



W.E.B. Du Bois and an Education for Democracy and Creativity

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WHENEVER SOCIETIES are beset by challenges that test the very foundations of their ideals, education emerges as an aid for the adjusting and readjusting of cultural values. In this sense, education appropriately relates to the challenges of war, revolution, economic instability, and social justice. Much of the history of the United States is a testament to the central role that education has played in shaping its democratic, pluralistic culture. One of the most challenging tests of the underlying principles of the nation resulted from President Abraham Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. With the stroke of a pen, a once-enslaved people were suddenly declared to be "human citizens." But how could the rights and responsibilities of citizenship be achieved without education? And how could White society be educated into a new understanding of race? Clearly, the transformation of Black Americans into citizens could not be legislated into being, especially given the fact that for centuries they had been systematically denied any formal education. To make good on the Emancipation Proclamation, the country would need to formulate a vision and support an unprecedented investment of material and human resources. It would also need to call on the leadership and imagination of Black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois. In the face of this challenge, one often called "the Negro problem," in which moral, political, economic, and social questions were entwined, Du Bois wrote an imaginative and powerful response in 1903, in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this chapter I will explore this response as a work of educational philosophy and read it as a relevant and practical text that advocates aesthetic education as a path to human dignity.¹

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Identifying that the "problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," Du Bois sought to transform the impoverished identity of the American Negro. Doing so would signal a Copernican-like reevaluation of the very meaning of race, culture, and morality at the foundation of citizenship in American democracy. At the heart of Du Bois's re-visioning of democracy was his ardent belief that education could address this by making possible "the sharing of gifts" between the cultures that constituted the nation and thus redefining the Negro race as a people worthy of full citizenship. In particular, he believed that education would position the Negro race to generate and contribute to a shared culture by putting forward its deep, unparalleled consciousness of the value and beauty of freedom. Du Bois's tireless, long life of 95 years constituted a sustained attempt to articulate and present the gift of the American Negro with the larger purpose of a full-fledged democracy in mind.

Du Bois's voluminous writings range from philosophy, sociology, and history to poetry, fiction, and autobiography. He published neither a formal treatise on education in general, nor a proposed curriculum in particular. His only book-length study of education was his reflection entitled "Seven Critiques of Negro Education," unpublished in his lifetime.² For this reason, it comes as no surprise that Du Bois's educational thought has not been the subject of systematic scholarship, unlike, for example, his political and social analysis. As recent scholarship has shown, however, he has bequeathed to his country and the world a rich vision of educational possibilities.³ And we find a remarkable portrait of the meaning and power of education in his trilogy of works that "center around the hurts and hesitations that hem [in]" Black Americans' quest for freedom (1940/1986, p. 551). These books include *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903/1994), *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (1920/1996), and *Dusk of Dawn* (1940/1986).

While these writings, combined with "Seven Critiques," offer a wealth of insight into Du Bois's thought, in this chapter I will confine my examination to themes from *The Souls of Black Folk*. *Souls* is widely regarded as Du Bois's most poetic, most philosophical, and most prescient analysis of race, education, and the American prospect.⁴ As such, it serves as an important window on his view of important aspects of American society and democracy. In the first section of this chapter, I chart the educational odyssey of a young Du Bois, leading up to his famous 1903 publication. This analysis will help shed light on certain fundamental and recurrent themes of that book. The second section elucidates Du Bois's liberal arts educational philosophy and his provocative parallels between what he thought of as "the liberal arts spirit" and the Negro soul. A third section introduces *The Souls of Black Folk* in greater detail and analyzes its importance in Du Bois's educational thought. In a concluding section, I consider Du Bois's enduring significance for the philosophy and practice of education.

ON A LIFE MISSION

From his birth on February 23, 1868, in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, 5 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, to his death in Ghana on August 27, 1963,⁵ Du Bois's life spanned one of the most violent times in White-Black race relations in the United States. In an America where the Negro was often seen as a "problem" or, worse, a being "somewhere between men and cattle" (Du Bois, 1903/1994, p. 63), Du Bois knew at an early age that he wanted to dedicate himself to the mission of changing the very concept of race. Somehow, he sensed early in his career that he would be able to do this through the written word. "It had always been my ambition to write; to seek through the written word the expression of my relation to the world and the world to me," he says (1940/1986, p. 750). Focused on his path, Du Bois would encounter many obstacles, including institutionalized codes of oppression that were denigrating to the psyche of the Negro people; a pseudoscience of racial categorizing that prevailed in his day; a White (mostly Southern) public that thought his moral ideas too radical; and his so-called nemesis, the preeminent Negro leader of his day, Booker T. Washington. Later in this chapter, we will explore some of the ways in which Washington and Du Bois agreed and differed in their shared vision of a more democratic America.

Du Bois ardently believed that only through education would he have the opportunity to strengthen his mind and form his character to meet the challenges of his Herculean task. The story of his journey was to be a beacon of inspiration to others throughout his life, as well as a source of pride and renewal in his own life. To illustrate, we will consider three profound, educative moments in his educational odyssey that established the foundations of Du Bois's educational thinking. Each of these find commanding expression in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

Du Bois showed great intellectual prowess as a child, and in high school he had his mind set on attending Harvard College. Because of lack of money, full academic credentials, and the impending death of his mother, Du Bois held off on applying to Harvard. After a year of hard work building houses, and several churches contributing to his academic cause, he was given the opportunity to attend college for fall 1885 on sophomore standing at Fisk University in Tennessee. Suddenly, the northern boy of mixed ethnicity was on his way to a southern Negro college.⁶ Up to this point, Du Bois had never experienced strife-ridden race relations like those he encountered in the South. Social oppression, legalized discrimination and segregation, poor economic conditions, and a generally inferior quality of education were now part of young Du Bois's reality. While undertaking a rigorous, classical liberal arts curriculum at Fisk, Du Bois sang with the Mozart society,⁷ and, already armed with considerable oratorical skills, he further developed his talent as a writer

and editor at the school's newspaper, the *Fisk Herald*. He also made time to be politically active in the struggle for the Negro's democratic equality by urging a Black student convention "to vote independently of the Republican Party in pursuit of black interests" (1940/1986, p. 1283). Throughout his career, he would make use of the skills he developed at Fisk University to create and edit many critical political magazines, newspapers, and journals to help improve the American Negro's existence.

Du Bois initially thought that a more liberal-minded North would act upon the dehumanizing social practices of the South once it fully grasped the scope of injustice. Graduating from Fisk in 1888, Du Bois finally made it to Harvard by securing a Price-Greenleaf grant, and later a Matthews scholarship. His experiences there proved decisive in the development of his intellectual powers as he interacted with some of the leading scholars of the day, most notably American philosophers William James and George Santayana and economist Frank Taussig. James, in particular, would become mentor and dear friend to Du Bois through some tough years at Harvard. Although Du Bois was privileged to have great minds invested in his success, his eyes were opened by the ugly presence of racist attitudes in a supposedly more enlightened North. What he saw and experienced drove home to him how deeply rooted were America's racial problems. Du Bois tells us that had he gone to Harvard before Fisk, he would have been "embittered by a discovery of social limitations" if he had "sought companionship with my white fellows" (1940/1986, pp. 578-579). He tells us of how his "better than the average voice" was rejected by Harvard's glee club, for "it posed the later problem of a 'nigger' on the team." In spite of unsettling experience like this, Du Bois pressed on and threw himself into his studies, in part because he was not active in the social-, political-, or public-writing scenes there—a stark contrast to his sociopolitical activism at Fisk. He earned his BA in philosophy, cum laude, in 1890.

If two starkly different social and educative worlds were not enough for Du Bois, his next educational achievement would come to be his most daring and ambitious undertaking. Although he was accepted to continue studying at Harvard at the graduate school in political science, Du Bois instead made his way to the University of Berlin—now Humboldt University—where he pursued a doctoral degree. This period in Germany was an awakening for Du Bois. Away from the oppressive racism of the United States, inspired by European culture (especially its art and music), acutely observant of German political affairs, and living in the birthplace of much of the philosophy and science he had studied at Fisk and Harvard, Du Bois was able to flourish in an untrammelled manner. Some scholars refer to his time in Germany as a romantic escape from American realities while others, among them Appiah (2005), believe that Du Bois's experience abroad powerfully shaped his nascent cosmopolitan thinking.

Du Bois's unique, worldly vantage point allowed him to think broadly and deeply about the struggles of the American Negro. Formed by three very different educational climates, Du Bois returned to the United States with a renewed determination to transform American democracy by addressing the Negro problem through education. He returned to Harvard, where he continued to hone his historical and sociological skills, and became the first Negro to obtain a PhD from the university in 1895. The power and promise in his scholarship was so apparent that Harvard published his dissertation, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade*, as the very first volume of its Historical Monograph Series in 1896. His ideas were informed by an education rarely equaled by his contemporaries, Black or White. He saw racism as a threat to democracy and believed that if true democracy were ever to flourish, a penetrating vision of how to deal openly and honestly with racism would have to be offered. Du Bois's most vivid, grave, and haunting work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, was intended to provide this vision.

THE POWER OF A BOOK

The Souls of Black Folk is a unique amalgam of philosophical, political, historical, sociological, and literary analysis.⁸ In trying to communicate the "strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century" (1994, p. v), Du Bois writes with such emotional vigor and eloquence that it is easy to be seduced by the work's bittersweet ruminations, forgetting its overall message of cultivating a race to help create democratic culture. In "The Forethought" Du Bois shares the architecture of *Souls*. There, he explains that it is divided into five major sections that deal with (1) "the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive"; (2) the perceptions that dwell on either side of prejudice with education being of central concern to aid in destroying this orientation; (3) "deeper detail" and elaboration of previous section; (4) an attempt to dignify the Negro's "religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls"; and (5) his recording of oral narrative into a canon for American culture. Clearly, this is intended as text of cultural observation. This architecture of *Souls* has been described as a *Bildungsbiographie* (an educational text composed of multidisciplinary narratives) (Zamir, 1995, p. 100). I wish to go further and flesh out the aesthetic dimensions of this educational work for two reasons: It articulates the attainment of freedom through art and, at the same time, teaches us how to adjust our judgments of taste in order to receive its message.

For example, in the chapter titled "Of the Training of Black Men," Du Bois writes that the highest goal of education is to develop empowered individuals:

Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass, must persist and evolve that higher individualism which the centers of culture protect; there must be a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds, and . . . they shall again. (1903/1994, p. 66)

Du Bois does not think that all people are capable of reaching this lofty "higher individualism." However, he does believe that the *opportunity* to aim in this direction should be made available to the Negro. Du Bois articulates his idea of how an elite few might ascend to these sovereign ranks in his controversial essay "The Talented Tenth" (1940/1986, p. 842). In his view, this group will help carry the message of a people forward in order to help cultivate a truly diverse, cosmopolitan culture in the United States. He calls this message of a people its "gifts" (1903/1994, p. 163). Given the growing ethnic diversity of the United States, Du Bois thought that there could and should be a sharing of cultural gifts in the name of a genuinely pluralistic, democratic life.⁹ Yet these gifts could not be properly presented or received because of an existential orientation that all oppressed people unconsciously or consciously suffered, a malady Du Bois termed "double-consciousness" (1903/1994, p. 2).

For Du Bois, the double-consciousness of the American Negro people sprang from the strange identity they were offered by Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Extracted from their homeland to be made into machinelike animals for the promotion of the United States's economic growth, enslaved for more than 2½ centuries, American Negroes were now, in one fell swoop, asked to think of themselves as free American citizens. However, as mentioned earlier, neither citizenship nor education can be established by fiat. Achievement of an empowered identity, full citizenship, and community responsibility would necessitate traveling a rough and "rugged" road:

Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan; longer than the highway of Emancipation and law, steep and rugged, but straight, leading to heights high enough to overlook life. (1903/1994, p. 5)

But before education could do its work, Du Bois knew that the fundamental reality of the American Negro had to be understood. One way in which he illuminated this was through his familiar metaphor of the Veil. How were Negroes to be counted as American when they were constantly reminded that they were less than human because of the color of their skin? How could these "nigger" folk work, sing, and dance with hope of a better life, when they did not know how to study and compete in the society into which they were suddenly thrown? The complex and nuanced metaphor of the Veil represented

the constant multiple barriers the American Negro was to meet on the way to achieving full citizenship: racial prejudice, cultural divides, self-doubt, and the inability to see and think clearly in a chaotic world. In general, it marks a perceptual divide and represents a form of denied recognition. *Veil* is not simply a word to connote the reality of prejudice and segregation; it refers to a fundamental moral condition that Du Bois wants the reader to imagine and feel. The Veil is an ontological fabric that obscures sight from within and hides the wearer from clear recognition from those outside. Thus, the Veil partitions off the life-world of Opportunity (1994, p. 3). For Du Bois, White America is blind to the Negro's humanity and thus shuts the Negro off from what humanity deserves. At the same time, Black America is blind to its own potential gifts, powers, and promise, and so fails to grasp its historical moment generated by emancipation. All this is implied in his concept of the Veil, which works to have the reader feel the weight of the oppressive, existential question that opens the book: "How does it feel to be a problem?" (1903/1994, p. 1).

In *Souls*—with the elements of the problematic Negro soul enumerated, its unrealized gifts, double-consciousness, and veiled perceptions defined—Du Bois offers an educational philosophy that keeps these elements in dynamic tension even as he proposes a solution in the form of a classical liberal arts education. For him, the liberal arts path best responds to the underlying existential and moral conditions that give rise to the "problem of the color line." From one point of view, his abiding commitment to the liberal arts is no surprise, since such an education was historically intended to cultivate free citizens. However, in *Souls*, Du Bois transfigures the idea of the liberal arts in order to address head on the Negro's yearning for genuine liberation and fulfillment. Thus, in this book, the young, broadly educated American Negro in a troubled society responded to the challenge of his people and his time with a forward-looking educational philosophy.

THE EMPOWERING VISION OF DU BOIS'S EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

Education for Freedom

Liberal arts education, an education begetting free thinking, is an ancient discipline that Du Bois strongly advocated. In *Souls*, he writes of this approach to education as the means by which human thinking has always strived to emancipate itself from mental stasis and delve deeper into the meaning of life:

Nothing new. No time-saving devices,—simply old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living. The riddle of existence is the college curriculum that was laid before the Pharaohs, that was taught in the groves by Plato, that formed

the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, and is today laid before the freedmen's sons by Atlanta University. And this course of study will not change; its methods will grow more deft and effectual, its content richer by toil of scholar and sight of seer; but the true college will ever have one goal,—not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes. (1903/1994, p. 51)

Guided by the principles of what the Greeks called the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, the liberal arts curriculum represents these "riddle[s] of existence" as best it can. The curriculum—literally, "the course" of study—constitutes more than amassing fact and information. It is not rigid in substance or presentation, since its methods and contents are always changing. What makes the liberal arts curriculum unique and powerful as a path to freedom is the *receptive attitude* it takes to learnable things. That attitude responds to the fact that the very meanings of truth, goodness, and beauty are constantly under adjustment as humans come in contact with one another.

For Du Bois, the American experiment, made up of diverse, pluralistic understandings, best comes to possess its unique, democratic identity by attempting to foster a mode of orientation that is receptive to the new. This posture includes being receptive to what each person can contribute to the preservation and expansion of the nation's principles of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As he writes in *Souls*, "Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek,—the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty, all these we need" (1903/1994, p. 7).

This receptive attitude toward readjustment is Du Bois's pragmatic rendering of the humanistic orientation of the liberal arts. However, Du Bois is aware that there is a challenge in transforming a discriminatory society into one that is receptive to all people. First, in order to open oneself to this vantage point, one must toil—"delve," as Du Bois states in the quotation above—to attain the substantive realities of the true, good, and beautiful. Du Bois reminds us that at the heart of a liberal arts education is "book-learning" (1903/1994, p. 5), a suggestive term whose etymological meaning he plays with in Latin: *liber* (book) and *liberates* (to set free).¹⁰ Charting the 4 decades following the Emancipation Proclamation, Du Bois signals that the Negro's complicated spiritual striving for freedom could now be enhanced by the ideal of "book-learning." In other words, as the 19th century drew to a close, Du Bois believed that the time had come when education in general, and a liberal arts education in particular, offered an important path to spiritual and political freedom for the Negro race. Indeed, what the Negro gains by the toil of "book-learning" are the fundamental elements of freedom. Du Bois writes:

To the tired climbers, the horizon was ever dark, the mists were often cold, the Canaan was always dim and far away. If, however the vistas disclosed as yet no goal, no resting-place, little but flattery and criticism, the journey at least

gave leisure for reflection and self-examination; it changed the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect. (1903/1994, p. 5)

With the birth of self-consciousness and meaning made possible through “book-learning” and liberal arts education, Du Bois believed, the Negro would begin to understand the “burden he bore on his back,” feeling his problems of social degradation, poverty, and ignorance and the weight of systematic crimes committed against him (1903/1994, p. 5). The Negro would gain insight, perspective, and knowledge that could usher in new ideas and actions in the face of widespread societal constraints and violence. At the same time, however, Du Bois emphasizes that “education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent” (1903/1994, p. 20). Du Bois knows that if the Negro critically examines his debased status, he might put up arms and fight the fundamental crimes of slavery and racism with violence, or take mental and spiritual flight from the nation’s problem because he feels it is too overwhelming for him to do anything about it. For Du Bois, therefore, “book-learning” is a double-edged sword, bringing both freedom of thought and grave, tragic revelations for the Negro consciousness. He charts a difficult course between an education that would simply alienate the Negro further from society, and an education that would infuse the Negro with a new self-understanding, new self-respect, and new self-reliance.

As stated above, *Souls* is a work of educational philosophy that prepares the reader to receive its message. This claim echoes the ancient Greek idea that tragic drama is educational. Tragedy plays on the spectators’ sense and sensibilities. In time it can transform them, converting the spectator into a participant in society—a participant who now cares more substantively for the future of his or her fellow beings, who brings to society a deeper, chastened compassion as well as determination to alter conditions that lead to tragedy. Du Bois is acutely aware of these classical Greek notions when he writes the tragic drama in the penultimate chapter of *Souls*, “Of the Coming of John.” In the following section I will touch on this chapter’s place in the architecture of *Souls*, linking it with the fact that Du Bois opens every chapter in his book with one or more bars from a Negro spiritual song. From this analysis, we will take up one of Du Bois’s larger educational themes: the creation of culture through aesthetic education.

The Aesthetic Education of Humanity

In “Of the Coming of John,” Du Bois writes about a Black boy named John who leaves the South to get educated in the North, only to return to his ruin and early death, just as the townspeople in the South (both Black and White)

predicted he would if he was foolhardy enough to enter another world supposedly not meant for him.¹¹ John’s fate reveals a double tragedy: how the Whites are sunk in their racist belief that Blacks don’t merit and can’t “use” an education, and how Blacks are so oppressed beneath the Veil that they too can’t envision a “why-for” for gaining formal education. The tragic end, in which racist attitudes find violent expression, and those oppressed by violence heroically accept their seemingly grim fate, is a resounding apex to the wrought drama. The narrative’s climactic end is arresting, but it immediately gives rise to possibility. At our most vulnerable moment as readers, shattered by the brutal end of John’s hopeful life, Du Bois elects in the very next chapter of *Souls* to reveal the origins of those mysterious bars of music he places at the beginning of each of the book’s 14 chapters.

In the final chapter of *Souls*, he tells us that the “Sorrow Songs” carry the message of a people who are heavy of heart but full of hope that one day, “men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins” (1903/1994, p. 162). Furthermore, Du Bois makes the bold claim that these Sorrow Songs are the “sole [authentic] American music” and the most “beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas” (1903/1994, p. 156). In his view, the songs are part of the gift of the Negro people to American culture.¹² The gift is not simply the singing of songs, but the message and the expression of human experience they express. This gift of the American Negro, for Du Bois, constitutes the first genuinely aesthetic mark of American culture. To place the Sorrow Songs at the center of American culture is to place the long, hard-fought struggle of a people for the very meaning of freedom as *the* struggle of American society. For Du Bois, the songs epitomize beyond any “Star-Spangled Banner” or waving flag, however revered, the fundamental yearning for freedom that is at the heart of true American ideals. The Sorrow Songs are, then, the freedom music of America, for it is those songs that always envisioned a better place for all in potent, poignant terms.

With this example of the American Negro’s distinct music, Du Bois suggests that the aesthetic education of humanity is what begets the creation of moral culture. In his view, aesthetic education is the formation of the realities disclosed by liberal education. Since it is liberal education that allowed for the sharing of gifts through its receptive attitude, there must be a formative power that shapes receptivity. Aesthetic education is the cultivation of receptivity. As such, aesthetic education points to the possibility of moral culture. This is why Du Bois says that the Sorrow Songs carry a message that shatters prejudice:

The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of the races is past, and that the backward races of to-day are of proven inefficiency and not worth the saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent toward Time and ignorant of the deeds of men. (1994, p. 162)

The aesthetic education into the Sorrow Songs allows for moral culture to emerge. By placing a bar or two of the Sorrow Songs at the beginning of each chapter, little by little Du Bois is trying to form our moral orientation. It is the revelation of the Negro aesthetic here in the Sorrow Songs that grounds the possibility of American democratic society to become a morally conscious culture.

Thus, *The Souls of Black Folk* as a text on the aesthetic education of humanity outlines the belief that the liberal arts prepare the way for a truly receptive human being to exist in the first place. The aesthetically educated person, shaped by a study of the liberal arts, can see clearly above false, conventional dichotomies as symbolized by the Veil. For Du Bois, seeing above false dichotomies positions people to create in "the kingdom of culture" that is the distinctively moral, human realm on the planet (1903/1994, p. 5). In one of the most quoted passages of *Souls*, Du Bois writes,

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. (1903/1994, p. 67)

Du Bois aspires here to be in an ahistorical, atemporal, aracial, transcendent space with other great minds. The movement in his picturesque portrait symbolizes liberation, for it reaches beyond unnecessary existential divisions. What begets this movement for Du Bois is classical education. His "book-learning" (*liber*), constituted by his imaginative recalling of a range of poets and philosophers, is the genesis of his freedom (*liberates*), which is evidenced by his choice words of *smiling*, *gliding*, *swinging*, and *dwelling*. He evokes a culture above the Veil where all can move "arm in arm." Du Bois believes that this moral possibility borne out of aesthetic education is precisely the message the Negro race has to offer America.

Booker T. Washington in a New Light

Most works that address Du Bois's educational philosophy present his educational thought as deeply commingled with that of Booker T. Washington. Moreover, *The Souls of Black Folk* is often regarded as Du Bois's impassioned reaction and alternative to what he perceived as Washington's narrow ideas. It is, therefore, important to address the differences in these two important thinkers as a means of deepening our understanding of Du Bois's philosophy of education.

As the inscription on the Booker T. Washington monument, called Lifting the Veil, at Tuskegee University makes clear, Washington "lifted the veil

of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry."¹³ Indeed, Washington's version of progress was predicated on industrial training, while Du Bois's conception of progress called for liberal arts education. Both were cognizant of the same problem, but what became clear as their debate developed is that the two had different presumptions about what course the creation of both Negro and American culture should take. However, their respective emphases need not be seen as mutually exclusive, since each sought to conceive how the gifts of the American Negro could best be realized.

Understanding that Negroes would have to learn how to compete with their White counterparts, in his educational thinking Washington called for racial uplift by means of economic stability in American society. He sought to transform what once was degrading slave labor into industrious, self-respecting, paid work. His educational program aimed to readjust the Negro's perception of material life, taking account of food, shelter, and mobility. In order to build community and remove the Negro from the center of political conflict, since Negroes were often physical targets of violent ramifications, he accommodated the segregationist idea underlying of mostly southern ways of thinking, evidenced in his 1895 "Atlanta Compromise." His belief in the construction of a segregated society gained strong support from politicians and he became widely accepted by Blacks and Whites as the voice of the Negro race. Washington's vocational educational program was accepted by many, White and Black alike, as the solution to the Negro problem.

Du Bois worked with Washington at the beginning of the former's academic career and was even offered a teaching position twice (1894 and 1902) at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama during Washington's presidency of the college (1881-1915). However, Du Bois gradually grew suspicious of Washington's accommodationist position on Negro education.¹⁴ It was that very attitude that Du Bois wanted to combat, not the notion that some individuals may be best suited or interested in life-sustaining pursuits other than contemplation and studying great books (1903/1994, p. 54). As stated above, for Du Bois, the Negro was gaining ground in apprehending the "kingdom of culture," however slowly, after Emancipation, and it was this book-learning that would usher in a true revolution in Negro consciousness and American culture. In contrast, he regarded Washington's accommodationist standpoint as unsuitable for sparking and sustaining a heightened consciousness of culture creation. For Du Bois, the Negro must press onward with books in hand and with eyes on the Promised Land. He biting asks,

Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from your high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land? (1903/1994, p. 67)

Du Bois's disagreements with Washington deepened his resolve and presaged his eventual disenchantment with the United States itself. He became impatient with what he saw as complacency, as well as complicity, on the part of Whites and Blacks alike, with a political and economic system that valued stability and comfort more than justice. His many travels abroad after World War II, especially to the so-called developing world, only heightened his alienation from a nation he saw as losing its soul through its fixation on the Cold War and on consumerism, both reflections of economic power and competitiveness rather than the humanistic culture he had hoped for. In 1963, Du Bois became a citizen of Ghana and settled there for the remainder of his days. In one of those anomalies of life where the ironies of reality are far stranger than fiction, Du Bois passed away on the eve of the greatest civil rights march in American history, on August 27, 1963.

FINDING DU BOIS TODAY

Although he turned away from his country in the end, Du Bois left behind an enduring legacy. For example, his vision of the Negro race and its gifts for humanity had an immense impact on one of America's most remarkable cultural movements, the Harlem Renaissance (1920–1930). Centered in New York, energetic groups of Negro writers, artists, scholars, and politicians created an empowered culture of personal expression. At the heart of this movement was the high value it placed on the aesthetic education of Black Americans to promote social and cultural change. The movement is indebted to the sustained, poetic efforts of Du Bois to dignify book-learning and inspire what he called “a catholicity of taste” in all who would create culture in the world. The manifold aesthetic flowerings of the Harlem Renaissance, represented by Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, to name but a few, have had an incalculable influence on White and Black perceptions of the capabilities of a once-enslaved people (Appiah & Gates, 1999, p. 926).

Du Bois's enduring place in American social and educational thinking is also evident institutionally. The Du Bois College House (University of Pennsylvania), the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research (Harvard University), and the Du Bois Library (Amherst College) are only a few of the places where serious study of his legacy continues. Moreover, as indicated at the start of the chapter, there has been considerable scholarly attention to his life and work. Recent studies range from a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography (Lewis, 2000) and analyses of his philosophical, sociological, and historical work on American society (Outlaw, 2000; Zamir, 1995), to the realization of Du Bois's encyclopedia *Africana* (Appiah & Gates, 1999).

Most of Du Bois's explicit educational philosophy centers on the function of Negro colleges and universities, and his legacy continues to thrive in these settings.¹⁵ Their curricula continue to mirror Du Bois's argument that the seven classical liberal arts (*trivium* and *quadrivium*) should help guide the Negro college and university, for such institutions are “to be the organ[s] of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secret of civilization” (1903/1994, p. 52).

Du Bois's pragmatic and poetic vision of the liberal arts finds expression in the mission statements of many historically Black institutions of higher education. For example, the Fisk University mission statement includes the following passage:

Fisk also is committed to involving both its faculty and its most advanced students in original research—since the passing on of the liberal arts tradition is not merely the transmission of dead or static knowledge; rather the liberal arts tradition involves the recognition that knowledge is continually developing. . . . The ultimate goal is to prepare students to be skilled, resourceful, and imaginative leaders who will address effectively the challenges of life in a technological society, a pluralistic nation, and a multicultural world.¹⁶

One of the most time-honored, if today hard-pressed, liberal arts is music. It is perhaps the most ancient liberal art, and yet today is often the first to go in American schools when budgets are tight. Du Bois argued in *Souls* that a signal gift of the Negro, the world-historical “seventh” race, as he puts it (1903/1994, p. 2), is its extraordinary expression of music, which is one of the seven classical liberating arts. That legacy, too, continues at such institutions as Fisk.

Furthermore, Du Bois makes clear that one of the functions of the Negro college is to *gather* a once-dispersed people back together again. His notion of gathering has strong ethical overtones in that he regards the Negro colleges as places for truly forming individuals. In the wake of formal emancipation, Du Bois writes, the Negro colleges can function as “social settlements” (1903/1994, p. 62). I have argued elsewhere (Anderson, 2006) that these communities offered more than the toil of letters, crucial as that was; they also fostered supportive communities that could shape character itself. Moreover, as V. S. Walker (1996) reminds us, educational institutions for Black Americans before the civil rights era often provided spaces for more than just pushing back against a still-racist society. Rather, they provided genuinely formative environments characterized by what Du Bois called the creation of culture.

Regarding elementary and secondary education, Du Bois's belief in the formation of moral character can be seen at places such as the Talented Tenth

Academy and the W.E.B. Du Bois Scholars Institute, both in Brunswick, New Jersey.¹⁷ Both institutions strive to form good character and leadership qualities in their students so as to meet the challenges that face many African American and Latino American communities. These institutions for high school students evoke the reciprocal relationship of moral character and community that Du Bois articulated in his writing on education.

Although Du Bois's educational philosophy is mostly mirrored in higher educational practice, he leaves us with imaginative ways of conceiving K-12 education. In particular, the curriculum that many public school students undertake in this country has its roots in liberal arts education. Required math, science, reading, social studies, and history courses aim at molding a well-rounded student. What we often forget is that these many fields of human endeavor are guided by the search for truth, goodness, and beauty. The subject matters, Du Bois would say, are deep expressions of human searching that are under constant renewal. They cannot be conceived just as an accumulation of facts that remain static. In this way, a distinctly American curriculum as an expression of human striving should be open to multiple voices. As we have seen, Du Bois championed the inclusion of the marginalized perspective of the African American as fundamental to the understanding of American letters. His provocative insights allowed for the birth of something we might call multicultural education.

Moreover, his demonstration of the Sorrow Songs as a canon of American culture places moral possibilities at the center of American education. From a Du Boisian vantage point, we should rightly be unsettled by the constant cutbacks in arts education, especially in predominantly impoverished socioeconomic areas. Perhaps the arts are viewed solely as forms of entertainment. However, Du Bois makes clear that freedom of expression is necessary for a genuine democratic culture to flourish.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has touched on one aspect of Du Bois's multifaceted career and life, namely, his philosophy of education as expressed through his seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. As we have seen, he sought in that work to confront in a frank, critical manner the pervasive injustices of slavery and racism in America. He sought to contrast this grim legacy with a vision of the possible, one that echoes the spirit of promise in the nation's founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. Most important, he sought to include in that promise an educational path to moral, spiritual, and political freedom. For him, that path was the humanizing study of the liberal arts. While Du Bois himself

concluded, perhaps tragically if also with reason, that the "possible" was in fact improbable, his writings surpass him in ways he might have found delightful. As we live with his legacy through the ongoing struggle of Black "souls" in America, we find that in the richness of his thought and action, W.E.B. Du Bois's own "gifts" of culture continue to show us how to create culture in our time.