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“Of the Coming of John”: W.E.B. Du Bois, *Lohengrin*, and the Marriage Function of Truth

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> My history is hidden,
> these questions are forbidden:
> to ask from whence I came
> or seek to know my name.
> —*Lohengrin* I, iii

In *The Art and Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois*, Arnold Rampersad devotes chapter four to an analysis of *The Souls of Black Folk*. In discussing “Of the Coming of John,” the thirteenth chapter of Du Bois’s masterwork, Rampersad writes the following: “Of the Coming of John” elaborates the duality of the black soul. There are two Johns. One is “brown” and struggling; the other is the white son of Judge Jones, the main citizen of the small Georgia town where they live” (75). It is, Rampersad goes on to say, a “tale of miscegenation, murder, and suicide” that “is discreetly but powerfully told” (75). While few would argue with Rampersad’s basic summary, most readers of *Souls* would be taken aback, at least initially, at the description of the “other” John as “the white son of Judge Jones.” As readers of *Souls* know, the surname of the white John and his father, the Judge, is “Henderson,” not “Jones.” Such misidentification, had it been heard by the fictive Judge Henderson, would no doubt have brought his blood to a boil. But we critics should be grateful for whatever force—call it contingency—is responsible for turning “Henderson” into “Jones.” Without that misidentification we might not so readily make the overcorrection of turning “John Jones” into “John Henderson.”[1]

In what follows, I propose to turn that “error” into the centerpiece of an interpretation of “Of the Coming of John” wherein the scandal of the unacknowledged patronym links the Jones and

Henderson families in ways more intricate and intimate than has hitherto been noted. The unnamed narrator, who narrates in first-person plural, utilizes a series of repetitions, sometimes lexical and sometimes structural, that, "if read with patience," as Du Bois had hinted in "The Forethought," positions the reader to appreciate "the strange meaning of being black here at the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (vii). But here, in the penultimate chapter and the only one cast in the form of a fictional story, Du Bois attempts what R.A. Judy calls a "formal experiment," something that Du Bois had elsewhere described as an attempt to "interpret historical truth by use of creative imagination." In doing so, Judy explains, "[i]t is the formal performance that achieves its political significance" (214). Part of that "formal performance" involves referencing significant portions of earlier chapters, such as "Of the Dawn of Freedom" and "Of the Training of Black Men," and in positioning the reader for thoughts yet to come in "Of the Sorrow Songs." Du Bois's great biographer, David Levering Lewis, gives the palm for "strongest academic piece" to "Of the Dawn of Freedom" (283), and he describes "Of the Sorrow Songs" as one of "the best" of the five new essays written specifically for *Souls,* going on to suggest that the songs themselves, as Du Bois utilizes them in his epigraphs, are designed to "counter" notions of European cultural supremacy (278). My intertextual reading might not convince Lewis that "Of the Coming of John" rises above the "bathos and crimson" to which he consigns it (278), but it might nevertheless prompt readers to understand the story as an integral continuation of the political arguments made in those earlier chapters alluded to above. Du Bois relies on the elliptical nature of a well-wrought story to link political to aesthetic theory.

Far from being a come-down, "Of the Coming of John," as *story,* becomes an epitome of what Lewis suggests *Souls* itself is designed to do. It makes audible—("hear my cry")—the "voices of the dark submerged and unheard" (278). In so doing, it foregrounds experimentation on the part of readers by way of compelling us to focus on formal arrangements that simultaneously say more, and less, than mere surface might suggest. Thus the *return* of John as the putative subject indicated by the title "Of the Coming of John" is punned by its reproductive double, framed in the form of an implied question, *How did John come to be?* It is the reproductive frame, wherein is described "the struggle over the control of female sexuality and sexual reproduction," that prompts Hazel Carby to criticize Du Bois for projecting his "imagined black community" as being "determined" by "the struggle of men over the bodies of women" (25). But as we shall see, in "Of the Coming of John," Du Bois has his narrator deploy those "discrete" but "powerful" formal techniques of repetition and parallel construction in order to credit more fully the role that John’s mother, Peggy Jones, plays in his education. As the story unfolds, we will see that Peggy revises slavery’s logic of *partus sequitur ventrum* (often translated as “the child follows the condition of the mother”), to better ensure that *her* child follows the *conditions* laid down by his mother.[2]

In Chapter 6 of *Souls*, “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois proffers one answer to the question of “how John came to be” by reference to what he calls “the panacea of Education” (91). From that chapter’s perspective, John’s “coming” is, in part, a product of a liberal education from Wells Institute, where our unnamed narrator is a member of the faculty. Such an education, Du Bois goes on to suggest, situates lived experience as “a matter of infinite experiment and frequent mistakes” (92) that yet might assist the John Joneses to leverage out a place in this world on the basis of something other than the “accidents” of birth or of the “stock market” (91). But in the network of repetitions with which our narrator structures his story, it is possible to make a case that, in this case, the “panacea” is necessarily a function of the willful desire on the part of Peggy that her son should have access to just such an education as Du Bois describes.

Getting Jones to that point where “error” was more a function of experimentation than of ignorance was no easy task. The narrator declares that “up at Johnstown, at the Institute, we were long puzzled at the case of John Jones” (231–232). The “case” before them was “loud and boisterous, always laughing and singing, and never able to work consecutively at anything. He did not know how to study; he had no idea of thoroughness; and with his tardiness, carelessness, and appalling good-humor, we were sore perplexed” (232). “And yet,” as the narrator had earlier recounted, “one glance at his face made one forgive him much,—that 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” (229). Compare that description with the following from “Of the Training of Black Men,” where Du Bois ventriloquizes the belief of the “older South” that “somewhere between men and cattle, God created a *tertium quid*, and called it a Negro—a clownish, simple creature, *at times even lovable within its limitations*, but straitly foreordained to walk within the Veil” (89, emphasis added). The trick, then, was to transform Jones, through the alchemy of a liberal education, so that rather than being “foreordained” to life behind the Veil, he instead “grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world” (234). A precondition, then, of the success of his education was that Jones become genuinely *dis*satisfied with the condition of the world around him. Once again, the path led through error. “[O]n account of repeated disorder and inattention to work," the narrator relates, the faculty "vote[d]" to suspend Jones for a term (232).

Jones is understandably confused and appalled by this devastating news. But rather than bemoan his situation, as one might expect, with inwardly directed angst, Jones is quick to proffer a deal to the Dean, cast in the form of a conditional: "if you won't [write to my mother] I'll go out into the city and work, and come back next term and show you something" (232). John's mother-focused reaction to his suspension now brings home for us the extent to which the narrator has left to our imagination the backstory of Peggy's raising of John and his sister, Jennie. But even so, the narrator does offer just enough by way of hint to suggest how much of Peggy's willpower and agency are motivating John's conditional. These hints, spread out through the middle of the story, beg the question of what constitutes a "strong-willed and driven woman," something that Christopher Powers suggests "do[es] not appear in *The Souls of Black Folk*" (66). Granted, very little narrative exposition is focused on Peggy, but what there is indicates a strength that should not be discounted. John Jones does not get to the Institute without Peggy's drive and will.

At the send-off for John at the Altamaha station, we readers are apprised that Peggy had held firm in her wish to have her son go to Wells Institute in spite of insistence from white folks that "It'll spoil him, ruin him" (230). The idea of spoilage is repeated by way of contrast when the Judge brags to Jennie about *his* John going off to Princeton: "'It'll make a man of him,' said the Judge, 'college is the place.' And then he asked the shy little waitress, 'Well, Jennie, how's your John?' and added reflectively, 'Too bad, too bad your mother sent him off,—it will spoil him.' And the waitress wondered" (231).

Clearly, college is reserved for the fashioning of white manhood; as Du Bois explained in "Of the Training of Black Men," the white Southern perspective imagined that "an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black" (94). Such a "delusion" is underscored again in "Of the Coming of John" as something that would only "spoil" John Jones, whom the white community of Altamaha had "voted" a "good boy," and who was deemed to be "a fine plough-hand, good in the rice fields, handy everywhere, and always good-natured and respectful" (230). The adjective "good," thrice repeated, modifies "boy," labor, and personality, thus rendering the pre-baccalaureate John the post-Reconstruction subordinate *par excellence* and prompting the reader to reflect that education might well turn black folk into spoiled *goods*.

The negative consequence of such spoilage is further underscored in the Judge's comments to Jennie: the repeated phrase, "too bad, too bad," with which he prefaces his "reflection" places the blame squarely on Jennie's mother, Peggy. Jennie's own reaction is simple, but nevertheless intriguing, and begs a question or two. Why would the narrator tell us that "the waitress wondered"? And about what, exactly, is she wondering? Is Jennie wondering if education will, indeed, spoil her brother? Or is she herself reflecting on the "reflective" manner in which the Judge, who elsewhere speaks "brusquely" (242) or "plunge[s] squarely into the business" (243), comments on her mother? It is too early to do too much with this, but I would ask my reader to keep in mind the interjection—"well"—with which the Judge addresses Jennie. This will be one of the first of several repetitions with which our savvy narrator will tell a tale that otherwise cannot be told outright.

Looked at from the perspective of a thicker understanding of Peggy's agency, we can surmise that John's conditional isn't necessarily compelled by fear. The agreement rather shows, I think, deep respect on the part of John and the Dean, who, at a moment of no little shame and embarrassment, can still "promise faithfully" to abide by its terms (232). (That verb-adverb phrase, "promise faithfully," will prove even more significant when the narrator takes us to New York to hear and witness *Lohengrin*.) For now, though, what this transaction makes appreciable, if not as visible as some critics would like, is Peggy's labor and defiance—the hours and hours and then the extra hours she must have worked to save enough to send John to the Institute, and the quiet strength with which she resolves to defy the codes and expectations of the white community, including the redoubtable Judge Henderson. In regard to the economic and cultural clout wielded by "five million women" who "are today furnishing our teachers," Du Bois in "The Damnation of Women" (1920) emphasized the impact that women like Peggy had on African-American cultural institutions: "If we have today, as seems likely, over a billion dollars of accumulated goods, who shall say how much of it has been wrung from the hearts of servant girls and washerwomen and women toilers in the fields?" (104).

In the post-bellum world of the New South, however, we might do well to wonder, along with Jennie, why Peggy should care what Judge Henderson thinks, or why he should care in regard to her thoughts. Ironically enough, a better case as to the "why" can be made when John Jones finally returns to Altamaha. However, we must follow the narrator in deferring that long-awaited arrival in order to better situate Peggy's relationship with Judge Henderson. For that, we need the backdrop of *Lohengrin*.

Upon graduation from the Institute, John Jones accepts an offer from the Dean to travel North with the Institute's "quartette." In a foreshadowing of events that will unfold at the conclusion of the story, Jones describes the trip as "a breath of air before the plunge" back into the spaces nearer to home that are patrolled by the codes and conventions of Jim Crow (*Souls* 235). Thus, September finds Jones in New York, where, swept along by the crowd, he nearly unconsciously spends five precious dollars on a ticket for a performance of *Lohengrin*. Jones unwittingly offends a white man and woman in line behind him who suffer the indignity of bumping up against a black man standing "stock-still, amazed" at what he has just done. The female companion gently chides her "fair-haired escort": "Be careful […] you must not lynch the colored gentleman simply because he's in your way" (235). It is clear from the escort's stock response that he is a Southerner. "With all your professions," he declares, "one never sees in the North so cordial and intimate relations between white and black as are everyday occurrences with us. Why, I remember my closest playfellow in boyhood was a little Negro named after me, and surely no two,—*well!*" (235). This interjection, with which the speaker cuts short his reply, indicates his recognition that the man seated next to them is the same "Negro he had stumbled over in the hallway" (236). The verb "stumbled" affirms the *scandal*—the stumbling block—of what we will come to see as a massively hypocritical projection of racial transgression, and the young man immediately engages the usher to begin procedures for redress.[3]

We shall have occasion, in a bit, to draw once more from that "well!"—but for now, as the narrator relates, John Jones is blind to all of these proceedings, caught up as he is in the sublime beauty of the opera. As Jones "grasped the elbows of the chair," he "unwittingly" touches the lady's arm. She "drew away," but the transgression of the color line has not gone unnoticed by her Southern escort. While previous arrangements remain to be enacted, "a deep longing swelled" in Jones's heart (236). The performance of the music opens up in John a series of political questions: "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?" (236–237). As "the movement changed," Jones turns these political questions into resolutions for action directed at "some master-work, some life-service" (237). The narrator then relates that when "at last a soft sorrow crept across the violins," John thinks about his mother and his sister (237). In using that key noun “sorrow,” the narrator is reminding us that this event, Wagnerian though it be, is not to be understood as a one-way path whereby European culture is deemed to be the ultimate purveyor of intellectual depth and universal feeling. It need not, as Keith Byerman suggests it does, “carry with it the corollary of deracination” (33). That key affect, *sorrow*, reminds us instead that Jones is sitting where he is because he has agreed to be a member of a quartet expected to “sing for the Institute” (234–235).[4] We can infer from the preposition that the tour is intended to raise a little money *for* the college. Now, the narrator makes no claims as to whether the Institute Quartet are as good as the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Indeed, it may very well be the case that they are not. In “The Sorrow Songs,” the concluding chapter of *Souls*, Du Bois notes that the Fisk singers have been much “imitated,”—“sometimes well, by the singers of Hampton and Atlanta,” and “sometimes ill, by straggling quartettes” (253). But whatever the quality of this “quartette” might be, it seems clear that Du Bois is pressing us to imagine more of a reciprocal relationship than many critics acknowledge. Sometimes that reciprocity is a function of reading ahead or of reading back. Just as the “infinite beauty of the wail” of Lohengrin’s swan “lingered and swept through every muscle of [John’s] frame” (236), likewise the Jubilee singers are described in the next chapter as having “conquered” Europe with “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (251). Understanding that reciprocal relationship adds greater poignancy to the next scene in which the usher finally returns to ask John Jones to vacate his seat. It is here that John and the fair-haired gentleman acknowledge each other for the first time as “Jones” and “Henderson” in a scene that, like double consciousness itself, offers no true recognition. It is shortly after this encounter, riding south on the train, that Jones comes to terms with his “manifest destiny,” his “duty” to the black folk of Altamaha (238).

Both Johns return to their southeastern Georgia town of Altamaha. Each is alienated in his respective way from comfortably fitting back into the flow of small town life. John Jones, however, has made the conscious attempt to do something with his life in spite of his growing awareness that his classical education, achieved by dint of great struggle and rigorous study, has unfitted him, as had been predicted, for the life of obedient subordination:

> he […] 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. He felt angry now when men did not call him "Mister," he clenched his hands at the "Jim Crow" cars, and chafed at the color-line that hemmed in him and his. (234)

Whereas Jones chafes at the thought of being consigned to a life of separate and unequal treatment based on fictions of race and social convention, Henderson, coming home from Princeton a month after Jones returns from Wells Institute, finds Altamaha and his father's plans for him to be too constricting. The younger Henderson wants nothing to do with his father's "cherished ambition": "'Good heavens, father,' the younger man would say after dinner, as he lighted a cigar and stood by the fireplace, 'you surely don't expect a young fellow like me to settle down permanently in this—this God-forgotten town with nothing but mud and Negroes?' '*I* did,' the Judge would answer laconically" (244). The Judge's response—"*I* did"—is one among several structural replacements, or desired replacements, that in this story reinforces the notion of repetition as a proxy for inheritance. The Judge wants John to follow in his footsteps, and, if possible, to go a little further than he did. In fact, the political options mapped out by the elder Henderson—mayor, legislator, governor (244)—are precisely options foreclosed to Jones. The very idea of a "Judge Jones" is an error not to be countenanced within what Judy calls the "socially and legally enforced grammar of segregation" (219). The fact that John Henderson is so dismissive of his father's political desires for his future incites a smoldering anger in the elder Henderson that can hardly be contained. As we shall see, the opportunity for release presents itself in the scapegoat figure of the other John.

There are structural replications figured by the Jones family as well. When John interviews with the Judge to take over the teaching position at the black school, the Judge makes clear that progress is to look an awful lot like a repetition of the recent past: "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,—I knew your father, John, he belonged to my brother, and he was a good Nigger. Well—well, are you going to be like him, or are you going to try to put fool ideas of rising and equality into these folks' heads, and make them discontented and unhappy?" (243–244). The Judge's expectation, of course, is that John Jones will be "like" his father, who belonged to the Judge's brother. But there's an interesting slippage here. By first saying like "your *fathers*" (I emphasize the plural), and then, after a strategically placed em-dash, by repeating and replacing it with “your father” (singular), the Judge ostensibly reinforces identification of like to like, of “darkies” to “darkies” and Joneses to Joneses. But in using the plural fathers, and in establishing that John’s father was owned by Judge Henderson’s brother, thereby reminding John that it’s all a family affair, the Judge also subtly destabilizes the very notion of John’s paternity.

John’s sister, Jennie, is also implicated in these structures of replication. We are initially introduced to Jennie just after we are introduced to the fact of another John in Altamaha, the Henderson’s John (238). It is in this scene that we are apprised by the narrator that this John, and his “darker namesake,” John Jones, were once playmates. While the idea of a “namesake” is suggestive in regard to the point I wish to make, here it also serves as a bit of misdirection. It compels us to focus on the identity of their *first* names, a fact that is reinforced when the Judge asks Jennie, “how’s *your* John?” (emphasis added).

Jennie figures in another replacement/repetition scenario when, after her brother’s return, she and John both stand overlooking the bluff above the sea, he with his arms around her, and she crying on his shoulder. This is the scene where Jennie asks John if “it make[s] every one—unhappy when they study and learn things.” After hearing confirmation from John that the suffering is worth it, Jennie pauses, then says, “‘I wish I was unhappy,—and—and,’ putting both arms about his neck, ‘I think I am a little, John’” (242). Here Jennie’s “putting both arms about his neck” replicates John’s placing “his great arms about his mother’s neck” upon departure to the Institute (230). John’s excitement at the train station, and Jennie’s unhappiness here, are both expressed in the context of education, but Jennie’s case begs the question as to just what kind of education she might be getting that is making her so inexpressibly “unhappy.”

For an answer to the matter of Jennie’s unhappiness, we have to be willing to entertain one more replacement/repetition, one that begins with a question. Given the color line, how is it that John Jones and John Henderson can have been such close playmates as children? Probably because Peggy, John and Jennie’s mother, worked for the Hendersons. Why else would the narrator state that the two Johns had “played many a long summer’s day to its close” (231)? Now the matter of Peggy’s employment is not stated directly, but I do believe it is inferred structurally. As rumors begin to swirl as to white folks’ perception of John Jones’s various insubordinations, John Henderson asks his father “"Who is this John?" And he is told, “Why, it’s little black John, Peggy’s son,—your old playfellow” (245). These three noun phrases can be viewed as appositions, since all three denominate John Jones. The first two are genetically connected and the third is separated, segregated we might say, by the em-dash. The first two—“little black John” and “Peggy’s son”—refer to “John Jones” in a *peculiar* way, if the reader will allow the pun: “Peggy’s son” denotes the possessive *condition* whereby “black” John is to be differentiated from his playmate, white John. The “peculiar” condition previously referenced is syntactically reinforced by the em-dash and grammatically highlighted by the possessive pronoun used to bind John Jones to John Henderson—*your* old playfellow. One thus presumes that the origins of that relationship are grounded in the close proximity engendered by Peggy’s being tied—through servitude and perhaps even through enslavement—to the kitchen of the Henderson house. She is thus the missing X in the family structure kept under wraps by Judge Henderson when Jones interviewed for the teaching post: Judge Henderson’s brother is to John Jones’s father as Judge Henderson is to X. Structurally, Peggy plausibly fills that void.

Let me return now to the smallest of the replicating structures, the interjections “well” and “well, well” that are repeated in such a way as to create parallel structures of larger narrative moments. In each of these instances, these interjections are uttered only by the Judge or by his white son and no one else. Even those who have had the good fortune to arrive with a degree from Wells Institute do not have access to that interjection. In the textual economy of this story, then, these interjections (shown below) are the exclusive property of white masculinity, and as such, they underscore the extent to which black and brown bodies are at the mercy of white masculine entitlement:

> “Well, Jennie, how’s your John?” —Judge Henderson (231)
>
> “[…] my closest playfellow in boyhood was a little Negro named after me, and surely no two,—*well*!” —John Henderson (236)
>
> “Well, John, I want to speak to you plainly.” —Judge Henderson (243)
>
> “—I knew your father, John, he belonged to my brother, and he was a good Nigger. Well—well, are you going to be like him […].”—Judge Henderson (243)

> “Very well,—we’ll try you awhile.” —Judge Henderson (244)

> “Well, I declare, if it isn’t Jennie, the little brown kitchen-maid! Why, I never noticed before what a trim little body she is.” —John Henderson (247)

The first two interjections—page 231 and page 236—connect the Judge and his son around the telling detail of the two Johns having been childhood “playfellows.” In the first scenario, it is the narrator who broaches that fact in advance of the Judge bragging about his son being educated at Princeton and in advance, too, of the interjection with which he begins his question to Jennie about “how’s your John.” In the second, John Henderson is using the playmate angle as evidence of the South’s equanimity in regard to race relations, linking father and son, and thus underscoring the heritability of family history as a metonym for Southern custom. The interjection in that context serves as an ironic indication of the hypocrisy lurking within that line of reasoning as the very black man he may have wished to “lynch” is assigned the seat next to his female companion. The next three instances occur within a context in which the post-graduate John Jones is interviewing with the Judge for the teaching position at the black school. We get here the backstory of the extended Henderson-Jones family saga in relation to the Judge’s self-described “friendliness” to John’s “people.” It is noteworthy that these interjections also syntactically frame the only mention of John’s father in this story. This particular scene ends with Jones promising to subordinate his liberal educational values, along with his “Northern notions,” to Southern racist customs—the varying shades of that custom are attested to by the Judge’s appositives for black folk that run the gamut in a linear sequence from “your people,” “colored people,” “the Negro,” “Nigger,” and “darkies.” In the last instance, involving Jennie, young Henderson sexualizes service in the Henderson house by linking Jennie’s “brown” skin to her place of service in the kitchen. An additional interjection— “why”—reduces her to “a trim little body.” The reduction of female black body and the presumption of white masculine privilege are both affirmed syntactically and logically by virtue of beginning the sentence with an interjection and ending it with the copula “is.”

Thus Jennie, in becoming the Henderson’s “shy little waitress,” has replaced her mother in the Henderson household. This replication helps make structural sense of John Henderson’s sexual assault on Jennie. Henderson, refusing to be a “faithful servant” to the Judge’s designs for his political career, nevertheless replicates what had happened again and again in Southern slaveholding households, including, I suggest, in the Henderson household: he tries to have his way with the help because he feels he is entitled to do so. In “Of the Training of Black Men,” Du Bois declares in an apostrophe to the “Southern Gentleman” that “[t]he rape which your gentlemen have done against helpless black women in defiance of your own laws is written on the foreheads of two millions of mulattoes, and written in ineffaceable blood” (106). Here I would point out that both John (229) and Jennie (247) are described as having “brown” skin. Because of the larger replicating structures that the narrator sets up by way of these verbal interjections, tracking these interjections allows us to plausibly claim that Judge Henderson’s son is trying to do to Peggy’s daughter what the Judge had done to Jennie’s mother—or perhaps even begun to do to Jennie herself. Might this not be the genesis of the “little bit” of unhappiness that Jennie admits to her brother, an unhappiness that the narrator takes care to connect to education, just as Du Bois had done in “Of the Training of Black Men?”

Kwame Anthony Appiah gets us on the right family track when he links “Of the coming of John” to Johann Gottfried Herder’s poem “Die Brüder.” As Appiah glosses it, Herder’s is a poem “about a black boy and a white boy who have been raised together—Milchbrüder (foster brothers), of course, not Blutbrüder (blood brothers)—and whose fraternity is undone when the white brother, grown to manhood, proves to be another ‘white devil’ and turns on his black brother” (48). Need I add that I will here insist that John and John are actually *blood* brothers?

Du Bois had earlier set his readers up for this very possibility in Chapter 2 of *Souls*, “Of the Dawn of Freedom.” There, in discussing the difficulties attending the establishment and management of the Freedman’s Bureau, he proffers a personification of the Southern color line in all its pathetic complications:

> Amid it all, two figures ever stand to typify that day to coming ages,—the one, a gray-haired gentleman, whose fathers had quit themselves like men, whose sons lay in nameless graves; who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes;—and the other, a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries, had aforetime quailed at that white master’s command, had bent in love over the cradles of his sons and daughters, and

> closed in death the sunken eyes of his wife,—aye, too, at his behest had laid herself low to his lust, and borne a tawny man-child to the world, only to see her dark boy's limbs scattered to the winds by midnight marauders riding after "damned Niggers." (29–30)

Early on in "Of the Coming of John," Judge Henderson is described as a "broad-shouldered gray-haired" man (231). And as John Jones awaits his fate upon the bluff at the conclusion of the story, with the lynch mob bearing down on him, we have every right to presume that their leader, "that haggard white-haired man, whose eyes flashed red with fury" (249), is Judge Henderson himself, hell bent on making certain that his Peggy's "dark boy's limbs [are] scattered to the winds."

Imagining John Jones and John Henderson as blood-brothers gives us another angle from which to appreciate the symbolic value Du Bois ascribes to *Lohengrin* in "Of the Coming of John." In Act I, Scene 3, Lohengrin establishes to Elsa the ground rules by which their wedding may proceed:

> Elsa, if I become your husband,
> if I'm to set your people free,
> if nothing is to tear me from you,
> to this demand you must agree.
>
> My history is hidden.
> these questions are forbidden:
> to ask from whence I came
> or to seek to know my name.

Stanley Brodwin claims that Du Bois "meant to suggest symbolic parallels between John and Lohengrin" in regard to the shared motif of a secret identity. "Lohengrin must keep his identity a secret in order to do good," Brodwin declares, "John must *find* his identity" (317, emphasis added). The identity that Brodwin finds for John is that of a "doomed" culture hero, an "individual and 'collective' hero" in whom "reside[s] the souls of black folk" (318). Russell Berman, on the other hand, views *Lohengrin's* "inclusion" in the concluding scene of Du Bois's story as a "reference to the tragedy of egalitarianism, the elusive possibility of justice, and the desire for a race-blind love" (130). The desire for justice, as well as the quest to find one's identity, are both exacerbated by the missing patronym that would allow us to acknowledge that "Jones" is "Henderson." In that way, Lohengrin as culture hero and John Jones as culture hero are structurally mirror opposites: Lohengrin's desire to keep his name and lineage a secret so that Elsa will love him for what Berman refers to as his "absolute specificity as a human" and not for "the secondary attributes of rank or race" (129) meets its mirror double in the figure of John Jones, on behalf of whom Du Bois would have the true patronym revealed, if for no other reason than to expose the hypocrisy of white, patriarchal panic that uses violence to regulate the color line yet continuously transgresses it in what Du Bois referred to as white concubinage.

For Robert Gooding-Williams, *Lohengrin*, within a post-Reconstruction American context, portends the "'impossible marriage'" between the "all too profane world of Jim Crow" and the "desire" of John Jones to "act in that world" (121). The conjugation of that impossibility is exemplified in the twice repeated "swelled" with which the narrator describes the action of Jones's "longing" (236) and, later, the action of the "fuller, mightier harmony" (237). It is difficult to assess whether this tumescence of soul incorporates, and thus controls, the interjecting "well" lodged within its precincts, or whether the interjection, having done its job too well, infects even the longing for spiritual transcendence above and beyond the Veil. I reinforce Gooding-Williams's point in order to suggest that the "marriage" we are discussing may be impossible but it need not be metaphorical.

Both blood relationship and moral hypocrisy are tragically exposed by Du Bois in the chapter's concluding paragraphs. While walking off the anger and frustration of having been removed from his teaching position by Judge Henderson, John discovers Jennie "struggling in the arms of a tall and fair-haired man," who is, of course, the younger Henderson. "[S]eizing a fallen limb," and "with all the pent-up hatred of his great black arm," John Jones smites John Henderson dead (248). In the post-mortem aftermath, the narrator has Jones seat himself on the very same stump on which young Henderson had earlier bemoaned the lack of erotic opportunity. As Jones replaces Henderson atop that "great black stump" (248), what had been Henderson's thoughts of sexual release and his subsequently violent attempt at miscegenation are replaced by "the faint music of the swan," by a recognition of the necessity, as Lawrence Kramer figures it, "of freeing desire from ideology, 'impossible' though it be in John Jones's America" (62). In commenting on Jones's shift from the music of the swan to that of the bridal march, Christina Zwarg suggests that John, and by extension, Du Bois, is shifting from a romance of vengeance toward an "identification with the bride's provisional state of longing" to "know" her husband's name and origins (23). Here, in the contact zone of the color line, the name of the father was rarely the name of the husband. However, in the hands of Du Bois's narrator, Jones's unacknowledged patronym is obliterated by the killing of young Henderson and by the educational condition that Jones's mother, Peggy, lays out for him. Judge Henderson may be his blood father after all, but Jones, with his liberal education and his refusal to submit passively to the rape of his sister, is indubitably his mother's son.

I wish now to make one more turn on *Lohengrin,* specifically in regard to the Bridal March. As has been noted by various critics and in various editions of *Souls,* Du Bois "misquotes" the opening words by replacing "treulich" (faithfully) with "freudig" (joyfully).[5] Given the language Du Bois himself uses to describe what the opera meant to him, the replacement of "faith" for "joy" makes a great deal of sense. In a brief article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* in 1936, Du Bois said of *Lohengrin* that "[i]t is a hymn of Faith. Something in this world man must trust. Not everything—but Something. One cannot live and doubt everybody and everything. Somewhere in this world, and not beyond it, there is Trust, and somehow Trust leads to Joy" (130). Lest we find the value of those words somewhat diminished by virtue of being anachronistic in regard to the publication of *Souls*, we should ask ourselves why, for readers of *Souls*, those words sound so familiar. It turns out that we have heard those words before in reference to the spiritual meaning of the sorrow songs. "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things," Du Bois writes. "Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whatever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins" (261). The fact that John Jones hums that hymn of Faith in advance of his suicide is Du Bois's way of suggesting that John has found that Something worth trusting in, that something worth dying for.[6]

In the famous conclusion of Chapter 6, "Of the Training of Black Men," Du Bois provides what I think is a compelling rationale for that faith. In that chapter, Du Bois is speaking on behalf of the benefits of a liberal education. While admitting that the "manual training and trade schools" have their uses, Du Bois, contra Booker Washington, claims that they are not enough. "The foundations of knowledge in this race, as in others," he goes on to say, "must be sunk deep in the college and university if we would build a solid, permanent structure" (107). For Du Bois, then, "the function of the Negro college" "must seek the Social regeneration of the Negro" (108). In order to do that, he felt that black men needed to have the opportunity to experience just the kind of transformative learning that John Jones had undergone—even at the risk of feeling the kind of alienation, the sense of homelessness or exile, that necessarily attends the assumption of what Martha Nussbaum, following the Stoics, has called the "lonely business" of becoming "a citizen of the world" (83). In such a space, as Du Bois famously declares, "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not" (109).

Du Bois concludes "Of the Training of Black Men" with a matrimonial trope that foreshadows John Jones's humming the Song of the Bride in "Of the Coming of John": "So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil" (109). In addition to complementing the "Song of the Bride," this matrimonial trope resonates with the way Du Bois's Harvard mentor, William James, discusses the marriage function of truth in "What Pragmatism Means." "New truth," says James, "is always a go-between"; it "marries old opinion to new fact" (35). For James, and I think for Du Bois as well, "purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience played no role whatever, is nowhere to be found. The reason why we call things true is the reason why they *are* true, for 'to be true' means only to perform this marriage function" (37). John Jones, humming the "Song of the Bride" as the Name of the Father bears down on him, is a new truth in the world of Altahama, a new fact confronting the ugliness of old opinion. In trying to ensure that Jennie might still become the "free woman" that Du Bois extolled in "The Damnation of Women," a woman who has "knowledge" and "the right of motherhood at her own discretion" (96), John Jones, even unto his death, becomes a model that bears repeating.

Notes

1. This article is developed from a paper presented at the W.E.B. Du Bois and Liberal Education Conference at Villanova University, September 14, 2018, organized by the Villanova Center for Liberal Education. I wish to thank Dr. John Doody and Assistant Director John-Paul Spiro for being such generous and attentive hosts. And I am especially

grateful to John-Paul for the patience and generosity which he has consistently extended on my behalf.

2. For an excellent history of the "reproductive logic" of slavery as a function of heritability derived from the mother, see Morgan.

3. I rely on David McCracken's excellent summary of the relationship between the Greek word *skandalon* and its English translation, "stumbling block," in his "Introduction: The Offense and Us" in *The Scandal of the Gospels*.

4. Robert Gooding-Williams is one of the few critics who points out the post-graduate context of the "quartet" in which Jones is touring. However, he does not connect that fact to the idea of cultural reciprocity occasioned by the Sorrow Songs. See Gooding-Williams 121.

5. I place quote marks around the word "misquotes" in respect of Charles I. Nero's fascinating reading of "Of the Coming of John" in which he posits both "a classically unreliable narrator" and a strategically intentional substitution on the part of Du Bois of "freudig" for "Treulich." He also mentions the *Courier* item on Lohengrin. See Nero 263–264.

6. Many critics commit to the logic of lynching that the narrator sets up. But I think it makes no sense to have Jones wait for the lynch mob with its inevitable emasculating tortures and mutilations—even if that violence is left to our imaginations. In line with Rampersad, I think suicide here makes more sense given Jones's stoical conflation of "going North" with freedom and death. It further makes sense in regard to setting, in that he is waiting atop the bluff, so proximate to the very location where he had killed John Henderson. The whistling in his ears is the whistling his body makes in its plunge off the bluff—the "breath of air" (235) that his plunge now makes—thereby depriving the lynch mob of the opportunity to turn John Jones into Sam Hose.

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