The meaning behind the music

WEB Dubois' *Credo*

By Dr. Terry P. Brock
Assistant Professor and Research Associate
African American and African Studies Program
Wake Forest University

The text of Margaret Bonds' *Credo* was written by WEB Dubois 65 years before her musical adaptation, first published in 1904. Dubois'*Credo* adopted the framework of a religious creed, stating a series of beliefs that set the philosophical grounding for the Civil Rights Movement. Dubois' was born in 1868 and spent his career helping to bring the beliefs stated in *Credo* into practice. A faculty member at Atlanta University with a PhD from Harvard, co-founder of the NAACP, and editor of its monthly magazine *The Crisis*, Dubois used a variety of media to communicate the argument that Black people should have access to not only political rights, but the right to pursue their humanity fully.

This argument is paramount in *Credo*, picking up the mantle of Black political advocates such as David Walker and Frederick Douglass, while at the same time levying critiques of the hypocrisy of America's founding documents, the proliferation and violence at the hands of white supremacy as expressed domestically and internationally, and against the popular beliefs of fellow African American advocate, Booker T. Washington. Dubois published the first version of *Credo* in 1904 in *The Independent*, and then again as the prelude to his autobiography *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil.* A deeper reading of *Credo* shows how Dubois uses the language of the creed – stating his own vision for the future of his nation – as an alternative to the views of others, all while serving as a message of hope to Black people and call for change to those in power.

Dubois' engagement with the founding documents, particularly the Declaration of Independence, is a continuation of a long history of Black political thought that identifies the beliefs articulated by the Founders as being incongruent with their practices. If all men are created equally and endowed by a creator with certain equal rights, then why are those rights not being protected for all people? Dubois uses *Credo* to argue for the complete and equal citizenship of Black people – using both political and Judeo-Christian imagery to establish his argument. As he states in his 1903 book, *Souls of Black Folk*:

> By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of the Fathers would fain forget: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[1]

In fact, Dubois argues, "there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negros" and that they seek the same "bright ideals of the past, - physical freedom, political power, and the training of brains and the training

hands." Gaining these freedoms would allow them to work in concert with all races towards the "greater ideals of the American Republic." For Dubois, the inability for Americans to provide liberty to Black Americans is the obstacle to achieving America's great promise.

The tools of that denial, white supremacy and racial violence, are heavily addressed in *Credo*. The late 19th and early 20th century were periods of immense violence for people of color both domestically and internationally. Race massacres were prevalent throughout the United States. Wilmington (1898), Atlanta (1906), Springfield (1908), East St. Louis (1917) and Tulsa (1921), are some of the locations where white mobs murdered Black residents and destroyed Black business and homes. Dubois was particularly impacted by the Atlanta Massacre, which he reflects on in the poem A Litany in Atlanta, published in *Darkwater*. Lynching was another form of racialized violence that was common throughout the South, with white people lynching approximately 4,400 Blakc people from 1877 to 1950. Dubois dedicated a section of each publication of *The Crisis* to documenting the number of lynchings in the South. Europe and the United States were also engaged in international crises during this period of time, and Dubois had a particular view of wars such as the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), the British conquest of Sudan (1896-1898), Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1895-1896), and World War I as being products of conquest by white, European nations over dark-skinned nations.

Another important critique in *Credo* is levied against the leading Black educator and activist of the time Booker T. Washington. Washington was the founder and director of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and architect of the Atlanta Compromise, and unwritten agreement with southern political leaders that, in response for access to some basic education, employment opportunities, and access to the legal system, southern Blacks would submit to the current system of disenfranchisement, discrimination, and segregation. Washington's philosophy was that by proving their value to the United States through vocational, agricultural, and industrial education and labor, whites would eventually end their discriminatory practices. Dubois had differing viewpoints, which he expressed in *The Souls of Black Folks* in a chapter entitled, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others":

> …so far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him…But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds…we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them.

Such a statement embodies Dubois' earlier stated position: that Black people should have access to the right to vote, civic equality, and the education of the youth.[2] This education should do more than teach technical skills, but should also should develop "intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it."[3] For Dubois, education needed to teach people how to claim and use their freedoms, and to understand the world in which they lived, not just survive in it. It was these people, what he called the Talented Tenth, that would lead the fight for Black civil rights and heal the racial division in the country.

Margaret Bonds' 1965 adaptation of Dubois' *Credo,* which premiered alongside her 1964 orchestral work *The Montgomery Variations,* connects Dubois' work to the triumphs and sorrows of the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 60s. Moments such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 expressed the "tardy triumphs of joy" that reflected his efforts towards political equality for Black people, while *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954 and the subsequent integration of grade schools and universities reflected his hope for better access to education. Unfortunately, the "mad chastening of sorrow" also accompanied this period: white supremacy continued to bring violence to Black people, with the murder of Emmett Till in 1954, the assassination of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, and the Baptist Street Church bombing in 1963, while the Cuban Missile Crisis and Vietnam War showed the continuing threat of war.

Below, you can see a section by section analysis of each portion of Dubois' *Credo*.

I believe in God…

> I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations ["races" in 1904 version] that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and gift and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.

Dubois begins by making a direct connection to the traditional religious creed, by invoking his belief in God. However, he does not stay there, he instead paraphrases the Declaration of Independence, that all men are created equal, and then specifies who he believes should be included in "all men": people of every race.

He also addresses one of the critical debates over race that at this point had plagued American history since the 17th century: Do people of different skin color have different origins, and therefore different abilities? Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, asks in *Notes of Virginia* in 1785, in his attempt to compare the "faculties" of Black and white people.[4] Dubois answers it unequivocally: humans have the same origins (they "are brothers"), and that differences between the races are the product of environment ("time and opportunity"), not biology. Instead, we have all been created equally in spirit and intellectual capability. The equal humanity of all people, therefore, is undeniable.

I believe in the Negro Race…

> Especially do I believe in the Negro Race: in the beauty of its genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet inherit this turbulent earth.

In this passage, Dubois doubles down on who he is advocating for, people who had to this point been left out of the Founders' definition of "all men". He highlights intellect ("beauty of its genius") and spirit ("sweetness of its soul") as characteristics he celebrates, reflecting their humanity.

Du Bois' reference to the meek inheriting the earth echoes Matthew 5:5 and Psalm 37 and can be read as a challenge to the idea that meekness means passive submission. Psalm 37 particularly encourages the righteous to persevere in the face of injustice, trust in God, and remain committed to doing good. Dubois' phrase "strength in that meekness" emphasizes that idea, making a commitment to dignity and justice without arrogance or domination. He affirms this characteristic in the *Souls of Black Folk*, when he discusses the commitment and resoluteness of free Blacks' pursuit and eventual achievement of abolition prior to the Civil War.[5]

This reading offers a contrast to Dubois' characterization of Booker T. Washington's approach, one that he calls "the old attitude of adjustment and submission"[6] – a reflecting a more common reading of the word "meekness". Washington's approach, deferring political power and civil rights in the hope that white people will eventually change, does not reflect the approach of Dubois' abolitionist heroes. Achieving equality requires advocacy and action, through dignity, not passive submission.

I believe in Pride of race…

> I believe in Pride of race and lineage and self: in pride of self so deep as to scorn injustice to other selves; in pride of lineage so great as to despise no man's father; in pride of race so chivalrous as neither to offer bastardy to the weak nor beg wedlock of the strong, knowing that men may be brothers in Christ, even though they be not brothers-in-law.

Here, Dubois specifically describes the kind of dignity and strength he wants to see, and that he levies against the racist tropes of shame that are attached to Black identity and ancestry. He does not call for a pride of race, lineage, and self that is exclusionary. Instead, he wants an ethical and just pride, one that advocates for justice for other races, that does not treat other's ancestry as lesser than your own, and does not exploit those with less power ("bastardy to the weak") or seek dignity by trying to associate with those who have more power ("beg wedlock of the strong"). One's pride should be achieved on one's own merits, and grounded in one's humanity.

By articulating an ethical pride through obligations to respect others, Dubois is also levying a critique of white supremacy, a form a racial pride that is grounded in acts of superiority, division, and domination. This is particularly relevant during this period, where racialized violence and organized white supremacy is on the rise. Wake Forest College graduate Thomas Dixon had just authored *The Leapord's Spots* in 1903, and its 1905 sequel, *The Clansman,* both which promoted racist picture of Black people and promoted white supremacy. The latter served as the basis for the 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*, fueling the rebirth of the KKK. Dubois himself was a critic of Dixon's writing, and used his writing to depict a very different, and accurate, portrayal of Black life, one that reflects Black pride.

I believe in Service…

> I believe in Service—humble, reverent service, from the blackening of boots to the whitening of souls; for Work is Heaven, Idleness Hell, and Wage is the "Well done!" of the Master, who summoned all them that labor and are heavy laden, making no

> distinction between the black, sweating cotton hands of Georgia and the first families of Virginia, since all distinction not based on deed is devilish and not divine.

In this passage, which Bonds pairs in the same movement with “I believe in Pride of race”, Dubois discusses the role and dignity of work. For Dubois, work is service, for the benefit of not only oneself but for others. He brings dignity to all forms of work, be it sole work (manual labor reflected in shining shoes) or soul work (the work of spiritual, educational, and moral uplift). He also makes a number of references to slavery (”Service”, “Master”, “Cotton hands”, “first families of Virginia”) but uses those words in a context that demonstrates that all labor is valued, deserves compensation, and that any distinction amongst laborers should reflect the quality of the work.

Dubois also expands what kinds of labor he thinks should be available to Black people, another critique of Washington’s focus on vocational, industrial, and agricultural labor. Dubois affirms this kind of labor but does not place limits on Black ambition or the measure of its distinction: it is the quality of the work, not the person doing the work or the type of work, that should matter.

I believe in the Devil…

> I believe in the Devil and his angels, who wantonly work to narrow the opportunity of struggling human beings, especially if they be black; who spit in the faces of the fallen, strike them that cannot strike again, believe the worst and work to prove it, hating the image which their Maker stamped on a brother's soul.

Both Bonds and Dubois use the final lines of I Believe in Service to transition to this section. Bonds uses the music, which shifts into a darker mood with the lines “devilish and not divine”, while Dubois uses the word Devilish to segway into “I believe in the Devil…”

Dubois also uses this section as a mirror to the previous two sections, juxtaposing his dignified vision of pride and service against the work of white supremacists. He discusses the amount of effort put into keeping the oppressed and downtrodden in their place. This is not work as service to others, this is work designed to oppress others. By naming it as work he is also giving agency to the people who are doing it: engaging in the work of oppression is a choice.



Figure 1: Christmas in Georgia by Lorenzo Harris. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division, The New York Public Library. Christmas in Georgia, A.D. 1916 Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.nypl.org

Dubois was a consistent critique of white supremacist violence, particularly lynching, and frequently used religious imagery as a means of positioning white supremacists in opposition to Christian practice. One particularly striking use is in *The Crisis* in 1916, where Lorenzo Harris' drawing "Christmas in Georgia" portrays a lynching, with Jesus depicted behind the murdered Black man, draws a clear line between the crucifixion and the lynching of Black people. The artist also positions the viewer as a participant, or observer, of the lynching, and includes in the image the text, "Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these, my brethren, ye did it unto me", paraphrasing a quote from Jesus in Matthew 25:40.[7] A section of a poem by Dubois, *The Christmas Prayers of God*, (later reprinted as *The Prayers of God* in *Darkwater),* provides a description of this moment from the perspective of the murderers talking to God (note: the original poem contains the N-word, which has been replaced here with a bracketed description).

> For this too, once, and in Thy name I lynched a [racial slur]—
> (He wraved and writhed,
> I heard him cry,
> I felt the life leap and lie,
> I watched him crackle there, on high,
> I saw him wither!)
>
> * * *
>
> *Thou?*
> *Thee?*
> *I lynched Thee?*[8]

The mob believed they were carrying out the murder in the name of God, only to realize that it was in fact God who they were lynching. It is clear who Dubois believes who the angels are who were carrying out the work of the Devil.

I believe in the Prince of Peace…

> I believe in the Prince of Peace. I believe that War is Murder. I believe that armies and navies are at bottom the tinsel and braggadocio of oppression and wrong, and I believe that the wicked conquest of weaker and darker nations by nations whiter and stronger but foreshadows the death of that strength.

This section builds on Dubois' belief in Jesus, using the moniker "Prince of Peace", attributed to Jesus in Isaiah 9:6 (Bonds tightens this connection, by using a motif from "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing", in which the third verse begins, "Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!"). As noted above, Dubois regularly associated the figure of Jesus with African Americans, making his strongest association in the 1919 December issue of *The Crisis* through "The Gospel According to Mary Brown". This story, written by Dubois, parallels the story of Jesus in the figure of Mary Brown's son, Joshua, a Black boy living in the Jim Crow south.[9]

By using the moniker "Prince of Peace" Dubois also professes a belief in peace itself. Here, we see him return to a conversation about the role of government to secure the right to life and safety as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Scholars have argued that government's role is to "keeps the peace," so that the persons, freedom, and property of citizens are kept secure.[10] Dubois would certainly argue that for Black Americans, such peace has not been kept.

Dubois also uses this section to critique war as a tool for oppression and domination, and as a façade of masculinity and white supremacy. This is a poignant stance, considering it was written during the presidential administration of Theodore Roosevelt, famous his belief in military courage, waging war as a national virtue, and imperial conquest as a means of advancing civilization. Roosevelt believed that war built character and manhood, as he writes in 1897:

> The victories of peace are great, but the victories of war are greater…No triumph of peace can equal the armed triumph over malice domestic or foreign levy. No qualities called out by a purely peaceful life stand on a level with those stern and virile virtues which move the men of stoutheart and strong hand who uphold the honour of their flag in battle.[11]

Dubois also recognizes that War is also used as a tool of white supremacy on the international stage. A series of wars at the turn of the century reflect this trend including the Philippine-American War (1899-1902), the British conquest of Sudan (1896-1898), and Italy's invasion of Ethiopia (1895-1896). In 1914, Dubois discusses World War I in this context: the cause of the war is "the wild quest for Imperial expansion among colored races [amongst European nations]. Germany long since found herself shut out from acquiring colonies." The essay goes on to discuss how "the theory of the inferiority of the darker peoples and a contempt for their rights and aspirations has become all but universal in the greatest centers of modern culture".[12] In the

following issue of *The Crisis,* Dubois uses poetry to express his opinion, again in *The Christmas Prayers of God*:

> War? Not so, not war:
> Dominon, Lord, and over black not
> white.
> Black, brown and fawn,
> And not They chosen brood, O god,
> We murdered.
>
> To build thy Kingdom.[13]

I believe in Liberty…

> I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love.

Dubois moves to liberty, the next right expressed in America's founding documents. Dubois expresses in this section many ways liberty could be enjoyed – and in so doing also notes how liberty of Black people has been restricted. He makes a similar request in *Souls*: "freedom…long sought, we still seek – the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire." For Dubois, access to liberty is essential for America's ability to achieve its true ideals.

Dubois groups his discussion of liberty into two parts. The first address what kinds of freedoms are needed: access to physical space, which has been restricted through segregation. Access to physical safety ("right to breathe"), restricted through the violence of lynching and race massacres. And access to political power, particularly the right to vote. Second, he highlights the things people can do with those freedoms: the ability to "choose their friends" – indicating the potential for friendship across racial categories; to enjoy the beauty of nature, and to travel unencumbered, and to think, dream, and work "in a kingdom of beauty and love," perhaps a reference to America if it were to achieve its ideals.

I believe in the Training of Children…

> I believe in the Training of Children, black even as white; the leading out of little souls into the green pastures and beside the still waters, not for pelf or peace, but for life lit by some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth; lest we forget, and the sons of the fathers, like Esau, for mere meat barter their birthright in a mighty nation.

The issue of education and learning is paramount to Dubois' political thought, and where he and Washington disagree. For Washington, education for Black people should be restricted to vocational, agricultural, and industrial. But for Dubois, Black people should be engaged in the training of the mind in all ways, not just for "pelf or peace" – meaning for security and comfort –

but also to pursue "some large vision of beauty and goodness and truth." Here, Dubois is referencing the broad education of the Talented Tenth, obtaining what he often refers to as "culture". This language reflects the Enlightenment concept of happiness, which is not a sense of feeling good, but more about the idea of achieving virtue.[14] Education, therefore, is one pursuit of happiness.

The story of Esau ties this all together. In Genesis 25, Esau sells his birthright to his little brother Jacob for bread and lentil stew because he is hungry. For Dubois, this is a meager exchange, and it is what he sees Washington's Atlanta Compromise as: giving up one's political birthright - which since the 1868 passage of the 14th amendment is one's citizenship - for the promise of basic comforts. For Dubois, education should not be for only teaching skills, it should be teaching children how to claim, fully deploy, and enjoy the rights of their citizenship.

It was these people, both Black and white, that would lead to the end of racial division in the country:

> What place in the future development of the South ought the Negro college and college-bred man to occupy? That the present social separation and acute race-sensitiveness must eventually yield to the influences of culture, as the South grows civilized, is clear. But such transformation calls for singular wisdom and patience. If, while the healing of this vast sore is progressing, the races are to live for many years side by side, united in economic effort, obeying a common government, sensitive to mutual thought and feeling, yet subtly and silently separate in many matters of deeper human intimacy,—if this unusual and dangerous development is to progress amid peace and order, mutual respect and growing intelligence, it will call for social surgery at once the delicatest and nicest in modern history. It will demand broad-minded, upright men, both white and black, and in its final accomplishment American civilization will triumph.[15]

I believe in Patience…

> Finally, I believe in Patience—patience with the weakness of the Weak and the strength of the Strong, the prejudice of the Ignorant and the ignorance of the Blind; patience with the tardy triumph of Joy and the mad chastening of Sorrow; patience with God!

Dubois finishes his *Credo* with the same call for patience that he asks for in his description of the final goal of education. Dubois places the burden of change here on the weak, the strong, the ignorant, and the blind – and knows that the work of changing those people's hearts and minds will take time. He speaks here both to Black and white people, and not only for the process of learning to take place, but also for the delicate intricacies of working together: sensitivities to each other's thoughts and feelings; keeping peace and order; maintaining mutual respect. This work will take time and require grace, and it will come with long overdue victories, and repeated and frustrating moments of failure. But an ethos of patience and perseverance in the face of difficulty – a strength in meekness – will prevail.

Dubois' final call for patience with God is multi-layered. It reflects common frustration: why, if God created everyone equal, has he allowed for the denial of that equality to persist? These

questions are evident in the poem *A Litany at Atlanta,* published in *Darkwater*. In the poem, Dubois has a conversation with God about the Atlanta Massacre:

> *Keep not Though silent, O God!*
> Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering.
> Surely Thou, too, art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless heartless thing![16]

He goes back and forth in this poem, exhibiting frustration, questioning God's motives, but then resolving himself to adopt patience. In *Credo*, he settles on patience, adopting the idea that calls back to Psalm 37, addressed in I Believe in the Negro Race: that perhaps this is part of the plan, and to trust that patience with God will finally result in the meek inheriting the earth.

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[1] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 35.
[2] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 32.
[3] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of Today*, ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: James Pott & Company, 1903), 33–75.
[4] Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on the State of Virginia: Query 14," *Teaching American History*, https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/notes-on-the-state-of-viriginia-query-xiv-justice/.
[5] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 35.
[6] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 30.
[7] Amy Helene Kirschke, "Activism through Art: Du Bois, *The Crisis* and the Crime of Lynching," *Raisons politiques*, no. 78 (2020): 75–93, https://doi.org/10.3917/rai.078.0075.
[8] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Christmas Prayers of God," *The Crisis* 9, no. 2 (December 1914): 84, https://archive.org/details/crisis910dubo/page/n89/mode/1up.
[9] Du Bois, W.E.B., "The Gospel According to Mary Brown," *The Crisis* 19, no. 2 (December 1919): 41–43, https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/1200-crisis-v19n02-w110.pdf
[10] Isaac Kramnick, "Lockean Liberalism and the American Revolution," *Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/essays/lockean-liberalism-and-american-revolution.
[11] Kristin L. Hoganson, "The Problem of Male Degeneracy and the Allure of the Philippines," in *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 133–55, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt32bht5.11; Theodore Roosevelt, "Captain Mahan's 'Life of Nelson,'" *The Bookman* 5, no. 4 (June 1897): 333, https://unz.com/print/Bookman-1897jun-00331/
[12] W. E. B. Du Bois, "World War and the Color Line," *The Crisis* 9, no. 1 (November 1914): 28, https://archive.org/details/crisis910dubo/page/n33/mode/2up.
[13] W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Christmas Prayers of God," *The Crisis* 9, no. 2 (December 1914): 84, https://archive.org/details/crisis910dubo/page/n89/mode/1up.
[14] Jeffrey Rosen, *The Pursuit of Happiness: How Classical Writers on Virtue Inspired the Lives of the Founders and Defined America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2024).
[15] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1994).
[16] W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Litany at Atlanta," in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920), 25.