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## **Much Ado About the Blacks: Booker T., W.E.B., and others on Educating African Americans**

It seems since the founding of this country, society has scratched their heads on what to do about the “race problem”. In particular, the conversation is geared toward how to deal with a population of people who experienced a systematic disenfranchisement woven into the intricate fabric of this nation. At every turn, there is a newspaper article, think tank, TED talk, political convention or protest regard the trepid state of the black community. Everything is failing; schools are failing, families are broken, food deserts are rampant, there is a lack of adequate healthcare. Many academics and some policy makers such as Michael Eric Dyson and Diane Ravitch, point the finger at institutional racism and poverty. Others such as John McWhorter point the finger at the self-victimizing ideology of black folks. What they all commonly agree on is the importance and transformative power of education; specifically, the importance of the quality education of one of the most historically disadvantaged populations in the United States: people of African descent.

This colorful debate is not of new. It existed before the Civil Rights movement. One can say that the two fathers of the movement in the discussion of how to best educate black folks are Booker Taliaferro Washington and William Edward Burghardt DuBois. To contextually frame the current conversation, it is important to look to the past. Many of the concerns addressed by both men arise in the conversations of education reform today as it affects black people in the United States. What exactly did they stand for? Was there common ground? Is there any nugget of wisdom we can parcel out and use to move the conversations of today in a more vigorously forward momentum? The answers to some of these questions - and many more - may rest in the stories of their lives. As you peruse through, you may find that what they stood for and what they propose are not too far from where we are today.

### **Booker T.’s Position**

To understand his approach to education, it is important to place Booker T. Washington in context and understand how this background influenced his views.

Born in Virginia in 1856, Washington spent his early childhood in slavery. Following emancipation in 1865, he found work in menial jobs as he was an unskilled worker (to no fault of his own). Like many of his brethren, Washington began to realize that a quality education was the means for him to improve his life, as notes “There was never a time in my youth... when one resolve did not continually remain with me, and that was a determination to secure an education at any cost.” (Washington, 57) As he was based in the South, the opportunities for blacks were limited and more often than not, included no means of formal education. Washington notes that while attending the available schools in his town, he encountered teachers who “knew but little

more than I did.” (Washington, 57) After hearing two colleagues speak of a “great school for colored people” in Virginia, Hampton Institute (now known as Hampton University) he ventures to find it and attend.

While at Hampton Institute, he receives a more industrial and vocational education than a liberal arts education common at many predominantly white institutions. It was here that he fortified his fervent belief that the most suitable education for black people in era centered around vocational and industrial instruction. After a rough experience with a disagreeable instructor, he was ordered by her to clean a dirty classroom. This altercation made a lasting impact on how he viewed institutions of Hampton’s caliber; “Ever since then I have had no patience with any school for my face in the South which did not teach its students the dignity of labour.” (Washington, 73) Washington would eventually become an educator, founding the illustrious Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University).

A major component in his argument for industrial and vocational training was that Washington felt that through that form of education, black people would learn self-reliance and the value of hard work. In his famous Atlanta Exposition Address in 1895, pejoratively referred to as the “Atlanta Compromise”, he notes passionately that “no race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem.” (Washington, 143) Simply put, learning to work with hands was a means of providing humanity to a people who were systematically stripped of their humanity. This skill of labor was a way to provide if the state, and white Southerners, were not to provide for them. Incidentally, this idea was also a means to encourage Southern blacks not to agitate the system, as he cautions “nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.” The grievance he hints at is the anger and resentment many blacks felt toward whites for slavery and Reconstruction. The opportunities he refers are not solely based in landing jobs and acquiring land, but the ability to forgive the whites for their trespasses and work with them to ensure an eventual equality under the law. Over time, by showing their ability to work and be upstanding citizens, blacks would gain the equality they seek.

Washington’s insistence on industrial education was two-fold; it was a way he felt blacks would gain a sense of self worth by working with their hands ,and keep them safe from the ire of angry white Southerner. This viewpoint was popular with many blacks in the South, who were more vulnerable to physical persecution and retribution from white people in the South than their northern counterparts. On the flipside, this viewpoint would alienate northern blacks, who did not experience such outright displays of racism (though they did experience it in other facets of their live such as denial of entrance to elite predominantly white schools), and did not believe in the goodwill of white people to treat them fairly and equally in the eyes of the law.

## **W.E.B’s Stance**

In all accounts, W.E.B. DuBois might as well be from a country across the Atlantic Ocean in comparison to Booker T. Washington.

Born three years after The Civil War’s end and twelve years after Washington, Dubois grew up a free black person in Great Barrington Massachusetts. Because Great Barrington was seen as progressive, had a decent free black population for many years, DuBois avoided

experiencing the more pervasive forms of overt racism his southern brethren encountered. He went to an integrated school, and was encouraged by his school teachers to pursue his academic interest. With the support, financially especially, of his town, he attended Fisk University in Tennessee. It was here he came face to face with the outright racism he never had to navigate in his formative years. However, it was not until his time at Harvard, under the tutelage of professor and prominent American philosopher William James, that the seeds of his education and political stances began to take root. Once he graduated from Harvard as the first African American to attain a Ph.D, he traveled across the United States and Europe to acquire knowledge and give voice to a movement to provide people of African descent their full citizenship in the United States.

In part due to his own upbringing, DuBois fervently adhered to the notion of a liberal arts education. He felt that a liberal arts education provides a basis for the hunger of knowledge, and fosters critical thinking among its pupils. That, to him, was the function of the university; “it is, above all, to be the organ of that fine adjustment between real life and the growing knowledge of life, an adjustment which forms the secrets of civilization.” (DuBois, 60) The liberal arts education is to bridge the gap between the knowledge of the world and with the every day going on of the world. Most importantly, the liberal arts education was designed to give one purpose, as he comments “the worker must work for the glory of his handiwork, not simply for pay; the thinker must think for truth, not for fame.” (DuBois, 61) In sync with the philosophies of his mentor, William James, DuBois ultimately sees this form of education as a means to access and seek truth and citizenship. An extension of that truth would be the expedient end of prejudice and injustice toward black people in the United States; “The function of the Negro college, then, is clear: ... it must seek the social regeneration of the Negro, and it must help in the solution of problems of race contact and cooperation. And finally, beyond all this, it must develop men.” (DuBois, 73) Furthermore, DuBois further insisted that the recipients of this form of education will receive the burden to uplift the entire population; “He is, as he ought to be, the group leader, the man who sets the ideals of the community where he lives, directs its thoughts and heads it social movement.” (DuBois, 197) He recognizes the power and impact of a liberal arts education as a means of freeing a people, even though acknowledging at times not everyone is equipped to and should participate in that arena. These select few would be known as the Talented Tenth, a phrase originally coined by Henry Lyman Morehouse, a white man who would become the namesake of Morehouse College.

As with Washington, DuBois’s model of education was two-fold: it was a means to instill a sense of humanity in African Americans (though DuBois specifically highlights men in his critiques) and provide them with tools to fight for their rights in a system that deprives them of said rights. The message was well received, predictably, among blacks in the north. This attitude would serve as a foundation to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, and influence many civil rights leaders. DuBois himself would live to see significant events that launched the 60s Civil Rights Movement such as the death of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Alabama bus boycott, and the Brown v. Board of Education decision, leading to the desegregation of schools nationwide.

**Booker T. and W.E.B.: different sides of the same coin?**

The most glaring difference between DuBois and Washington was the role of education in terms of liberating black people, north and south, in the United States. Washington, through advocating for vocational education, urged for a longer term process in accumulation of rights; “The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremest folly...” (Washington, 144). Given the time and place he was issued in, Washington is correct in his assertion. It was dangerous for African American in the South, as they experienced terrorism from their white neighbors regularly. He insisted that by showing the merit of their work, African Americans will reap the benefits of what they sew. Eventually, and in good faith, white people will see the errors in their ways and treat everyone justly under the law; “No race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized.” (Washington, 144-45) Because we, black people, can benefit fully from the laws, it is of the utmost importance “that we be prepared for the exercise of those privileges.” (Washington, 145). The privileges he speaks of not only extend to the political arena, but tangentially the cultural arena as well.

DuBois, on the other hand, wished to expedite the process. He openly criticized Washington for what he saw was a shortsighted argument. DuBois states that “honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched... this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society.” It is not only their, African Americans, right to receive a quality education, it is their right to question those that deny them of that right, and other rights that were guaranteed by the Constitution. Moreover, it is their right to demand that these rights be acknowledge. For that is the essence of democracy. In order to participate in that democracy, their education, a liberal arts education, will give them the tools to take advantage of this system; “They have the right to know, to think, to aspire.” (DuBois, 185)

While their philosophies differed, DuBois and Washington agreed that the rights and citizenship of African Americans is a necessity in this country and need to be recognized. They also worked against racially motivated violence in both the North and the South. Additionally, both, in their own ways, acknowledge the positive impact an education had on their lives. Washington consistently notes how his education led him to meeting interesting people throughout his life and the impact these meetings had on him; “The older I grow, the more I am convinced that there is no education which one and get from books and costly apparatus that is equal to that which can be gotten from contact with great men and women.” (Washington, 65) The meetings were a different, non-traditional type of education for him, and those lesson persisted with him longer than any lesson he learned from more conventional learning ways.

### **But, How Are They Relevant Now?**

On the surface it appears that Booker T. and W.E.B. are relics of a distant past. There is not a law-imposed segregation of schools, train cars, airports, and other public works. The vigilante justice of white mobs is prevalent in no part of the United States. Thanks to the Civil Rights Movement, several laws are on the books that solidify the citizenship of people of African descent in the United States. While this is far from the entire truth, there are many ways in which the ideas of these gentlemen are relevant and crucial in contemporary United States.

First, the argument for the best method of educating black youth has significantly evolved. The conversation is no longer liberal arts versus vocational. It is more nuanced. The central concern, as it was with both DuBois and Washington is how that education prepares these students to be global and American students, as well as being on equal footing with their more privileged white peers; “And until we attain the role of civilization, we cannot stand up and hold our place in the world of culture and enlightenment.” (DuBois, 173) Hinted in both their arguments is the sentiment that the education needs to be congruent with the student, without neglecting the students’ roots, or limiting their options; “... We will fight for all time against any proposal to educate black boys and girls simply as servants and underlines, or simply for use of other people.” (DuBois, 185).

In the current climate of education, in particular urban education, many thinkers state the importance of understanding the students they work with. DuBois pushes the importance of having well-trained teachers to work with these students. He references strong normal schools that train black teachers in his time and expresses the notion that teachers “must also, so far as possible, be broadminded, cultured men and women, to scatter civilization among a people whose ignorance was not simply of letter, but of life itself.” (DuBois, 67). In bold language for the time, he acknowledges the rut most black people in the United States are in at the time. It is important that they have gives that teach them the importance of literacy, but also directly teach them character and the value of their own life. This wondrous stipulation was seized upon, with mixed results, in the nineties with alternative teaching programs such as Teach for America and The New Teacher Project. The intention of the those organizations is to provide classrooms in failing schools in predominantly black and Latinx neighborhoods with optimistic, highly motivated, and highly intelligent teachers in order to close the achievement gap. More often than not, these teachers are ill prepared to work with the populations they are placed in as there is often a significant cultural gap between the teachers and students they teach, and the training they receive is inadequate.

Columbia University Teachers College professor Christopher Emdin expands on DuBois idea and updates it for the twenty-first century. He asserts that the teachers need to be competent not only in their teaching abilities and fields of expertise, but be competent in their understand of the many cultures in their classroom. In his book, he proposes “reality pedagogy”, that is utilizing space to show value for “students’ expertise on their own lives, communities, and ways of learning.” (Schwartz, 2016). This practice, however, implies that the teacher must humble themselves; “The process [coteaching in reality pedagogy] also requires that teachers let their students know that they are not only students but teaching experts whose knowledge about how to teach has tremendous value.” (Emdin, 2016) A primary goal of a teacher should be to establish relationships with their students. This goal needs to be utmost paramount when working with all students, particularly with students of color.

DuBois, rather astutely, notes that education will eventually have to somehow cope with and consider:

“Internal problems of social advance must inevitably come, - problems of work and wages, of families and homes, or morals and the true valuing of the things in life; and all these and other inevitable problems of civilization the Negro must meet and solve largely for himself,

by reason of his isolation; and can there be any possible solution other than by study and thought and an appeal to the rich experience of the past?" (DuBois, 73)

DuBois foresees something that is intricately linked in the conversation of education. It is known that education is not the sole factor in determining success. A student's environment outside of the school must be considered in terms of the total package. In the current state of affairs, many black families are already at a distinct disadvantage in nearly all of those arenas. Somehow, in DuBois's head, education should be a preventative measure to disadvantages. In today's world, these disadvantages are lumped together in the form of poverty, as policy makers indirectly seek to eradicate poverty by reforming schools. Opponents of this, however, like Diane Ravitch, argue that this approach is narrow in its scope. Rather, the eradication of poverty is a separate conversation from that of education reform, and that as a society needs to tackle ending poverty without using education as the sole means to do that.

### **Where Is There to Go**

*"Courage brothers! The battle for humanity is not lost or losing. All across the skies sit signs of promise. The Slav is raising in his might, the yellow millions are tasting liberty, the black Africans are writhing toward the light, and everywhere the laborer, with ballot in his hand, is voting to open the gates of Opportunity and Peace. The morning breaks over blood-stained hills. We must not falter, we may not shrink. Above are the everlasting."* - (DuBois, "The Niagara Movement")

If we learn anything from these two gentlemen is that there is no all-encompassing answer in how to best educate students of African ancestry in this country. What is tried and true, however, is the importance of educating the students of African ancestry. Both Washington and DuBois responded to the needs of their people at that time: education as a means to provide security, safety, citizenship, and equality. It is telling, some might even say troubling, that over 100 years later, America is still having the same conversation with the same goals: providing black youth with an education that will guarantee them security, safety, citizenship, and equality in a society that is incredibly hostile toward them.

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