the 16th and 17th centuries that sought to "purify" the Church of England of Roman Catholic remnants, first arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.[13] Puritans were exemplified by an intensity of religious experience and moral correctness that impacted nearly every aspect of everyday life (a later result of the intent to eliminate the organizational hierarchies of the Catholic Church, Puritans established the Congregational Church to promote individual power structures among local "congregations"). The Congregational Church became a steadfast and ubiquitous influence in Amherst, Massachusetts. By the 1740s, religious revivals had spread across New England through fiery preachers such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards — who, in a reaction against the increasing secularization and hedonism of American society, gave sermons such as "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" — in order to inspire fear, reverence, and awe of God in their

[13] Brittanica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Puritanism," *Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Puritanism.*

listeners.[14] This period of revitalized engagement with Christianity became known as the First Great Awakening, followed by a Second Great Awakening that spread across the Eastern seaboard in the greater part of the early to mid-19th century. By the time of Emily Dickinson's birth in 1830, Amherst had experienced a wide variety of religious transmutations and evolution. Amid this period of rapid change, the Congregational Church remained a steadfast and ubiquitous presence in Amherst.

Beyond the walls of the Congregational Church, the Christian influence extended into the classrooms and played a large role in Dickinson's educational journey. At the age of nine, Dickinson was enrolled in Amherst Academy, a school founded to provide religious instruction, and later entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary,[15] which sought to instill moral and spiritual values and prepare young women to become suitable wives and mothers.[16]

In other words, it is important to remember that Dickinson is not writing in a vacuum: She is very much a product of the religious climate encircling Amherst, Massachusetts and any analysis of her understanding of religion must take into account her immediate environment. No matter her personal relationship with religion, she is inundated in a Congregational culture, a reality her personal correspondence reflects. In a letter to trusted friend Abiah Root, jokingly referring to her deep-rooted association with her garden (another facet of her inner life characterization we will discuss later), Dickinson writes, "I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam."[17] In this nuanced engagement with scripture, the poet alludes to the biblical garden of Eden and playfully challenges conventional expectations with her use

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[14] Ibid., "First Great Awakening."
[15] Founded by Mary Lyon, an American educator and pioneer of women's higher education and the namesake of my college dorm my sophomore year, another point of connection between myself and this work.
[16] Martin, Wendy. *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2007.), 8.
[17] Emily Dickinson, "Letter from Dickinson to Abiah Root." *Emily Dickinson Digital Archive.* https://archive.emilydickinson.org/correspondence/aroot/l9.html.

of the title, "Mrs. Adam," an uncommon identifier for the figure of Eve. Here it is evident religious terminology becomes a vehicle through which she expresses aspects of her identity and reality, no matter the religious basis of the fact or circumstance. With the Puritan-founded, revival-riddled, and Congregational nature of Amherst — Dickinson's chosen place of home, hearth, and mind — we can move to an exploration of her personalized "sabbath."

Poem #1, circa 1864[18]

"Some keep the Sabbath going to Church –
I keep it, staying at Home –
With a Bobolink for a Chorister –
And an Orchard, for a Dome –

Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice –
I just wear my Wings –
And instead of tolling the Bell, for Church,
Our little Sexton – sings.

God preaches, a noted Clergyman –
And the sermon is never long,
So instead of getting to Heaven, at last –
I'm going, all along."[19]

The above poem resounds with praise of nature, liberation, and the individualized every day. While "Some" attend church services on Sunday in order to worship and be in communion with God, Dickinson observes the holy day at home. That declaration against religious convention continues throughout the poem with stark imagery: with the bobolink, a powerful

[18] Emily Dickinson's did not title her poems in her original transcripts. Later editors such as Thomas Johnson and R.W. Franklin use the first line of the poem as a "title" and also assigned numbers to the poems to establish a chronology. In this chapter, I will number the poems as I analyze them (going from the first poem, "Poem #1, to the final poem, "Poem #4)

[19] Emily Dickinson, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (New York: Back Bay Books., 1976), 153.

songbird, as a chorister, and wings donned instead of liturgical vestments, Dickinson rebels against tradition and advocates a personal and individualized sacred practice.

Fig. 2
The Homestead of Emily Dickinson,
Emily Dickinson Museum, Amherst, MA.

Regarding the theme of home as spiritual refuge, Dickinson rejects formal religious structures and instead finds divinity in her immediate surroundings. When I was fortunate enough to visit the Emily Dickinson museum in August 2023, I had the ability to walk through The Evergreens[20] and The Homestead, the birthplace and home of the poet. As my group saw first-hand the dwelling in which she lived, including the piano she played with her brother Austin and sister Lavinia, we were amazed to be in a place that held the title "sabbath home." Once we left the house, my guide took pause a moment and commented that we could interpret

[20] Located to the west of The Homestead, the birthplace and home of Emily Dickinson, The Evergreens was the home of Dickinson's brother Austin Dickinson and lifelong companion, Susan Gilbert Dickinson.

the grounds as a sacred space. The group meditated for one minute in silent reverence to the divine place in which we inhabited. All these years after her death, her house has evolved into a sanctuary of sorts: a respected and revered place of spiritual enlightenment.

In fact, the museum offers "Studio Sessions" in her bedroom with the possibility of a similar enlightenment journey on her holy ground: "Whether you're looking to become the next great American author or looking for a reflective experience, reserve a Studio Session and spend time alone in Emily Dickinson's space where she honed her revolutionary voice. Let Dickinson's own room be the spark to your imagination for your next creative endeavor."[21] All these years later, aspiring authors can pay to experience a similar voluntary confinement in search of literary salvation. Aside from the morally ambiguous nature of capitalizing on an informally sacred ground, it is clear the sanctity of Dickinson's home has expanded beyond her own personal devotion to this particular place.

For Dickinson, her seclusion was necessary for her art and permited her absence from the contemporary time-consuming customs of parties, lectures, church socials, and weddings.[22] Her isolation from society began in 1869 when Dickinson was 38 years old and decided to remain on the grounds of The Homestead and The Evergreens; in a letter to friend and mentor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, asking him to travel to Amherst, she wrote,

> You noticed my dwelling alone - To an Emigrant, Country is idle except it be his own. You speak kindly of seeing me. Could it please your convenience to come so far as Amherst I should be very glad, but I do not cross my Father's ground to any House or town.[23]

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[21] See "Studio Sessions" in *Emily Dickinson Museum*.
[22] Martin, *Cambridge Introduction*, 19.
[23] Dickinson, "Letter from Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson."

In relation to the displacement an emigrant feels in any country other than their homeland, Dickinson would not feel comfortable meeting her life-long mentor in any place other than her own home. Interestingly, she does not modify the grounds as her own, rather it is "my Father's ground" that serves as her source of belonging. It is unclear whether the Father refers to her earthly father, the politician Edward Dickinson, or a more celestial Father, fitting with Congregational sentiments. No matter the earthly or divine identity of the parentage, Dickinson would feel uprooted and displaced on any land other than that of her Father in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Returning to the above poem on home as sabbath, I now want to analyze one way in which Dickinson observed the sabbath on her Father's ground, namely, through nature. In the poem, references to the natural world, such as the bobolink and orchard, challenge conventional religious practices and highlight the possibility of finding a profound spiritual connection in the simplicity and beauty of the surrounding environment. Nature serves as her church, a place where she can commune with a higher power. In another poem, Dickinson writes, "Earth is Heaven — Whether Heaven is Heaven or not."[24] Here an important distinction arises between Dickinson's understanding of heaven and that of Transcendentalism: the philosophical, spiritual, and literary movement that developed alongside Dickinson in 1830s New England.

While the Transcendentalists saw God in and through nature, Dickinson saw nature as godlike, as worthy in itself of worship, attention, and devotion.[25] She sees nature as an intrinsic divine end, not a means through which one could find spiritual nourishment and mortal embodiments of God. As an amateur botanist with a garden and her own greenhouse (perhaps

[24] Dickinson, "The Fact that Earth is Heaven," 602.
[25] Martin, *Cambridge Introduction,* 86.

itself a metaphor for her chosen seclusion — a controlled environment for the sake of nurturing and cultivating creation), her time with plants, specifically, is imbued with a sacred spirituality: nature is its own end, not a vehicle for philosophical or religious truths, rather a source of beauty, power, and strength unto itself and therefore, deserving of individual and directed praise. A discussion of nature allows us to see, once again, Dickinson's rejection of formalized dogmas, such as conventional Congregational structures and traditional Transcendental thought. Instead, she is in constant pursuit of her own truths outside larger institutions. As scholar Gianna Fusco wrote in her analysis of nature and Eucharist in Dickinson's poetry:

> She invested nature with deep spirituality, while always remaining independent and critical in her positioning towards any received theory and doctrine. Never dogmatic in her attitude, she rejected the safety of any structured philosophy, be it Calvinism or Transcendentalism, and, while remaining unflinchingly rigorous in her thinking, she cultivated the openness necessary to constantly challenge her poetic powers.[26]

The poet engages in a radical refutation of dogma and doctrine and remains steadfast in her commitment to independence of thought, a fundamental and enduring quality of her distinctive and thought-provoking writing.

Dickinson's ability to create her own personalized and liberating truth appears in an analysis of the "everyday": the quotidian and ubiquitous religion that is not restricted to a physical church, but becomes a liberating way of life. Specifically, Dickinson practices a place-based spirituality in that the poet honors the sabbath in an orchard, while institutional

[26] Gianna Fusco, "Sacred Emblems to Partake: Nature and Eucharist in Emily Dickinson's Poetry." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 29, no. 2., 2020, pp 75.

religion holds sabbath in a dome. A dome, a typical architectural feature of many churches,[27] suggests connotations of grandeur and awe, but also claustrophobia and entrapment — symbols the poet associated with traditional religious institutions. As a representation of an entire institutional establishment, domes evoke a history of pervasive confinement and intellectual interment. In place of that dome-based religiosity, one that is suffocating and narrow, the poet instead worships in an orchard which implies vastness, freedom, and open space. While others choose rigid dogma and religious doctrines imposed by organized religion, symbolized by a dome structure, Dickinson practices her faith in nature, with no constraints on her personal spiritual exploration and expression.

This practice is not limited to Sunday morning, or the four-walls of a church, as Dickinson states, "Instead of going to heaven at last, I'm going all along." She does not interpret life as a vehicle through which one can achieve heaven; rather, life itself on Earth, is worthy and deserving of the honorific Heaven. Dickinson does not seek salvation, instead she finds it, every day, through her individual and personal direct connection to the quotidian, constant, and continuous sacred. The poet, in her vehement refusal of formalized structures, instead finds divinity in her orchard, tending to her garden, cultivating her greenhouse, and even through her poems themselves, Dickinson is dedicated to a continuous and constant experience with the sacred. On the following page is a fragment of one of her letters to friend and correspondent Elizabeth Holland, in 1866, where her descriptions of nature exhibit a sacred connection:

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[27] An interesting use of diction, given the rare use of domes in Western Christianity. It is unlikely for Dickinson to have seen a domed church with her limited travel. With steeples much more common in the majority of Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, (particularly the town place of worship First Congregational Church of Amherst) it is an interesting choice to compare an orchard with a dome, and not a steeple.

> My flowers are near and foreign, and I have but to cross the floor to stand in the Spice Isles. The Wind blows gay today and the Jays bark like Blue Terriers. I tell you what I see. The Landscape of the Spirit requires a lung, but no Tongue.[28]

In the above letter, Dickinson mentions the presence of flowers nearby and imagines herself crossing the floor to stand in the Spice Isles: an impossible yet commonplace sacred movement. Another near-mystical comparison appears in the imagery of jays, colorful and noisy birds, barking like dogs in a magical trans-species visual. In this landscape of the spirit, which suggests a realm of inner experience that transcends verbal expression, the tongue becomes obsolete as it could never describe the mystical and sacred complexity of nature. In the last line, she writes, "The Landscape of the Spirit requires a lung,"[29] as it is only through breath and an embodied presence in one's environment that Dickinson maintains familiarity with the remarkable forces of nature. It is not through second-hand official religion, nor foreign philosophical movements that Dickinson traverses the landscape of the spirit, rather it is a constant, everyday, and sacred engagement with the mysticism of nature.

During the silent meditation at the Emily Dickinson Museum, I felt as if I too were convening with supernatural forces: not supernatural as in supra (above, over, or beyond natural), but super-natural, as in a delicate, high-quality experience with the natural that Dickinson felt every day.

At this point, it is time to begin our explicit discussion of soul. Here I will attempt to focus on one aspect of Dickinson's religiosity and perception of spirituality through a concentration on soul: both the use of soul language in the poems themselves — instances

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[28] Dickinson, "Letter from Dickinson to Elizabeth Holland."
[29] Ibid.

where the poet expresses central dimensions of the human experience through the word and descriptive "soul" — along with the capacity of poetry to express different dimensions of the inner life.

Poem #2, 1862

"The Soul selects her own Society —
Then — shuts the Door —
To her divine Majority —
Present no more —

Unmoved — she notes the Chariots — pausing —

At her low Gate —
Unmoved — an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat —

I've known her — from an ample nation —
Choose One —
Then — close the Valves of her attention —
Like Stone —"[30]

The above poem, written in 1862 regarding her seclusion, considers concepts of selectivity and individuality, both fundamental to her utilization and comprehension of soul. It is a concise, yet profound analysis of "Soul": an autonomous female entity with the power to choose her own companions, company, and associations. She is introduced as a feminine force, who is at all times, capricious, emotional, and scrupulous with whom she decides to associate. The Soul (memorably capitalized in this poem), is a discerning and selective agent who shuts the door to her "divine majority" and instead prefers a select minority to constitute her society. Dickinson further emphasizes the authority of the Soul through her use of regal and aristocratic imagery;

[30] Dickinson, "The Soul selects her own Society," 143.

even when "chariots" and "emperors" kneel before the personified soul, she remains "unmoved" in her convictions.[31] The royals, members of the highest class, cannot rely on their esteemed social status and grand cultural influence, instead the aristocrats beg to be "saved" and allowed entry into Dickinson's personal "select." Regardless of the monarchs' wishes, whose preferences are of highest value according to the world's perspective, Dickinson holds a selective company that does not bow to the wealth and status of the monarchy.

However, the soul is not isolated in this safe haven she has created. She chooses "One," then "closes the valves of her attention…like stone."[32] Although she is selective, it is not a universal or extreme shutting of the door, as some are permitted to become part of her sacred inner circle. The poem does not give specific qualities of those who are admitted, however we are introduced to the soul as a queenly figure who carefully chooses her company according to her own criteria, not worldly values such as prestige.

The meticulous agency of the soul is also featured in the following poem from 1863:

Poem #3, date unknown

"The Soul should always stand ajar
That if the Heaven inquire
He will not be obliged to wait
Or shy of troubling Her

Depart, before the Host have slid
The Bolt unto the Door —
To search for the accomplished Guest,
Her Visitor, no more —"[33]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Dickinson, "The Soul should always stand ajar," 481.

This poem is similar to “The Soul selects her own society” as Dickinson affirms the feminine agency of the soul through her transitional power over the House threshold. In that poem, the soul “shuts the Door —/ To her divine Majority” and here, she runs the risk of bolting the door to her would-be guest, “Her Visitor, no more—”. The selectivity of the Soul is once again on display with the added rich imagery of a gate-keeper with the authority to deny entry to the divine itself. However, this poem differs from “The Soul selects her own society” in its new call for openness and readiness; here it is the prominent motif of “ajarness” where the soul is understood as a threshold that should exist in a constant receptivity.

The first line begins the metaphor of a door that should always be slightly open (“ajar”) and encourages the soul to be in a constant state of readiness to receive visitation from Heaven or the divine. She must not hesitate or shy away from the divine, and instead remain perpetually open to accept guests.

This readiness and openness is complicated by Dickinson’s use of Heaven: “Earth is Heaven — Whether Heaven is Heaven or not”[34] While the divine is depicted as a guest, and the soul’s role is to be receptive of this potential company, the visitors may not originate from an external Heaven, and instead might stem from Dickinson’s Heaven, found on Earth. The earthly realm, with its connections to friends and family, holds a heaven within itself. In effect, heaven is not merely a distant, otherworldly realm, but can be found in the everyday experiences and relationships of life on earth. One such relationship, between Emily Dickinson and Susan Gilbert Dickinson, her sister-in-law and lifelong companion, demonstrates the intensity and profundity of human connection in the poet’s life. In one poem, Dickinson writes, “One Sister have I in our house / And one, a hedge away. / There’s only one recorded, / But both belong to

[34] Dickinson, “The Fact that Earth is Heaven,” 602.

me."[35] Here, she acknowledges how she may biologically have only one sister from the same mother (her younger sister Lavinia) however, she also shares a chosen sisterhood, one of voluntary bloodline, with her confidante Sue:[36] the same woman about whom Dickinson declared in a letter, "With the exception of Shakespeare, you have told me of more knowledge than any one living - To say that sincerely is strange praise."[37] The heartfelt relationship between the two women, which spanned five decades, is simply one example of the deep personal connection that constitutes heaven on earth. Referring back to the poem, as an entity who is suspended in a state of ajarness, the soul must remain open to social invitation and interaction: she must actively work to keep the door ajar so that chosen associates have the opportunity to cross the threshold and engage in this personalized heaven on earth which derives its power from personal connection.

The following poem provides an extended metaphor on the intrinsic and extrinsic value of family, friends, and mentors in one's life through the visual of the construction of a house and the final affirmation of a soul.

Poem #4, date unknown

"The Props assist the House
Until the House is built
And then the Props withdraw
And adequate, erect,
The House support itself
And cease to recollect
The Augur and the Carpenter –
Just such a retrospect
Hath the perfected Life –
A past of Plank and Nail
And slowness – then the scaffolds drop
Affirming it a Soul."[38]

[35] Dickinson, "One Sister have I in our house," 12.
[36] Martin, *Cambridge Introduction,* 16.
[37] Dickinson, "Letter from Dickinson to Susan Dickinson."
[38] Dickinson, "The Props assist the House," 512.

The above poem uses "House," a metaphor of the self that requires support and reinforcement from props until it is affirmed a soul, as an exploration of process and the necessity of relationships. While a house is under construction, "Props" help to build and pillar a house until it becomes capable of supporting itself: "The Props assist the House/ Until the House is built."[39] Although necessary during the foundational stages, props become obsolete once they have fulfilled their function and strengthened the house to the point where it is self-sustaining. The poem might seem a straightforward illustration of the process of building a home, until the second half of the poem, when the house becomes personified: it is afforded a "perfected life" and in the end, affirmed a soul.[40] In the previous poems, the soul has come across as a solitary, autonomous, and introspective entity navigating its own internal landscape. The soul appears withdrawn and discerning, cautious of engaging too deeply with the outside world as she meticulously "selects her own society." In fact, she must be reminded to "stand ajar" so that she remains receptive to outside company despite her natural proclivity towards the bolting of the door to those external to her handpicked society. However, the metaphor of building a house with props offers another explanation for the selective nature of the soul: the soul must be choosy with who comprises her company, because it is exactly that company that enacts the constructive work of soul affirmation. The selectivity required to "choose one" from an "ample nation"[41] is the result of the life-altering importance of the selected individuals who together form one's inner circle.

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[39] Ibid.

[40] There is one interpretation I want to mention here that takes into consideration the religious imagery found in the work with references to Augur, a priest in the classic Roman world, and "the carpenter," perhaps an allusion to another religious prophet, Jesus of Galilee, the carpenter who would become the messiah in Christianity. The line, "A past of Plank and Nail" could serve as another reference to the crucifixion of Jesus in the Bible.

[41] Dickinson, "The Props assist the House," 512.

The metaphor of building a house, an examination on the crafting of one's personhood, is best understood through the idea of process. In a poem where process is the prominent theme, it is clear the props assist in an extensive step-by-step journey. The descriptor of "slowness" in the last line, "And slowness – then the scaffolds drop / Affirming it a Soul" refers to this act of construction as a slow and gradual undertaking. In fact the penultimate line, "A past of Plank and Nail,"[42] emphasizes the intensity of the transformation, moving from the early stages with a plank and nail, toward a finished product that no longer depends on scaffolding. Dickinson draws a stark contrast between the early beginnings of a house, even before a foundation has been laid, and the final moment when the props have fulfilled their function and the house can stand alone. After a long and painstaking process of construction, there is a finality in its final moments.

The conclusion of this maturation process, defined by its gradual nature, is a swift dropping of the scaffolds, where a soul is affirmed. Crucially, a soul can only be affirmed once an individual, or house, has reached a degree of completeness, at which point it is capable of standing without external support. The house must arrive at a state where it no longer depends on props or scaffolding, and draws strength from itself. Only when an individual reaches that point can they receive the stamp of approval that is a soul. Importantly, it is not a collective soul, as in a larger consciousness that is accessed; rather, the "a" in "Affirming it *a* Soul," implies an individual culmination of personal maturation. Additionally, the choice of "affirmation" implies that the soul was inherently present throughout the process of construction, however, it is only when the scaffolds drop that the house receives the ultimate affirmation of possessing a soul. It is as if the soul's presence becomes more apparent and tangible once the external supports are no longer needed and self-sufficiency has been achieved.

[42] Ibid.

The notion of affirmation asserts the final state of the house as more than just a physical structure as it is imbued with the essence of a soul, representing the consummation of the developed individual.

At this point, we see the significance of props, as it is through props — the external influences and relationships that aid in the development of a whole person — that a house moves from a single plank and nail, to a strong and stable structure. The poem illustrates the process by which the house outgrows its dependence on external influences, and learns to rely instead on its own internal resources for support and guidance. Although invisible toward the final stages of development, the props were pivotal in the construction phase and exist in the memory of past dependence despite a present independence. In this context, the soul's selective and isolating nature in admitting others to her prestigious company can be understood as a reflection of its discernment in choosing the influences that shape its identity. Dickinson creates a metaphor where the props determine the house, which can be interpreted as a statement on how one's company determines the essence of a person: the people one surrounds themselves with are similar to the props that contribute to the construction of the house of one's personhood. Therefore, the soul must be selective in its associations, associating only with those who align with its values and aspirations. It is through this poem on process and relationships that we contextualize the soul who has been portrayed as a force who is so willing to bolt her doors to would-be visitors, that she must be reminded to keep the door ajar. Here, Dickinson proclaims a selectivity that is not a sign of arrogance or elitism, but rather, a recognition of the profound impact that others have on one's personhood and spiritual development.

Following the discussion on the reasoning behind the soul as a divine, feminine force who is determinedly picky in her associations due to the power of one's company and personal

connections in the creation of their personhood, I move to the final poem of this chapter, which is arguably Dickinson's most renowned work. Here I explore the significance of Dickinson's overall use of soul language in her works. In this concluding section of the chapter, the soul is understood through one final image as it transforms into the keeper and protector of hope.

Poem #5, circa 1861

"Hope is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

And sweetest - in the Gale - is heard -
And sore must be the storm -
That could abash the little Bird
That kept so many warm -

I've heard it in the chillest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me."[43]

The above poem is a remarkable illustration on the enduring nature of hope. The image of hope as a perched bird who selflessly flutters around the world and sparks resilience in others solidifies Dickinson's place among the greatest American poets. After the overarching discussion of various manifestations of the soul, we can analyze hope from a new perspective. I find a newfound agency in this poem, related back to the affirmation of a soul: if every completed house has earned and been affirmed a soul, and hope rests in the soul, then an individual holds a significant reservoir of perseverance that is open to be accessed. There is a self-determining sense of agency in one's ability to find safety, security, and comfort in the

[43] Dickinson, "Hope is the thing with feathers," 116.

wells of their own individual and hard-earned soul. The act of hope is also reinforced as a radical one. Similarly to the ways in which one's soul should stand ajar, hope requires an openness and readiness to believe. It is a choice and a challenge to cultivate and sustain hope "in the chillest land" and "on the strangest Sea," however it is possible if one is open to dare to nurture the virtue. That agency is further seen in the soul who selects her own society, in that she must accept and admit hope to join her company. As the soul is a selective, independent agent — who once affirmed is not easily influenced by external worldly factors — she must be hospitable to the guest of hope who offers little in terms of prestige and asks for even less. Hope is a powerful emotion, but it can only effect change when given the admission, permission, and possibility of the soul.

I find Dickinson's soul to be a capricious, picky, hyper-independent divine feminine who serves as the keeper of hope. She is at once a personified force of will who delicately decides who will be graced with her company, at the same time, a quality affirmed to an individual once they have graduated from the work of soul-crafting and person building, and finally the guardian of the life-sustaining virtue of hope. There are significant parallels between Dickinson's conceptualization of the divine feminine, who possesses both depth and agency, and the biblical depiction of another divine feminine, wisdom itself. In Proverbs 8, wisdom is personified as a woman calling out to all people, urging them to listen and seek understanding. She cries out, "To you, O people, I call out; I raise my voice to all mankind."[44] It is an exercise in active agency as wisdom herself speaks directly to humanity and claims authority over matters of counsel, judgement, and power: "Counsel and sound judgment are mine; I have insight, I have power. By me kings reign and rulers issue decrees that are just."[45] Beyond this

[44] Proverbs 8:4 (NIV).
[45] Proverbs 8:14-15 (NIV).

jurisdiction over all matters of knowledge, including power and influence over the highest aristocracy and ruling classes, she proclaims an eternal genesis. Regarding her holy cosmology, wisdom declares, "The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be"[46] This personification of the virtue of wisdom claims to have existed before the creation of the world — co-present with God in bringing into existence all things. Dickinson, as a product of the Congregational influences surrounding her, would be familiar with such a biblical reference. Again, in this interpretation of her utilization of soul, we see evidence of Dickinson's creative use of classical Christian ideas to further her spiritual poetry. The poet draws upon the biblical image of a divine feminine who showcases an active agency, feminine authority, and sacred genesis, to further her own ideation of a determined and selective official of the soul.

At this point, I want to include a valid warning/critique of the Dickinson scholar Douglas Anderson regarding interpretive studies of the poet: "One particularly regrettable assumption that proceeds from the Dickinson myth is that her work possesses some grand unity, that all the poems are but episodes of one long poem."[47] It is true, her brilliance lies not in a singular, overarching tale, but in the multiplicity of narratives she weaves through her poetry. On that point, the interpretations we form shed light on the profound depths of human experience and the intricate nature of soul. Readings of her poetry allow explorations into the role of "Props" in the crafting of one's personhood, the power of a life rooted in possibility, and finally the image of a guardian soul who fiercely protects her house and the spirit of hope which lies within.

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[46] Proverbs 8:22-23 (NIV).
[47] Douglas Anderson, "Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson's Poetry," *The New England Quarterly* 57, no. 2, 1984, pp. 223.

Here, I will repeat the quote at the beginning of this chapter:

"If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?"

For Dickinson, poetry is defined by feeling: her transgressive definition establishes a personal and visceral criteria based on physical sensations which are subjective to the individual. This definition is further elucidated by Dickinson's declaration of purpose, writing to Higginson, "My Business is Circumference."[48] Whereas her Transcendentalist contemporary Emerson used the term to describe the ideals of an individual which were unattainable but nevertheless worthy of pursuit, Dickinson saw circumference as very much attainable and very much a part of her everyday life. She instead, "Wanted to determine the edges of experience, the periphery or circumference, rather than focus on the center."[49] With a commitment to circumference that prioritized an embrace of life with the most complete and comprehensive perspective, she sought to express dimensions of human experience that might be otherwise ineffable. She found her poetic purpose in the realm of possibility, which hopes to share some slant of truth on the surreal condition of human life. Her use of soul language repurposes religious language to create a bridge between the sacred and the secular, the past and present perfection, allowing her to delve into the complexities of the unique human experience.

[48] Dickinson, "Letter from Dickinson to Thomas Wentworth Higginson."
[49] Martin, *Cambridge Introduction,* 34.

Chapter 2: Du Bois' Paradoxical Soul of Sorrow and Hope

"One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."

Fig. 3
Portrait by James E. Purdy, 1907

While the previous chapter discussed the 19th century American poet Emily Dickinson and her pioneering imagination of the soul as a divine feminine, rooted in relationships, and who serves as the guardian of hope, this chapter shifts to the American South with the words of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). Although Dickinson's poems and letters touched upon many of the pressing issues of the day regarding the role and place of unmarried women in Congregational New England, her scope was limited to the white individuals of the age. Her thoughts and reflections often reflect the experiences and concerns of contemporary white

Americans. Even her relative silence on abolition, as the Civil War raged on, is a symptom of a larger complicity in upholding systems of white supremacy. So this chapter, which analyzes Du Bois and his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, is one of recentering as it places emphasis and centrality on Black Americans.

W.E.B. Du Bois begins his magnum opus, *The Souls of Black Folk*, with "Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being Black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century."[50] The famous work, consisting of a short story and thirteen essays, sets out to analyze the strange and mythic quality of living as a Black American in the white man's world. But before I embark on my analysis of his words, I want to begin with explaining how I first encountered the author. Although I had been exposed to the scholar via various academic and cultural overlaps, I had never read any significant portions of his works.

In reality, I would say I was first introduced to Du Bois through the incredible debut novel *The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois*, by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers. The poetic narrative traces multiple generations of a Black matriline — and, in an emulating and honoring fashion, begins each chapter with one of Du Bois' selected Sorrow Songs — in an attempt to document one family's contribution to the constructive song of America. The book spans multiple timelines, from the antebellum south to the contemporary 2020 period where the historian protagonist, Ailey Pearl Garfield, is conducting primary research on slave records in the basement of a church in the Deep South. At one point, she returns home and is physically ill after her time reviewing auction receipts, birth/death certificates, and other pieces of documentation that reflect the horrors of slavery. Her mentor informs her that the work she is doing is so acutely personal and traumatizing that she needs to cleanse her body before and after

[50] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*, (New York: Norton., 1999), 5.

her research sessions. The main character begins praying before she enters the church, wearing white as she works, and afterwards, undergoing a cleansing ritual to purify herself from the spiritual malaise within those documents. Due to her positionality and connection to the people on those pages, she needed to protect her own peace and insert her authorship and authority in the work she conducted. Ailey effectively constructed an embodied liminal ritual space through clothing and cleansing that helped her to cope with the horrific realities of slavery.

Shamoon Zamir has defined *The Souls* as a "Bildungsbiographie" due to the complex incorporation of historical, sociological, political, and cultural commentaries with autobiographical reflections and dramatizations.[51] W.E.B. Du Bois scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. further stated, "Writing yourself into being as an artist is a predictable stage of development for a young author, but the centrality of literacy to a claim of humanity is peculiarly African American."[52] For Zamir, Gates, and Ailey, the author is not simply the vehicle through which a story is told or truth is revealed, but an active agent in the history of self-authenticating storytelling itself. For Du Bois, his rage is inseparable from his words: "Despite feeding Du Bois's fury at exclusion, Harvard and its composition courses taught him to transform this rage into the well-polished 19th century prose style that characterizes *The Souls of Black Folk.*"[53] That fury seeps into every word of this text. He is writing from an anguished position as an individual who, due to his race, is forced to struggle through the dual and contradictory identity of being Black and American. In a way, *Souls* is a lament song that manifests the blood, sweat, tears, and emotional labor of Blackness.

The passion behind this project endows a prophetic value in the Black community. Academic Houston Baker Jr. identifies, "passages (indeed, entire essays) that pulsate with the

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[51] Henry Louis Gates Jr, "Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk,*" (New York: Norton., 1999), xix.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., xxii.

oracular biblical tones of the prophet,"[54] in an apt confirmation of the oracular presence of Du Bois. Arnold Rampersad went a step further and argued that *Souls*, "became a kind of sacred book, the central text for the interpretation of the Afro-American experience;"[55] here, a thoroughly secular work — although Du Bois is in favor of the use of religion for earthly and secular ends — is bestowed a sanctity as a result of the truth and passion behind the message. The sheer weight of this literature was not lost on white audiences, with an anonymous review appearing in the Nashville American which opined, "This book is indeed dangerous for the negro [sic] to read, for it will only excite discontent and race hatred and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind."[56] All audiences, Black and white, are witnesses to the fervent and prescient accuracy of a text, built on rage, with the intent to explicate and thoroughly portray an impossible existence.

With anger as the embers that fuel the fiery remarks within the work, Du Bois introduces the audience to two concepts that constitute the Black American experience: the idea of the Veil, and that of double-consciousness. The entirety of *Souls* is a journey within the Veil, the metaphoric yet very real separation between the Black and white worlds. Du Bois offers an escape from the white world that is made possible through his entrance point: "*I* have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses, —the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls."[57] We, the audience, are crossing the boundary that separates two realities as Du Bois holds open the Veil for this brief moment. Here again, the centrality of the author's positionality is apparent as our very interpretation and experience of the underside of Black life is tied to his individual reality

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[54] Ibid., xxxiv.
[55] Ibid., xxxiv.
[56] Ibid., xvi.
[57] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 5.

and rage at the state of the Black man in 20th century American life. The Veil is itself an allusion to St. Paul's famous phrase, "For now we see through a glass, darkly"[58] in his first letter to the Corinthians; Gates interprets this reference — specifically "darkly" as an adjective that implies an opaque or invisible lens — as a larger declaration on the impossibility of a true Black vision within a white world: "the African Americans's attempt to gain self-consciousness in a racist society will always be impaired because any reflected image coming from the gaze of white America is necessarily a distorted one, and quite probably a harmful one as well."[59]

It is a cynical truth that the membrane of the Veil is forever impermeable in a racist society. The existence of a divided nation precludes the possibility of a truly actualized self-consciousness for any Black American. In the following section, Du Bois elaborates on the nature of the Veil through the explanation of double-consciousness:

> After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a Veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.[60]

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[58] 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)
[59] Gates, "Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk,*" xxviii.
[60] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 11.

Given the invisible yet tangible barrier between Black people and the rest of society, African Americans are forced to perceive themselves through the eyes of dominant whiteness. It involves the constant awareness of their identification as American citizen and Black individual, which is inundated with unresolvable conflict. This dual identity results in a tension, described as "two-ness," with competing ideals and unreconciled strivings of true self-consciousness. As the "seventh son" behind Egyptian, Indian, Greek, Roman, Teuton, and Mongolian, this experience of constant strife suggests a special, almost mystical quality to the life of Black Americans. Similarly, the gift of "second-sight" implies a clairvoyance or parable-like quality to this hyper-specific reality, a prophetic virtue fundamentally shaped by the challenges and prejudices faced by Black persons. As Du Bois writes, it is through dogged strength alone — the ancestral and collective reserve of tenacity — that the Negro can survive an inconsolable and unthinkable existence. Endowed with the symbolic associations of the number seven and the gift of "second-sight," it is clear Black individuals face uniquely difficult challenges of near mythic proportions.

Importantly, Du Bois uses the vivid imagery of the incorporeal yet embodied nature of the Veil and double consciousness in order to shed light on the "souls" of Black folk. And at this point, we arrive at the center of this essay: to analyze Du Bois' use of soul language, in this "non-religious" work. I ask the question, "Why is soul language — the terminology and specific wording of 'soul' — which stems from a religious framework, so appealing and apt in this secular work on the state and status of a people?" Although the true definition and revealing of his understanding of soul is withheld until the final chapter on Sorrow Songs, with Gates writing, "It is in sorrow songs that he offers as a final proof of the value of 'the souls' of black folk,"[61] Du Bois meticulously crafts this comprehensive abstraction of soul since the very

[61] Gates, "Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk,*" xxxiii.

beginning of the text. In fact, the formal tripartite structure of *Souls*, with various scholarly interpretations, constitutes the work of soul-building. Stanley Brodwin perceives the format as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis; Arnold Rampersad sees chapters one through three as the historical section, chapters four through nine as the sociological section, and chapters ten through fourteen as the spiritual section; Robert Stepto envisions a stasis, immersion, and ascent; for Elaine Newsome, it is pursuit, captivity, and escape.[62] I find truth in each of these posited theories, as the first two interpretations offer concrete rhetorical devices and formats for each third of the text, and the last two open an avenue for an abstract discussion on the power of the word "soul" in relation to rage and hope. As Stepto propositioned, the reader begins with the initial stage of being trapped in a state of stasis, then they journey into an immersion within the Veil, finally departing the text with an ascent, that is the striving for self-actualization and liberation. In contrast with Newsome's theory of pursuit, captivity, and escape — which indicates a passivity, reactivity, and a trek of helplessness — the language of stasis, immersion, and ascent avows a tangible power. There is an agency to the formal structure of the text that mirrors the agency of Blackness. The growth from stasis to ascent is a transcendent expedition of Black consciousness that is codified and extended through the language of soul.

But before Du Bois can reach the ascent, and before we can clearly define "soul" in this text, we must first analyze the stages of stasis and immersion. In the first chapter, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," he muses on the unasked question that persistently lies between himself and the other world beyond the Veil: "How does it feel to be a problem?"[63] Although posited with hesitance and apprehension, often in an indirect manner, the question is a constant feature of the experience of double-consciousness. The author asks himself a subsequent question, "Why did

[62] Ibid., xxxi.
[63] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* 9.

God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?"[64] As a Black American, he does not wish to, "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism…he simply wishes to make to 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."[65] The captivity and stasis of the text exists in an inability to live a whole and absolute life when one is permanently split between his Black and American identity. I am most drawn to the desire not to "bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism," specifically the verb "to bleach"; The Webster definition, "to make whiter or lighter especially by physical or chemical removal of color"[66] indicates color, or lightness as an innate process of bleaching. To bleach a Negro soul with white Americanism would be to make lighter and remove color, perhaps an indication of the relevance of skin color to Blackness.

However, the second definition, "to remove, make dull, or sanitize as if by removing color"[67] more appropriately speaks on the Negro soul that Du Bois is trying to liberate. It is a condition that extends beyond skin color, and operates on the vitality and vibrancy of the soul. If the process of bleaching one's soul results in a dull and removed soul, there is a Black soul separate from the white American soul that is fueled by an ardor that cannot be dulled. The difficulty of this existence, the state of captivity and stasis, is found in the impotence to find accord and harmony between two forms of consciousness, when one constantly threatens to bleach and dull the reality of the other. Du Bois feels as a stranger in his own house, a problem

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[64] Ibid., 10.
[65] Ibid., 11.
[66] "Bleach Definition" in *Merriam-Webster*. www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bleach#:~:text=%3A%20to%20make%20whiter%20or%20lighter,as%20if%20by%20removing%20color.
[67] Ibid.

in his own nature, due to the hostility within his character, where the two most fundamental aspects of his identity are at warring odds.

Sorrow and William James' Sick Soul:

We can find further elucidation on the divided self that struggles to find harmony through a comparison with William James' concepts of "healthy-mindedness" and "the sick soul." As a psychologist-turned-philosopher, James is a "religious-outsider" who "believes in believing" — he is a voyeur of experiences, who respects religion for what it is, and what it can do.[68] In that vein, in one of his most prominent texts, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he seeks to analyze religion not via a metaphysical approach, but rather as a subject matter that deals with human needs and wants. He defines religion as, "The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[69] He seeks to ignore the institutional aspect of religion entirely, calling that a second-hand tradition (except for the founders of those institutions who exhibit a heart-heart, soul-soul connection with the divine that modern adherents supposedly lack) and instead centers the interior of each person; in effect, religion is theorized as the group of personal and individualized inner dispositions of a believer that form the center of their conscience and morality.[70]

In terms of their relationship, as a lover of philosophy, Du Bois was a student of the famed philosopher and psychologist, William James. In a chapter of his memoir describing his

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[68] Martin E. Marty, "Introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: *A Study in Human Nature*" (New York: Penguin Books., 2015), xxvi.
[69] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: *A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Books., 2015), 31.
[70] Ibid., 26.

time as a Negro student at Harvard University, Du Bois writes: "I was repeatedly a guest in the home of William James; he was my friend and guide to clear thinking."[71] As part of his personal creed, he sought nothing from the university but the tutelage of teachers and the freedom of the laboratory and library, writing how free he was of college social life apart from the teachers with whom he studied.[72] In fact, after his years at Harvard, the two continued correspondence and James sent his brother, the famous novelist Henry James, a copy of the critically acclaimed work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, writing, "I am sending you a decidedly moving book by a mulatto ex-student of mine, Du Bois, professor of history at Atlanta (Georgia) negro College. Read Chapters VII to XI for local color, etc."[73] The letter, sent in 1903, the same year the work was published, serves as a link between the two scholars, and further evidences the relevance of William James' scholarship in this discussion on soul in Du Bois' work.

Returning to James' contributions to interdisciplinary studies, the scholar's understanding of religion — through the spectrum of healthy-mindedness and its contrast, the sick soul — is founded on the principle of solemnity. There is something mindful, serious, and tender involved in any and every attitude which is denominated as religious: religious experiences are solemn experiences. However, he defines religious solemnity through its association with religious happiness, a felicity he defines and explains on the following page:

[71] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 190.
[72] Ibid., 188.
[73] William James, "Letter from William James to Henry James," *The Souls of Black Folk (*New York: Norton, 1999), 227.

> "This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion. It is parted off from all mere animal happiness,[74] all mere enjoyment of the present, by that element of solemnity of which I have already made so much account. *Solemnity* is a hard thing to define abstractly, but certain of its marks are patent enough. A solemn state of mind is never crude or simple — it seems to contain a certain measure of its own opposite in solution. A solemn joy preserves a sort of bitter in its sweetness; a solemn sorrow is one to which we intimately consent." [75]

Effectively, the sick soul represents an individual who grapples with profound existential questions, a sense of guilt, and an awareness of the darker aspects of human experience. They experience a deep inner conflict that often involves a search for redemption and a desire to overcome sin or guilt and achieve a sense of inner peace. It is the prolonged suffering that a healthy-minded individual would never experience. Contrarily, the path to a healthy relationship with religion involves an optimistic and positive approach to life and religious affect. He writes, "Religious happiness is no mere feeling of escape. It cares no longer to escape. It consents to the evil outwardly as a form of sacrifice — inwardly it knows it to be permanently overcome."[76] There is a resoluteness and resignation to religious happiness that stems from the idea of a solemn religion, which is a whole religion. It is not an avoidance of evil, nor an obsession with evil, rather the ability to hold evil as a true, yet defeatable presence in one's religious life. James emphasizes the surrender and sacrifice of true religious happiness, explaining, the "Healthiest-minded type of religious consciousness finds a complex sacrificial constitution, in

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[74] There exists an interesting comparative study in *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power*, where Donovan O. Schaefer explores animal religion in an effort to subtract the framework of human exceptionalism from religion: a non-anthropocentric representation and analysis of religious affect.
[75] James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* 48.
[76] Ibid., 49.

which a higher happiness holds a lower unhappiness in check."[77] The term solemnity contains elements of complexity and opposition, and refers to the ability to acknowledge bitterness, finding an even more pleasant sweetness in the company of the bitter. The author mentions the painting, "St Michael Archangel," which depicts the Archangel Michael trampling Satan as further evidence of the presence of conflict as an enabler of peace. In the image, the richness of the picture, and the associated Christian elements, stems from the ability to defeat the devil in the artwork. James elaborates that the world is all the richer for having a devil in it, so long as we keep our foot upon his neck.[78] Here again, religious happiness arises from a nuanced sense of wholeness and completeness. It is not simple nor crude, but instead is a "solemn sorrow" to which we intimately consent:[79] a voluntary tension between the contrasting concepts of wholeness and incompleteness.

James' sick soul, an individual who cannot find religious happiness in the paradoxical yet tandem solemn joy and solemn sorrow, is exactly the stasis and immersion that we are trying to surpass in the ascent of *Souls*. Du Bois' troubled and divided consciousness is seeking to realize and unite his Black and American identity into an absolute being. Importantly, this desire is not one of emotion; similarly to James' idea of religious happiness through consented solemnity (in both sorrow and joy), Du Bois hopes to embody a unified self-consciousness. He offers education as a step on the path to self-actualization, a step on the ascent path. In the chapter entitled, "Of the Training of Black Men,"[80] education is presented as the literal panacea: "such training as will give us poise to encourage the prejudices that bulwark society, and to

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[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid., 50.
[79] There is an interesting comparison with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's "knight of resignation" and "knight of faith" in his work *Fear and Trembling:* similar themes of impossible resignation and faith in resolve.
[80] Throughout *Souls*, Du Bois focuses on Black men, a narrative and historical reality that reflects attitudes of the time. Later in this chapter I will analyze the role of Black women, however, here, I will interpret "men" as representative of the broader Black community, women included.

stamp out those that in sheer barbarity deafen us to the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil, and the mounting fury of shackled men."[81] Du Bois argues that education equips individuals with the intellectual and emotional tools to navigate a society marked by racial prejudices. On that point, the line, "encourage the prejudices that bulwark society" may seem contradictory, when in fact, he is advocating for a form of education that helps Black individuals understand and operate the very-real systems of oppression and discrimination. However, while he encourages fostering an awareness of these forces so that one is not blindsided by these structures, he also acknowledges that there are some that, "deafen us to the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil;" These are the unjustifiable, illogical prejudices that actively abuse and silence the souls that exist within the Veil. And in order to assist Black consciousness' attempts at full-realization, one must receive an education of balance: one that teaches individuals to both navigate and destroy the prejudices that imprison the soul's attempt at ascent. He dissects specific curriculum that maintains the standard of popular education — and also elaborates on how Negro colleges must seek the social regeneration of their students and help in the solution of race co-operation — but beyond all this, education must "develop men."[82] There must be an educational system that teaches on practical, intellectual, and racial fronts in order to craft whole individuals who have the capacity to engage absolutely in their soul journey.

[81] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. 64.
[82] Ibid., 73.

Journey of education in "Of the Coming of John" and "Of the Meaning of Progress":

The chapter "Of the Coming of John" in *Souls*, offers a fictional account of two Johns, the Black John Jones and the white John Henderson, with a focus on the former who embarks on a profound journey — one marked by the transformative power of education, the pursuit of hope amidst racial oppression, and the unfolding of the human soul. John begins the tale as a figure of humble origins from the rural Southern town of Altamaha: "A long, straggling fellow he is, brown and hard-haired, who seems to be growing straight out of his clothes, and walks with a half-apologetic roll."[83] He was an awkward, yet charming individual who brandished a "broad, good-natured smile in which lay no bit of art or artifice, but seemed just bubbling good-nature and genuine satisfaction with the world."[84] As a respectful young man, his mother decided to send him off to Wells Institute in Johnstown to receive an education. Although he experienced difficulty adjusting to academic life away from home, Jones underwent an extensive transformation that includes a shedding of his innocence and a heightened awareness of the oppressive forces of racial prejudice. It is through this journey that the main character learns to confront the harsh realities of discrimination and inequality: through John's narrative arc, Du Bois invites readers to witness the life-changing potential of education as a means of realizing the fullness of our humanity, and the cultivation of one's soul.

As a result of his journey of young adulthood, John experienced a two-fold metamorphosis of body and soul. At once externally evident, "his clothes seemed to grow and arrange themselves; coat sleeves got longer, cuffs appeared, and collars got less soiled"[85] and at the same time internally motivated: "He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil

[83] Ibid., 143.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid., 145.

that lay between him and the white world; he first noticed now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, differences that erstwhile seemed natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh."[86] Not only is it a superficial change of clothes and outward appearance, rather, that external transfiguration mirrors his profound internal racial reckoning. Despite his character's introduction as a young man whose demeanor and personality convey a genuine warmth and sincerity, John evolves into a fully mature individual who is wholly aware and cognizant of the racial divide that separates the Black and white reality. It is through his education, both formal at Wells Institute and informal in his experiences away from home, that John begins to learn the truth of the Veil and the systemic barriers that constrain his opportunities.

Apart from his official education at school, John has an encounter with music at the concert hall that serves as an informal catalyst for his spiritual and intellectual growth. During his time in New York City, the protagonist stumbles upon a concert hall and is struck by its glamour: "The delicate beauty of the hall, the faint perfume, the moving myriad of men, the rich clothing and low hum of talking seemed all a part of a world so different from his, so strangely more beautiful than anything he had known, that he sat in dreamland, and started when, after a hush, rose high and clear the music of Lohengrin's swan."[87] In addition to the architectural appeal of the theater and the unfamiliar sights of scents of wealth, he is most dumbfounded by the music that moves throughout the space. Du Bois writes:

> A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If only he could only live up in

[86] Ibid., 146.
[87] Ibid., 147.

> the free air where birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood! Who had called him to be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call when a world like this lay open before men?[88]

In the ethereal beauty of the concert hall with the cathartic abilities of the swan song, John first experiences a profound longing to transcend the limitations of his environment. Here, John's desire for freedom is described as deep and heartfelt, swelling within him. He wishes to rise above the low life of imprisonment and live in the free air: it is at this moment he first dreams of a world of beauty and freedom that directly contrasts with the oppressive environment in which he finds himself. The terminology of "dirt and dust," represents the degradation and indignity of his current circumstances, while the description of him as "prisoned and befouled" suggests a sense of captivity and contamination. In this concert hall, he received a lasting education, possible through the transcendent powers of song, that lead him to question the legitimacy of the societal roles imposed upon him that have deemed him unworthy of dignity: here, song has opened the door for the possibility and hope of Black liberation.

During this epiphany, John is called to return to Altamaha and enact his newfound hope and motivation toward Black ascent, however this transformational moment is cut short when he is escorted out of the theater due to his race. At this point, I will introduce the other John of the story: John Henderson, the son of the town's judge. John Henderson and John Jones both leave Altamaha at the same time to receive an education, however it is only in Jones' absence that the following maxim is developed: "When John comes."[89] As John Jones left on that morning train, the town began to create the legend of John's return, at which point there would

[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid., 143.

inevitably be new furniture in the church, a new schoolhouse, new teachers etc. all this and more, "when John comes": "Thus in the far-away Southern village the world lay waiting, half consciously, the coming of two young men, and dreamed in an inarticulate way of new things that would be done and new thoughts that all would think."[90] Although there were two Johns, for Black folk there was one, John Jones, and for white people, there was John Henderson, both of whose respective and separate homecomings would bring progress and change to their communities. As John Jones serves as the symbol of hope for the Black body, he himself is inspired and galvanized by music to fulfill the town's legacy of his near-mythic return.

Upon his prodigious return to the town, John's transformation becomes starkly apparent, leaving the community in a state of bewilderment and discomfort. Once characterized by warmth and affability, he now exudes an air of cold detachment. Before a man of gracious and generous eagerness, he now speaks a "short, dry word here and there" leading the people to question, "This silent, cold man,—was this John? Where was his smile and hearty hand grasp."[91] This newfound aloofness is only a visible manifestation of the profound education he has received in the form of a growing awareness of the limitations placed on Black people. Beyond the social taboo of his recently developed standoffish nature, he is also ostracized for speaking out in church on the reality of Jim Crow and the consequent need for denominational unity, urging, "the world cares little whether a man be Baptist or Methodist, or indeed a churchman at all, so long as he is good and true…Let's leave all that littleness, and look higher."[92] His statements produce a visceral reaction in the churchgoers and are interpreted with scorn as a scathing denunciation of "true Religion:" an unwanted departure from the religious and moral norms respected by the Black community.

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[90] Ibid., 144.
[91] Ibid., 148.
[92] Ibid., 149.

That nonacceptance extends to the whites in the town and ultimately contributes to John's tragic demise. Inspired by the swan song in New York City and his newfound hope for Black liberation, John asks the judge for the opportunity to teach at the Negro school in town. Judge Henderson is skeptical of his ability to conform given his new awareness of racial oppression and responds, "Now, John, the question is, are you, with your education and Northern notions, going to accept the situation and teach the darkies to be faithful servants and laborers as your fathers were."[93] Although John claims he understands the situation, he is fired once the Judge hears he is, "livenin' things up at the darky school"[94] and filling his pupils' heads with dangerous ideas of equality and freedom. As he is walking through the woods pondering the closure of the Negro school, he comes across John Henderson attacking his younger sister, Jennie, causing John to kill Henderson with a tree branch. After the murder, he says goodbye to his mother, explaining, "Mammy, I'm going—North" and then sits on a stump and waits for the lynch mob led by Judge Henderson.[95] There is ambiguity regarding whether his death was at his own hands or that of the mob, however that is indifferent as this final scene transforms the chapter, "Of the coming of John" from one of glorious return to yet another journey of the not-yet-arrived: the story emerges as a mourning of hope that is initiated and perpetuated through the power of song.

At the death scene of John Jones, music emerges as an enduring symbol of the inseparable link between hope and mourning. As he awaits his demise, the narrative echoes back to his earlier experience in the concert hall: "Then as the sheen of the starlight stole over him, he thought of the gilded ceiling of that vast concert hall, and heard stealing toward him the faint sweet music of the swan. Hark! Was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men? Yes,

[93] Ibid., 151.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 153.

surely! Clear and high the faint sweet melody rose and fluttered like a living thing, so that the very earth trembled as with the tramp of horses and murmur of angry men."[96] Despite the fact that he sits on a tree stump anticipating his murder, he experiences a sensory immersion in the structure and song of the auditorium in New York. It is here that John finally completes the metamorphosis that was started when he first left Altamaha: he rises from the chrysalis of his transformation and emerges as the narrative symbol of sorrow and hope. The music that drowns out the shouts of the mob and the trampling of horses is both a eulogy of sorrow and a eulogy of hope. Through the melody, described as "clear and high" which "fluttered like a living thing," John continues the ascent and experiences the inextricable connection between music, sorrow, and hope. It is at this point the narrative theme that has been woven throughout the chapter reveals itself: as the notes of hope sing during his execution, John serves as an example of a Black man who received an education, becomes enlightened with respect to the realities of racial discrimination, and experiences a subsequent alienation from the Black community, in a radical reimagining of soul growth as a work of sorrow and hope.

Before we arrive at the final section of this chapter, I want to bring attention to the glaring absence of Black women in *Souls* and offer an interpretation on their subtle presence and implicit potency. Throughout the work, Du Bois focuses on Black men, a narrative and historical reality evident in the primacy of male protagonists in the fictional chapters, such as John Jones, and the emphasis placed on men, such as "Of the training of Black men." However, women are consistently marks of strength throughout each chapter, most clear in the chapter, "Of the Meaning of Progress" and through the character of Josie. Du Bois starts the narrative passage describing himself as a young man finding work as a teacher following his graduation from Fisk University. When he eventually finds a small rural town, he elaborates on the simple

[96] Ibid.

and crude nature of the school: “I was haunted by a New England vision of neat little desks and chairs, but, alas! The reality was rough plank benches without backs, and at times without legs.”[97] Despite the rudimentary conditions, the students were eager to learn, one such student is Josie, described as a, “thin, homely girl of twenty, with a dark brown face and thick, hard hair.”[98] She approached life with a vivacity and tenacity that inspired those around her, including her incredible work ethic to take difficult jobs for menial pay. However, the most striking characteristic of Josie was her longing to know and desire to learn: “There were, however, some — such as Josie… — to whom War, Hell, and Slavery were but childhood tales, whose young appetites had been whetted to an edge by school and story and half-awakened thought. Ill could they be content, born without and beyond the World. And their weak wings beat against their barriers,—barriers of caste, of youth, of life; at last, in dangerous moments, against everything that opposed even a whim.”[99] Similarly to John Jones in Altamaha, Josie shines as a light through the darkness of racial oppression and serves as a symbol of hope.

Unfortunately, both of these paragons of hope face an early demise and reinforce the intrinsic connection between hope and mourning. In Josie’s tale, once Du Bois returns to the town after a 10-year period, he is struck by the little progress the town has made. Regarding his most prized student, the narrative abruptly states, “Josie was dead, and the fray-haired mother said simply, ‘We’ve had a heap of trouble since you’ve been away.’” [100] W.E.B. Du Bois scholar Nellie McKay emphasizes Josie’s story as a song of hope and sorrow, writing how the character serves as an example of the determination of Black women to transcend the tri-difficulties of

[97] Ibid., 48.
[98] Ibid., 47.
[99] Ibid., 51.
[100] Ibid.

race, class, and gender through work, self-reliance and independence.[101] She writes how the story of Josie acknowledges and pays tribute to the overwhelming number of Black women in America:

> In Josie, he honors the black woman, not for her success, but for her selflessness, for her love of family, for her belief in a better future for black people, and for her strength, willingness, and determination to work for a better life. Important too is the fact that Josie's work and efforts are in and for a narrow world, and that the outcome of her efforts, whether success or failure, would make no immediate impact on the larger world.[102]

McKay argues a two-fold reality of anguish and unfulfilled dreams that is underscored by a remarkable resilience to continue seeking an improved existence. She similarly refers to the women within the chapter "Of the Coming of John," specifically John's mother and sister, and how they encourage John to go forth and embark on his journey toward racial enlightenment. Although the conclusion McKay draws — "Black women as the source that empowers black men to discover their dignity, and by extension, the force that determines the course of their race is an implicit theme in the undertones of 'Of the Coming of John'"[103] — is a utilitarian interpretation of the role of Black women, wherein that population exists to serve the function of educating Black men,[104] I find value in her analysis of the peripheral figures as the focal point. The female characters who exist between the lines of the text and engage in a steadfast silent strength are vital to the overall arc of *Souls*: "Portraits of women permeate these works,

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[101] Nellie McKay, "W.E.B. Du Bois: The Black Women in His Writings," *Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Norton, 1999), 270.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 272.
[104] Possibly a conclusion that is a product of the time, given the article's publication date in 1985.

and even when they appear to be no more than background figures they embody and carry forward the ideas of the works in an important way."[105] John's mother, sister, and most of all Josie are threads of hope that run throughout the narratives of sorrow, and inspire the protagonists to continue on their journey toward education and the expansion of their soul.

Sorrow Songs:

Although Du Bois discusses education as a crucial aspect of soul liberation — unshackling Black souls through interdisciplinary, pragmatic, and spiritual syllabi — which aids in our ongoing journey towards understanding "soul" in the text, we find the richest response in the final chapter, "The Sorrow Songs." It serves as the culminating component of this anthology, and ironically enough, it was almost omitted from the final project.[106] Specifically, the essay finally offers further clarification on the lyrics and musical notes that start every essay.

> 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 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.[107]

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[105] McKay, "W.E.B. Du Bois: The Black Women in His Writings," 271.
[106] Du Bois' editor, Francis Fisher Browne, had to repeatedly insist on the inclusion of "Sorrow Songs" as the last unifying chapter, questioning late in the editing process, "Is it too late to carry out your original intention of having a chapter on 'Sorrow Songs of the Negroes?'" He accurately predicted,"it will make an impression on the country." (Gates, "Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*," xxxiii)
[107] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 155.

Du Bois finally explains that each passage begins with a piece of a Sorrow Song, a song which when sung, wailed, or otherwise felt, has the profound powerful ability to release a weary heart. With roots in the African diaspora, these songs become a medium through which the soul, once imprisoned, is now free to speak. In contrast with the storm and stress of the Black soul, which has been mercilessly divided and forced to exist within an intricate writing of spirit, the soul finds wholeness, representation, and release through songs of sorrow. The passages before each chapter allows for a momentary lift of the Veil, so that readers catch a glimpse of the profundity of the Black consciousness. While the soul is confined and restricted by societal prejudices and injustices, it finds expression and the final ascent through these musical notes that carry the weight of historical pain, weariness, and resilience. Similarly to James' understanding of "solemn sorrow" — which describes a state of mind that has a complex discernment on the nuanced and layered experience of sorrow — there is a bitterness in sweetness, and sweetness in bitterness that underlies the emotional labor that toils beneath each song. It seems these Sorrow Songs permit the long-longed for wholeness, unity, and health of a soul, so that Black consciousness can ascend from stasis.

These Sorrow Songs — crucially not individual expressions of emotional labor, rather a created collective voice that transcends individual narratives — gain their power and longevity in the potent capacity of hope:

> 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.[108]

Du Bois reflects on the persistent undercurrent of hope that permeates through the music, and serves as the counterpoint to the despair and desolation expressed in the songs. He suggests a resilience and optimism that stems from a profound faith in ultimate justice: that in the end, the "minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence." This hope extends beyond any individual or immediate circumstance of suffering to a broader vision of justice and moral equilibrium. Importantly, this hope is not a stagnant one. In this passage, hope gains purpose and meaning through movement, specifically the minor cadences that evolve to confidently quiet tones; there is a dynamic motion of progress within the tensive emotional landscape that mirrors the constant complexity of the Black experience in America. Finally, a direct link between hope and soul emerges in the last line, when the author aspires for an unknown future where people are judged not by their skins, but by their souls. Here, again, the terminology of soul is linked to the wholeness of an individual and is assumed to accurately represent the strife and strength — the past and future of a conflicted state of consciousness. It is the hope that the prisoned souls shall go free, and those free souls can ascend into a condition of complete, absolute, and total self-actualization that draws upon sorrow and joy to continue the journey.

After an anthology where each chapter begins with two bars of a Sorrow Song, Du Bois breaks his usual format and ends the eponymous section (as well as the overall text) with an

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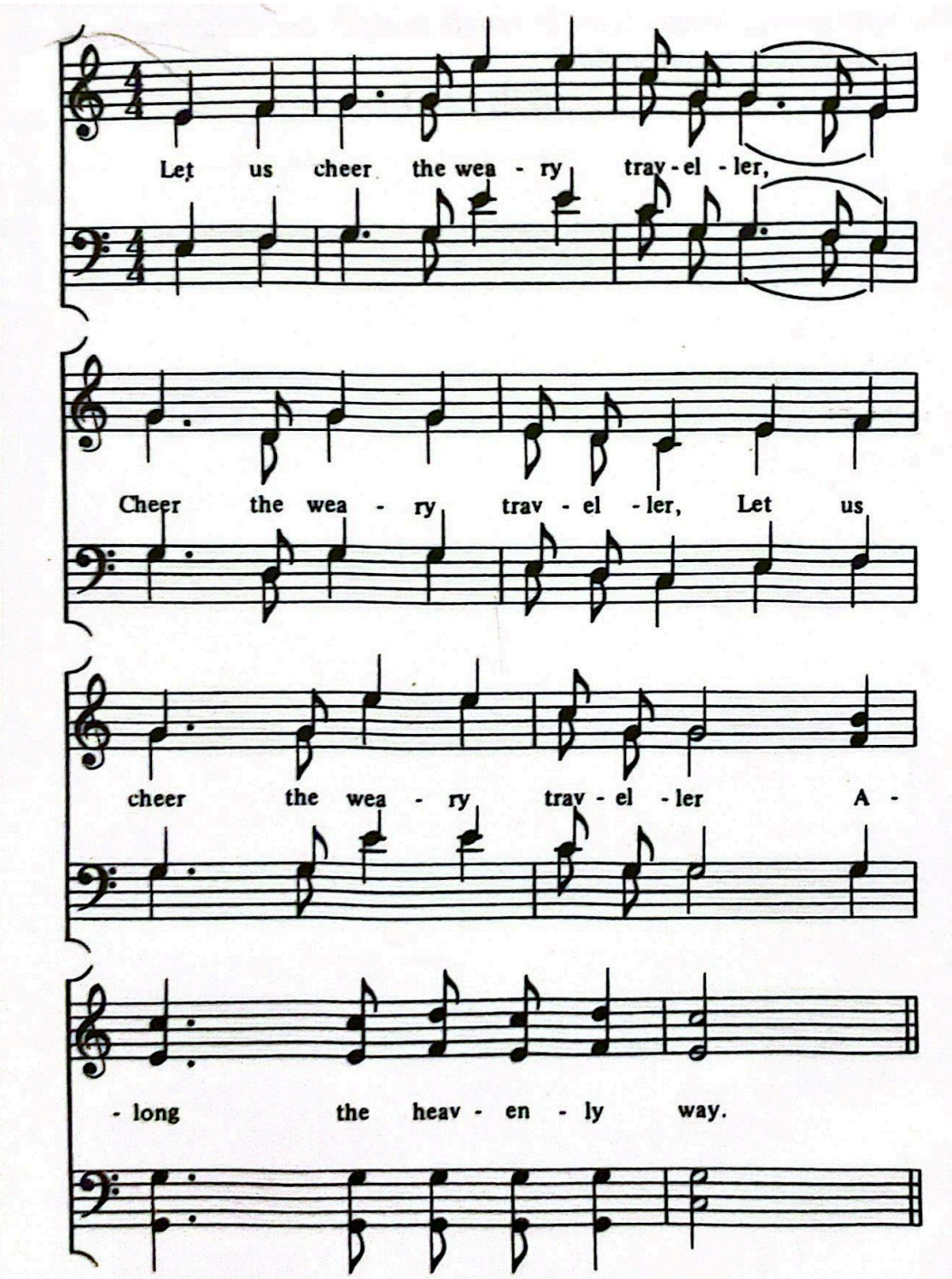
[108] Ibid., 162.

entire song, aptly entitled “Let Us Cheer the Weary Traveler,”[109] which attests to the enduring capacity of hope. The first “let us” conveys a sense of communal support and engagement. There is no “I”, “me”, or “you”, instead the collective “we” who are engaged in a similar soul journey of motivation. That motivation is presented in an oxymoronic fashion in the following line, as cheer and weary are solely separated by the definite article “the.” It is implied that in this communal labor, cheer and weariness will come hand in hand in the trek of the traveler. The ultimate line, “Along the heavenly way” draws upon language of ascent: through transcendence, and a divine motion of liberation, the traveler, perhaps the soul of Black consciousness itself, journeys the path to a whole, realized, and healthy soul which is fueled by the veracious tenacity of hope.

Du Bois, driven by a rage against exclusion and injustice, weaves a remarkable narrative of stasis, immersion, and ascent that explores the complicated idea of Black consciousness through seminal concepts of double-consciousness and the Veil. He locates the stasis in the struggle, captivity, and tension characterized by the warring ideals of being Black and American within one’s identity — a unique and almost mystical quality for Black people. As he himself lifts the Veil, which separates the starkly distinct Black and white worlds, the reader is immersed in the deeper recesses of Black life. It is at this point that we begin to explicitly connect the language of soul — meaning Du Bois’ specific understanding and use of the word “soul” in this text — with the final stage of ascent. The final and ultimate goal, realization of a unified and whole Black consciousness, comes from the liberation of the soul through education, paradoxical solemnity, and the emotive power of Sorrow Songs; the haunting echoes of these songs become a medium through which the imprisoned soul finds expression and release. In essence, there is something unspoken and ineffable about the word “soul” with its

[109] The sheet music appears on the final page of this essay as well. (Ibid., 164)

Christian roots, that when used in a “secular,” or otherwise not overtly religious circumstance, can refer to an intensity of emotion that is irretrievably linked to transformations of wholeness, solemnity, and hope. The soul of Black consciousness has been imprisoned in stasis, but through education and song, it finds liberation to ascend and express a totality. Somehow, the specific terminology of soul together holds the linguistic and emotional capacity to represent the journey of the Black traveler, through cheer and weariness, on the ascent to absolute self-actualization.



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

Fig. 4
"Let us Cheer the Weary Traveler"

Chapter 3: Morrison's Embodied Soul of Tomorrow:

"*We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language.*

That may be the measure of our lives."[110]

Fig. 5
Portrait of Toni Morrison by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

The first two chapters have focused on two American authors' respective utilization of the terminology of soul. Emily Dickinson employs the word to further elucidate her complex visualization of the divine feminine and keeper of hope—a cerebral and constructed poetic of the soul that is intellectually-driven and oriented toward a white audience—while W.E.B. Du Bois interprets soul as a paradoxical song of sorrow and hope among Black Americans.

[110] Toni Morrison, "The Nobel Prize in Literature 1993 Speech." *NobelPrize.org*.

Importantly, he sets the foundation for the fully embodied spirit which emerges in the marvelous work of Toni Morrison (1931-2019). It is here that Morrison completes the task not represented in Dickinson, yet anticipated in Du Bois as she formulates the soul as a sensory being that is enfleshed through the medium of jazz. Through an analysis of "The Beloved Trilogy," jazz music theory, and the novel *Jazz* (1992) itself, I explore Morrison's robust integration of flesh and spirit.

The Beloved Trilogy:

It is appropriate that we ended the last chapter where Black women were largely peripheral yet pivotal figures in the overall arc of the plot, to this section where they are front and center. The American novelist and editor Toni Morrison, the first African-American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, is recognized as one of the most influential writers on the Black experience, particularly the Black female experience. Morrison's writing is characterized by its intricate narrative structures and lyrical prose that resonates with deep emotional intensity. She is the author of 11 novels that each explore the variety of struggle, triumph and resilience of Black individuals. However, her commitment to Black storytelling expands beyond each work as a standalone. Three of those groundbreaking novels — *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), and *Paradise* (1997) — comprise the "Beloved Trilogy": interconnected novels that form a thematic and conceptual continuum by examining various facets of Black life across different temporal and spatial contexts.

Morrison scholar Justine Tally analyzes the trilogy as a reflection on the complex relationship between memory, story, and history and argues that each has played a role in the

survival of African Americans in the United States.[111] The first, *Beloved*, is based on the true story of Margaret Garner — an enslaved woman who killed her daughter rather than allow the child to be returned to slavery — and tells the tale of Sethe, Morrison's fictionalized version of Garner, who is haunted by the spirit of her deceased daughter. It is a heartbreaking reflection on trauma, memory, and the horror of slavery. *Jazz*, set against the backdrop of 1920s Harlem, follows the intersecting lives of Violet and Joe Trace, a married couple who moved to New York City during the Great Migration and navigate infidelity in their relationship. The story unfolds as a piece of jazz music with its nonlinear storyline, and alternating periods of dissonance and consonance. Finally, *Paradise* completes the trilogy and focuses on the parallel histories, yet tragic violence, between the all-Black, male-dominated town of Ruby, and the Convent, a nearby all-female sanctuary. Here, Morrison delves into the complexities of race, gender, and power dynamics, and the difficulty in establishing a "true" history. Tally draws the conclusion:[112]

> No one reasonably doubts the crucial role of memory in *Beloved*, nor the emphasis on storytelling in *Jazz*, or even the challenges of establishing "true" history in *Paradise*; but memory and story become mutually dependent, and history must be nurtured in both.[113]

It is clear that the three-part work serves as a monumental epic exploring themes of Black memory, trauma, and resilience with profound depth and weight. In an interview with Jennifer Hoofard, Morrison discussed the significance of the trilogy's themes and the careful

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[111] Justine Tally, "The Morrison Trilogy," *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press., 2007), 76.
[112] Much of her article also analyzes the ways in which each novel is an enactment of three different literary theories [Michel Foucault (Beloved), Mikhail Bakhtin (Jazz), and the 'French Feminists' (Paradise)]. I will not delve into this point of her work, however I wanted to note her fascinating piece of analysis.
[113] Tally, "The Morrison Trilogy," 76.

consideration young readers must give to engage with its complexities. She mentioned hearing people claim that they initially attempted to read her books when they were too young to fully comprehend the severity and truth of the subject matter. Describing a common anecdote the author would hear, she recalled the refrain:

> "Well, I read it in high school, or I started it, and then years later I went back, and it's my favorite book." But they couldn't deal with it earlier. Many, particularly young black women, tell me: "I could not deal with this book." And they just stopped reading, but then later they did.[114]

Many readers, particularly Black women, upon encountering Morrison's novels in their childhood, find themselves overwhelmed or unable to fully grasp the profundity of the narrative. As a result, they set the book aside for years, only to later rediscover the work, gradually grasping the careful blend of devastation and hope woven throughout its pages.

I myself had this experience with Toni Morrison. My mother, a Black woman with Southern roots and an eye for literature, had bookshelves filled with prominent Black authors, among whom was Toni Morrison. As an adolescent, I loved exploring her library, however, whenever I displayed an interest in Morrison (and *Beloved* specifically), my mother would tell me to, "wait until I was ready." She recognized the tragedy and triumph of the writing that required a level of maturity and life experience to fully internalize the weight of the words. Despite my curiosity, I heeded my mother's advice and set aside the novels, anticipating the day

[114] Jennifer Hoofard and Toni Morrison, "An Interview with Toni Morrison: 'Thinking About a Story.'" *Writing on the Edge* 17, no. 2 (2007)., pp 95.

when I would be able to fully engage with the difficult themes and plot lines. It was not until my junior year of college, during my semester abroad in Madrid, Spain, when my previous time of preparation grew into opportunity.

As I returned from classes one day in the neighborhood of Prosperidad, I decided to take advantage of the beautiful weather and explore a new route home. On that detour, I passed by a small bookshop that had a display of books in the window for passersby to view. My eyes were drawn to a well-loved copy of *Jazz*, translated into Spanish. With a proclivity toward challenging myself — as I knew the difficulty ahead in reading Morrison's difficult prose in my second-language — I dove headfirst into my second[115] attempt to read Morrison due to a spur of the moment decision. Unsurprisingly, it was no easy task to decipher due to the language barrier and the nonlinear, nomadic style of the book. However, upon completion, I finally understood the care with which my mother wanted me to meet Morrison: one must prepare in mind and spirit before reading the words of the author, especially Black women for whom the subject matter is more fact than fiction. It is a profoundly intimate and validating experience to read multidimensional Black female characters, defined by strength, resilience, and an overwhelming humanity; however, it is also a literary journey upon which one must prepare before embarking. Once prepared, readers board Morrison's tripartite exploration of Black life within the United States, rooted in universal resilience and sorrow, yet expressed via various temporal and spatial characterizations: a difficult yet necessary journey of Black spirit and flesh.

[115] During a conversation with my Professor and mentor Mark Wallace — where we discussed my mother's dedication to ensuring I was ready and prepared for the turmoil that lies in many of Morrison's works — he gifted me a copy of *Beloved*. On my first read-through, I only made it one third of the way through before I had to put it down for good. Only after reading *Jazz* have I returned to the novel and read it in its entirety.

Background and inspiration of Jazz:

Fig. 6
James Van Der Zee, *Harlem Book of the Dead*

Similar to the ways in which *Beloved* was influenced by the real life story of Margaret Garner, Morrison's journey with the novel *Jazz* was inspired by the above photo in James Van Der Zee's *The Harlem Book of the Dead* which was published in 1978. The image depicts a woman in a coffin who bled to death in order to avoid exposing her lover who had shot her. As Van Der Zee recalled:

> She was the one I think was shot by her sweetheart at a party with a noiseless gun. She complained of being sick at the party and friends said, 'Well, why don't you lay down?' and they [took] her in the room and laid her down. After they undressed her and loosened her cloths, they saw the blood on her dress. They asked her about it and she

> said, 'I'll tell you tomorrow, yes, I'll tell you tomorrow' She was just trying to give him a chance to get away.[116]

Morrison's novel is not a direct retelling of this event, but rather an imaginative exploration of the themes of tragedy, love, and betrayal that haunt relationships. From the beginning of the anecdote, where Van Der Zee sets the scene at a party, there is a heightened tension and sense of immediacy. There is a stark contrast between the party setting and the act of violence, similarly evident in the distinction between the noiseless gun and the loud joyous atmosphere. This confusion, tension, and contrast reaches its peak when the woman offers a cryptic response to her friends' concerns and worry: "I'll tell you tomorrow" she concedes, a promise that she knew would go unfulfilled given the condition of her wound. In the end, the story itself is a powerful illustration of the human capacity for violence in relationships, a truth that is honored through the photograph.

As Jovona Jones writes in her article on the centrality of Black aesthetics and photography in the novel *Jazz*, "Morrison takes up Van Der Zee's photograph and the deceased's unresolved 'tomorrow' as a kind of prompt: she imagines characters who resist narrative, consistency, and closure, those who are hard to pin down, even by the one who claims to know their story."[117] The work unfolds as a piece of jazz itself that is unstructured, unfiltered, and authentically committed to the representation of an unfilled tomorrow. Morrison is dedicated to

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[116] James Van Der Zee, Owen Dodson, and Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead.* (New York :Morgan & Morgan., 1978.)

[117] Jovonna Jones, "'Look. Look. Look.': The Work of Black Aesthetics in Toni Morrison's Jazz." (*Callaloo* 41, no. 2, 2018)., pp 97.

exploring the movement of the soul through the uncertainty of the tomorrow which is promised, yet unresolved.

With that in mind, after two chapters of less-than-fully embodied interpretations of the soul, where the soul lies in an intangible place somehow larger than and outside of the body, in this final chapter, I will explore the soul of corporeality. In *Jazz*, the soul is understood, experienced and most of all felt through the body of jazz itself. Morrison offers a tale of tomorrow that continues the legacy of the woman in Van Der Zee's image and serves as an examination of Black womanhood during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. It is in this chapter that I argue the boldest interpretation yet of soul, as I explore jazz as a linguistic and thematic stand-in for the soul. In effect, yes it is true that Morrison wrote this novel as a piece of jazz, it was also written as a work of the soul, an aspect I will first investigate through the technical music theory of Jason Bivins.

Jason Bivins and the spirituality of jazz:

In *Spirits Rejoice: Jazz and American Religion*, Jason Bivins begins his profound examination of the intersection between jazz music and spirituality with a quote from the jazz legend Louis Armstrong on the importance of the senses: "You blows who you is." At its core, jazz is about authenticity and identity. Through improvisation and innovation, jazz musicians "blow" their instruments in a way that reflects who they are as individuals. In this act of musical creation, they reveal their innermost passions, emotions, and experiences, transcending language and communicating directly with their audience. For a trumpeter specifically, the transcendent qualities of jazz lie in the unique relationship between the player and the trumpet into which he

blows air. It is a sensorial connection as the trumpeter engages in the act of breathing, an action that relies on various sensory modalities to complete respiration. It is this centrality of the senses upon which Bivins builds when he writes, "Scholars of religion have started attending more rigorously to the centrality of the senses to the religious experience."[118] Rather than simply attending to "the body" in the field of religious studies, attention is now being paid specifically to registers such as sound and vision.[119] By examining specific sensory registers, scholars gain insights into the ways in which individuals embody music as an entity which is fundamentally intangible. As multi-instrumentalist Eric Dolphy claims, "When you hear music, after it's gone, it's gone, in the air; you can never capture it again."[120] Dolphy captures the ephemeral essence of music and the unique nature of its temporal experience. Unlike tangible objects or visual art, music exists primarily in the realm of sound, which is inherently transient. It is a fleeting experience that ends the second the sounds dissipate into the atmosphere.

The intangibility of jazz is similar to religious studies in that they are both nearly impossible to completely codify and systematize. Bivins argues, "The study of religion is always an engagement with multiplicity: notoriously difficult to define, religions sit at the intersection of a wide range of human activities both imaginative and embodied."[121] He elaborates that the study of religion is further complicated by our shifting understanding of religion and the more contemporary movement toward "spirituality" in place of "religion." Rooted in the 19th century, this distinction denotes a connotation of religion as shaped by social and institutional structures, while spirituality is characterized by a more individual and experiential practice which is more diffuse and focused on direct contact with the divine.[122] It is

[118] Jason Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice! Jazz and American Religion. (*Oxford: Oxford University Press., *2015),* 5.
[119] Ibid., 6.
[120] Ibid., 4.
[121] Ibid., 7.
[122] Ibid., 20.

a nuanced understanding that recognizes that religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive categories, but rather variable points on the spectrum of belief, non-belief, and practice. In the realm of jazz, musicians often draw upon both religious and spiritual themes in their music, reflecting their own diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

Through his essential question, "Where and how do we locate jazz in the multiple narratives of American religion, and what does jazz reveal about them?"[123], Bivins analyzes this complex interplay between institution and individual: formalized structure and personalized interpretation. Specifically, he cites the influence of the Black church: "The influence of the Negro church on traditional jazz is obvious in the very sound of the music…To study the history of jazz is to take the church background for granted."[124] Besides the concrete similarities between jazz and the Black church, such as call-and-response patterns, and an improvisational spirit, both forms of music are built upon a fervent spirit. Describing the jazz saxophonist Albert Ayler (1936-1970), Bivins writes, "And upon hearing 'the call' while listening to Coltrane, he plunged into American vernacular music and religion. His style grew toward huge swooping notes, deep pitch bending or raw barks, and an intense quaver that 'replaced notes with glossolalia.'"[125] Through jazz, Ayler was able to experience "the call," usually a reference to the Christian calling to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, however in his case, the call is identified as a need to spread music. Here, the influence of the institution of religion is apparent in the use of religious terminology such as "the call" and "glossolalia,"[126] however the religious extends beyond religion in jazz. It is the fusion between "spiritual" and "religious" that reflects a departure from traditional characterizations and instead transcends the confines of both

[123] Ibid., 14
[124] Ibid., 12.
[125] Ibid., 32.
[126] Colloquially known as "speaking in tongues"

conventional musical language and formal religious terminology. Jazz as a music form allows one to tap into a more visceral and sonic form of expression that is not limited to categorization and codification.

The raw nature of jazz as a genre that exists beyond definition resulted in a pervasive attitude of horror and disgust towards the genre. Jazz was degraded as, "barbaric, sensuous, jungle music which assaulted the senses and sensibilities, diluted reason, led to the abandonment of decency and decorum, undermined dignity, and destroyed order and self-control."[127] Because jazz emerges from African American communities and carries with it the cultural expressions and experiences of its creators, the sentiment of jazz as "barbaric" is rooted in racial prejudice and bias. The genre, with its improvisational nature and emotional intensity, challenged established norms of decorum and propriety, provoking fear and condemnation among those who sought to maintain rigid boundaries of Black/white societal norms. Bivins concisely explains the disapproval of jazz with the following: "This was a music that seemed to spill beyond limits —moral, cultural, musical — and to many demanded a vigorous reassertion of those same norms."[128] The combination of the biased perception of Black spirituality as primitive or irrational by mainstream society, along with the genre-bending inherent nature of jazz, led to a condemnation of jazz by popular culture.

The polemic status of jazz does not deny the palpable power and enduring legacy of the genre as a vehicle through which spirits can rejoice. Bivins explains his use of the phrase "spirits rejoicing" in his overall analysis of jazz and American religion, writing, "Throughout this book, I often use the gerund 'spirits rejoicing' as a synonym for 'religion' or 'spirituality.' It signifies the musicians' own understanding 'beyond category'; and also signals my intention to

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[127] Lawrence Levine*, Black culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Thought from Slavery to Freedom.* (New York: Oxford University Press., 2007), 293.
[128] Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice*, 11.

avoid a number of conventional writing pathways."[129] He explains how the sound of spirits rejoicing fundamentally challenges our understanding of what we know about religion. And it is at this point that I introduce our exploration of soul in this chapter. Bivins sees jazz, religion, and spirituality as similar points on a spectrum that influence each other and directly thrive off the existence of its counterparts. At the conclusion of his work, where he examines the role of jazz in various religions/spiritualities such as Juju and Taoism, he proposes a dynamic relationship between jazz and religion in that they are "becoming each other:" "Jazz and religion are continually becoming, even becoming each other, in a shared constellation of play, intensities, and sustained experiential attunement to what the Transcendentalists once thought of as 'a world in which each person makes his own truth from what works for him.'"[130] Drawing upon the Transcendentalist idea that individuals construct their own truth based on personal experiences, he describes jazz as the shared space of creative expression and spiritual exploration that conduct a work of summoning. He states, "Music is understood as a vehicle for the deity's or the spirits' appearance, and for the cultivation of the sensibilities (joyful, reverent, solemn) attendant to such presence. Jazz is a summoning, a bringing forth of the very thing it purports to be *about* and to describe."[131] Jazz may be originated by the call, as evidenced in the testimony of Albert Ayler, however jazz is also itself a call that invites a deep connection to the divine or spiritual realm.

[129] Ibid., 15.
[130] Ibid., 269.
[131] Ibid., 270.

Consonance and Dissonance of Tomorrow

Similarly to how Morrison approaches *Jazz* as an addition to the unfilled promise of "tomorrow" left by the woman who bled to death at the hands of her lover, jazz as a genre is also an attempt to speak to the "tomorrow." It is here that I see the soul in Morrison's jazz: not as an explicit use of the terminology of soul, but rather as a theoretical examination of jazz music as the movement of the soul and the interpretation of tomorrow. Bivins makes clear that categories are neither perfect, nor finite, however he investigates religion through such terminologies due to the fact that breakthroughs and new ways of thought emerge in the ambiguity of these loaded terms. He explicates, "'Spirituality' or 'religion' or 'jazz' may be categories unable to escape their overdetermination or evanescence, no matter the beauty or sizzle an author intends. But in the very 'ugliness' of their inevitable frames we might find the questions that bother us and open us up too."[132] Although these terms are often overdetermined and elusive, resisting easy classification, he suggests that within the ambiguity and uncertainty lies the potential for exploration and discovery, as it prompts readers to grapple with fundamental questions of identity, meaning and existing. Bivins goes even further and promises that through failure and murkiness, we find fresh beauty and possibility:[133] By embracing the implicit uncertainty and complexity of these phenomena, we open ourselves up to new perspectives and insights which foster a deeper understanding of the profundity behind what it means to be human.

[132] Ibid., 275.
[133] Ibid.

In *Jazz*, it is the realm of tomorrow that is only accessible through the movement and body of the soul, that thrives in both states of dissonance and consonance. Tomorrow is promised yet unfulfilled, and as a result, exists in a correspondingly oxymoronic state between conflict and resolution. To understand this concept, it is crucial to delve into the music theory behind consonance and dissonance:

> Notes that sound good together when played at the same time are called consonant. Chords built only of consonances sound pleasant and "stable"; you can listen to one for a long time without feeling that the music needs to change to a different chord. Notes that are dissonant can sound harsh or unpleasant when played at the same time. Or they may simply feel "unstable"; if you hear a chord with a dissonance in it, you may feel that the music is pulling you towards the chord that resolves the dissonance. Obviously, what seems pleasant or unpleasant is partly a matter of opinion. This discussion only covers consonance and dissonance in Western music."[134]

Consonance refers to notes that sound harmonious when played together, that is contrasted with the harsh and unpleasant nature of dissonant notes. Dissonance creates a sense of tension and instability that often leads to a desire for resolution, pulling the listener towards a chord that offers closure or harmony. However, the manifestation of dissonance and consonance goes beyond music theory as explained by the following quote of jazz legend Duke Ellington:

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[134] Catherine Schmidt-Jones, "Understanding Basic Music Theory: Course Introduction." *Creative Commons*. http://cnx.org/content/col10363/1.3/.

> "Hear that chords!" he once instructed, not requested. Directing a listener's ear to the colors of one of his own pieces, the composer continued, "That's the Negro's life…That's us. Dissonance is our way of life in America. We are something apart, yet an integral part"... This is also about maintaining identity as 'something apart,' evading easy resolution in the major chord of the listener who really did not want to understand too much of struggle, of manyness and fluidity.[135]

Ellington utilized the movement of jazz and the dance between tension and peace, harmony and discord, as a larger statement on the existence of Black life. The dissonance and consonance of the chords made audible what had been muffled about the paradoxical and impossible existence of African Americans.[136] The major chord is not as simple as triumph, nor ascent, rather it exists in tandem with the minor chord that reflects a sense of being both separate from and integral to American society. This dissonance serves as a means of maintaining identity amidst struggles and resisting easy resolution into the mainstream narrative.

Morrison's Embodied Soul of Tomorrow:

With the connection established between religion and jazz, I move to the movement of the soul in the novel *Jazz* which begins with the first line: "Sth, I know that woman."[137] The soul is not just a theological concept, but a living, palpable presence that is felt physically through the narrative and interpreted through the senses. As its enigmatic opening, "Sth" is a sound that

[135] Bivins, *Spirits Rejoice*, 24.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Toni Morrison, *Jazz* (New York: Penguin Books., 1993), 3.

is felt as much as it is heard, inviting the reader to repeat the name and embody the movement of jazz from the beginning. Tally reads the first line with the following analysis:

> Jazz, concerned as it is with language, opens with a sound, 'Sth," also plying multiple interpretations, as it constitutes the consonants of both 'Sethe' and 'South.' Moreover, its affirmation, 'I know that woman,' not only indicates the gossip nature of the narrator, but also sets out its concern with gnosis (i.e., knowledge) as opposed to ontology, later qualified with the narrator's own admission of fallibility, which then entirely qualifies what can, in fact, be known, as opposed to constructed via storytelling.[138]

"Sth" has ambiguous consonants that both resemble "Sethe," the protagonist from *Beloved*, and "the south," which is a peripheral yet constantly felt presence in the novel that takes place after the Great Migration to Harlem. It is an introductory line that not only sets the tone for the novel with its allusions to prior works and the ubiquitous south, but also as it creates a sensory experience for the reader.

Building off the power of breath in Bivins' jazz theory and the beginning breath of Morrison's novel, Ashton T. Crawley, scholar of Black Pentecostalism, argues that pneumatology—the study of pneuma, the Greek word for "breath"—is the foundation of all African and African American music. He argues that the calls, cries, shouts, emotion, and overall *sound* of Black music permits one to "break the automaton, through evidence of life, by improvisatory performance, through breath, through black pneuma that animates any sonic

[138] Tally, "The Morrison Trilogy." 78.

performance."[139] The strong emotions of the Black experience are translated and transcribed into this breath which is the connecting force between spirit and flesh. When Morrison begins with the sound "Sth," the sound is animated by breath. Because the novel begins with the sacred movement of breath, which is the unique and potent heartbeat in jazz, from the start, readers witness Morrison's radical embodiment of soul through breath.

Importantly, the line, "Sth" is spoken by the narrator who is never known and only felt. Unlike conventional narratives where the narrator is a clearly defined entity, in *Jazz*, the narrator is more of a specter, a presence sensed rather than seen. On that same first page, the narrator goes to describe Violet and reveals the entirety of the plot in a few sentences. As the book was written as a piece of jazz, there is no timeline, no ulterior motive, and exists solely as a movement of the soul. In that vein, the unnamed narrator introduces Violet as a woman who went to the funeral of the girl who had an affair with her husband and cut her face: "When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church."[140] The plot unfolds as a piece of gossip the narrator is divulging to the audience in a concise and direct manner. Tally refers to this method of narration as more the feeling of knowledge than the imposition or acquisition of knowledge. It is less so the case when a narrator moves methodically through the plot, and more so a dynamic piece of gossip that the narrator pushes the audience to embody, such as with the "sth" sound. Writing on Dorcas, the girl with whom Joe Trace was unfaithful, on the next page Tally explains:

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[139] Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press., 2017), 175.
[140] Morrison, *Jazz*, 3.

> Dorcas is not the narrator. The narrator is never really known to the characters in *Jazz*. But Dorcas is narrated with the same temporal, spatial, and sensuous dynamism as whomever or whatever is telling the story. Both Dorcas and the narrator are specters of something that has some kind of hold over the characters: the blackness of American culture; the simultaneity of the Old Negro and the New; the sound and sight of mourning as a condition for new living.[141]

Tally draws the conclusion that the specifics of the narration style, specifically the dynamism of the senses in present space and time, reflect Morrison's commitment to Black Aesthetics and honoring the blackness of American mourning. In fact, the first chapter of *Jazz* is not the only one to begin abruptly. The novel relentlessly jumps through space and time (such as the antebellum south and 1920s Harlem) and avoids chapter numbers and titles which would help contextualize the story. It is a story that cannot be understood, nor followed, but felt, just like a piece of jazz in order to honor the song and sorrow of Black mourning. Specifically, Tally's line, "the sound and sight of mourning as a condition for new living" serves as one of the central ideas of this final thesis chapter. The phrase suggests mourning and loss are integral to the process of renewal and rebirth: the cycle of pain, suffering, resilience, and transformation is a movement that is embodied through the senses of sight and sound. In *Jazz*, a novel on the power and presence of storytelling, the narrator cannot be explained nor categorized—and the plot as a whole cannot be understood nor systematized—as it can only operate through the movement of jazz and the senses of the soul.

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[141] Tally, "The Morrison Trilogy," 95.

Another presence in the novel that cannot be codified and is only experienced through first person embodiment is the divine characterization of the City. "The City," referring to Harlem, is always capitalized and emerges as a moving entity of love and dedication. Amongst the wave of Black people running from want and violence in the late 19th, early 20th century, Joe and Violet migrated north in 1906. The narrator explains, "Like the others, they were country people, but how soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is forever, and it is like forever."[142] In this tale that lacks linear time, once Joe and Violet move to the City, it is as if they always loved it through a deep emotional connection that transcends the boundaries of past, present, and future.

However, it is important to note that the City is a hub of movement that is powered by contradiction. Yes it is a place of love, dedication, and holds a near-divine status with its capitalization, yet it is also a suffocating experience with the narrative describing, "There is no air in the city, but there is breath."[143] In contrast with the positivity in the previous paragraph, here there is a sense of constraint and the audience feels smothered with the possibility of the absence of air. Yet, while the City lacks air, it has the capacity of breath. Although Harlem may feel stifling at times, it also contains the essence of life itself, which speaks to the tenacity of the City despite adversity and hardship. The place exists in a paradox between an absent air and the breath of life, with its paradoxical nature illustrating through the following:

> And when spring comes to the City people notice one another in the road; notice the strangers with whom they share aisles and tables and the space where intimate garments are laundered. It's the time of year when the City urges contradiction most, encouraging

[142] Morrison, *Jazz*, 33.
[143] Ibid., 34.

> you to buy street food when you have no appetite at all…Really there is no contradiction — rather it's a condition: the range of what an artful City can do.[144]

Morrison beautifully captures the condition of urban life in Harlem during springtime as a balance of contradiction. The arrival of spring brings about a heightened sense of awareness among city folk as they become more attuned to their surroundings and the people around them. She then transitions into a discussion of the control and power of the City to urge its inhabitants to engage in seemingly contradictory behaviors, such as purchasing street food when one is not hungry. However, she observes that this apparent contradiction is not conflicting at all, rather a natural condition of life in Harlem. It is a place that cannot be explained in rational terms, and thrives in the sphere of arational embodiment: one can only experience the city through the feeling of springtime, which exists as a condition of the senses.

Similarly, the transition from winter to spring in the novel marks a narrative transition that answers the unfulfilled promise of tomorrow. At the conclusion of the novel, Dorcas' friend Felice arrives and has one final conversation with Violet and Joe Trace. Felice, a name meaning happiness or felicity, tells the story of the night of Dorcas' murder and offers more backstory behind Dorcas' choice to protect Joe. When Felice asks her "Who shot you?" Dorcas replies, "Leave me alone. I'll tell you tomorrow."[145] As she is bleeding to death at the party she utters her final words, a message to her lover: "There's only one apple…Just one. Tell Joe."[146] The apple, a reference to the biblical story of Adam and Eve's temptation by the forbidden fruit, suggests that Joe's fixation on Dorcas is all-consuming. Even at the cost of destroying his own

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[144] Ibid., 118.
[145] Ibid., 213
[146] Ibid.

happiness and the lives of those around him, he cannot resist the temptation. The emphasis on the singularity of the apple, "there's only one apple," adds weight to his actions as they are irreversible and cannot be undone. Importantly, the finality of murder is not enough to motivate Dorcas to seek help at the expense of Joe's innocence. She instead chooses to protect him and his decision to eat the apple.

After Felice's account of that night, the yesterday of the narrative, we finally are able to move to the realm of tomorrow. Once she recounts the tale, she turns to discuss the mundane, specifically, her thoughts on Violet's catfish: "Her catfish was pretty good. Not as good as the way my grandmother used to do it, or my mother used to before her chest wore out. Too much hot pepper in the dredging flour the way Mrs. Trace fixed it. I drank a lot of water so as not to hurt her feelings. It eased the pain."[147] The passage is shockingly mundane given the preceding account of the murder only a few lines before. Yet, it is here we see realized Morrison's embodied, yet intangible soul of tomorrow. Life continues after Dorcas' death, and characters move forward. The scene describes a meal shared by the characters, focusing on the simple act of eating catfish. Although Felice had eaten better catfish, she drinks water to ease the pain of the hot pepper.

As we saw in the music theory of Bivins, there is a direct relationship between jazz, religion and spirituality in that they all move along the same spectrum. In *Jazz*, the second installment of the Beloved trilogy, Morrison explores the theme of storytelling in the Black community and chooses to tell the tale of Violet and Joe as a piece of jazz itself. Inspired by Van Der Lee's photograph, she hopes to offer a possibility of the tomorrow that is promised yet unfulfilled. It is the embodied soul, felt through the senses yet intangible to description, that

[147] Ibid., 216.

narrates the novel and tells the tale. The soul itself is the narrator who begins the novel with a sound and ends with an easing of pain. Only translated through the senses, the soul tells a story that reflects on the power of resilience to endure, persevere, and thrive in the condition of contradiction that is an unfulfilled tomorrow.

I want to conclude this chapter with the following passage from *Beloved*, an excerpt from "The sermon in the clearing," which is a declaration on the meaning of life given by the wise preacher Baby Suggs:

> "Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back… Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I'm telling you… The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your lifeholding womb and your lifegiving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize."[148]

Baby Sugg's impassioned sermon calls for her congregants to love their flesh above all else. In a world that despises the Black body and attempts to destroy the eyes, skin, and heart of the Black community at all times, it is the duty of Black individuals to love that body and all it can do. At the conclusion of her sermon, the novel explains, "Saying no more, she stood up then and

[148] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Random House., 2004), 103.

danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say while the others opened their mouths and gave her the music. Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh."[149] Here, the characters embody the message of loving their flesh through music. The four-part harmony, the song of hope and sorrow in light of the white world's attempt to corrode the Black body, is the representation of an enfleshed soul. As a fulfillment of Du Bois' embodied soul, felt through sorrow songs, Morrison calls upon the music of jazz as the movement of the complete and actualized soul of tomorrow: through jazz, one learns to enact Baby Suggs' command and love Black flesh.

[149] Ibid.

CONCLUSION:

It is here that I conclude this soul exploration. We have travelled from the white world with Dickinson, to the Black world with Du Bois, and ended in the world of Black women with Toni Morrison, a journey across race, gender, and temporal timelines. Despite differences of genre, with each author mainly operating in the sphere of poetry, essays, and novels respectively, there are thematic similarities of identity and spiritual transcendence among the writers. Regarding identity, the three writers are inseparable from the works they produce; Emily Dickinson's poetry grapples with themes of self-discovery and introspection, exploring the inner workings of the human psyche and the individual's relationship to society. Her cerebral and intellectually-driven conception of the soul as a divine feminine who serves as the keeper of hope only serves to explicate the value of home in her life. As an individual who claimed, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church — // I keep it, staying at Home,"[150] her spirituality was rooted in her notions of house and home, a sacred connection that could only be illustrated through the powerful dexterity of the language of inner life. Importantly, Dickinson had no aspirations for publishing her work and asked her sister Lavinia to burn her poems upon her death. It is only due to her sister's disobedience that we are able to read Dickinson's poems and observe her introspection at work. It is clear that in her poetry, written for herself and herself alone, identity is a central theme in her unique construction of the soul.

While Dickinson, given her context in mid 19th century New England, wrote from a white perspective, with Du Bois and Morrison, we see an intrinsic Black identity that cannot be separated from the writings. W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, examines the concept

[150] Dickinson, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," 153.

of double consciousness and the complexities of the African American identity in a society marked by racism and oppression. Through his essays and short stories, he invites his readers to accompany him behind the Veil that separates white society from Black society. The audience can only interpret his critiques and declarations, such as the impossible double consciousness of being Black and being American, through *his* access behind the veil. When he discusses sorrow songs as the heartbeat of the African American experience, it is a circumstance of mourning and joy, that is transferred through *his* authorial lens. The centrality of themes of authorship and identity are also present in Toni Morrison's novels which address issues of racial identity, trauma, and perseverance through song. Her famous Beloved Trilogy is an epic that documents the struggle and resilience of Black Americans, and importantly, it is an illustration that is deeply tied to Morrison's identity as a Black woman. This literary journey is not only a testament to the historical tribulations faced by the community but also serves as a poignant reflection of Morrison's own identity. Through her evocative and vivid depictions of grief and triumph, she invites readers to intimately experience the emotions and struggles written into the story. Her soul of tomorrow, which builds upon Du Bois' analysis of sorrow songs and reinforces the Black oxymoronic state of hope and mourning, is the result of the interconnectedness between identity, narrative, and audience.

Another similarity amongst the three writers is the theme of spirituality and transcendence. Dickinson's poetry often explores themes of mortality, eternity, and afterlife, reflecting her fascination with existentialism and the unknowns of the universe. Her soul of home and hope is not based in an external faith system and instead relies upon her individual devotion to her personalized sacred home. Du Bois also evokes language of spiritual transcendence in that the final and ultimate goal within *Souls*, is the ascent of a unified and

whole Black consciousness. As a result of the liberation of the soul through education, paradoxical solemnity, and the emotive power of Sorrow Songs, the imprisoned black soul transcends its stasis and finds full expression and release. The transcendence of Morrison appears in her dedication to tomorrow. Despite the murder, infidelity, and trauma of the novel *Jazz*, the work offers a complex manifestation of the promised yet unfulfilled tomorrow. In the real life story of the woman from Van Der Zee's photo, although she promised to reveal the identity of her killer (her lover) the day after the incident, she died before she could arrive to the promised tomorrow. Morrison, in her fictionalized interpretation of this photograph, fulfills the promise of what happens tomorrow. Through a novel written like a piece of jazz, we witness music, songs of sorrow and hope, as the vehicle through which the soul is fully realized in the embodied tomorrow.

Although each author arrives to a different conceptualization of soul — one cerebral and home-based, one of radical solemnity, and one of an embodied tomorrow — there is one connecting thread amongst the three: the message of hope. Dickinson's personification of the soul who guards the hearth, has the life-affirming responsibility of holding and protecting the virtue of hope. Du Bois' *Souls* is rooted in the belief of an upward-moving ascent of the Black community. The understanding of soul as the mix of mourning and joy gains significance as it is the method through which Black individuals will achieve liberation: it is a soul of hope toward freedom. Finally, Morrison makes real the journey that is absent in Dickinson and anticipated in Du Bois through her embodied soul. With the words of Baby Suggs in mind, who commands the congregation within *Beloved* to sing songs of sorrow and love the flesh, the music jazz is the principal hope for an embodied salvation. It seems as if the utilization of "soul" speaks to the

indefatigable essence of hope which bridges the respective identities and transcendent themes of each author and their works.

Before offering a concluding argument, I want to reflect on the process of writing this thesis. Although it has been a solo journey, I have not embarked on this soul journey alone. I felt as if each author has pulled me along a twisting and winding path with no set answers, only more provocative questions. The thesis begins with Dickinson because she is the author who first introduced me to thinking of soul as an artistic medium of literary expression. So in many ways, this work started in 2020 during the COVID pandemic when I first experienced that kinship of isolation. With a start date in 2020, this work has consequently spanned a broad expanse of time and space; From my bedroom in Connecticut (my home state) where I found similarities of circumstance between my quarantine and Dickinson's reclusivity, to my initial investigations during my time abroad in Spain, and culminating with the final edits done on Swarthmore's campus, this work has truly been a multidimensional odyssey of the soul.

As a biomythography, I hope the brief biographical asides add context and substance to the overall analysis. Similarly to how the lives and experiences of Dickinson, Du Bois, and Morrison directly influence their works and creation of soul, my exploration of soul is an exploration with a fully integrated body, soul, and mind. In future works, I hope to delve further into the biography and myth of these authors and their utilization of spirit. In a larger work with more space for additional biographical information, I could more effectively analyze the "myths" or unspoken meaning behind their writings. For example with Dickinson, the inclusion of more of her letters, already written in the same beautiful poetic as her poems, would offer more context on her observational nature and introspection. With Du Bois and Morrison, an examination of their other works, specifically a full exploration of the Beloved trilogy, would

provide a more full scope of the role of sorrow songs in the Black American ascent toward tomorrow. With the hope of a more wholly actualized academic biomythography in mind, I now present a final piece of analysis related to a 2008 NPR broadcast that pondered the nature and quality of soul.

In an episode of NPR *Morning Edition*, when gospel-trained singer Sharon Jones was asked, "What is Soul?" she replied, "It's the root. You can't get rid of the root."[151] Although as a musician, her answer was a distillation of her comments on the ubiquitous nature of soul music in mainstream American pop culture, this imagination of the soul as the root is an intriguing image. Instead of soul acting as a general modifier that is added on to describe and advertise things created by and for Black people, as I thought before this thesis journey, it is the basic foundation that exists in all things. Just as the root sustains and nourishes the entire organism in plant biology, soul serves as the core essence that imbues life with meaning and vitality. Jones' analogy suggests that attempts to detach or sever oneself from the soul would be akin to uprooting a plant: a fundamental disruption that undermines the very essence of existence. In other words, soul is not an additive feature, rather an internalized spirit which is accessed and affirmed.

I propose that we can interpret each author's construction of soul (as a divine feminine, a song of ascent, and an embodied tomorrow) as a manifestation of a rooted hope. Similarly to how a plant without a root cannot survive, the writings of Dickinson, Du Bois, and Morrison could not exist without the underlying current of hope that is only revealed through soul. Through an analysis of the inner life of the poems, essays, and novels of three authors, we witness soul craft as the rooted work of sorrow and hope.

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[151] Ashley Khan, "'What Is Soul?' New Faces Have Answers." *NPR Morning Edition*. 2008.

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