

The Freemasonry of Race: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois on Education and Black Cultural Consciousness

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The premise that education opens the door of opportunity and empowers those who are educated is all the more powerful for oppressed groups who have been denied education. Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois both would agree that education is potent in its ability to transform and uplift the individual. They differ, however, in their approaches and in the types of education they would promote for achieving African-American progress in American society. The importance of education for African-Americans in the nineteenth century can be seen in the reaction of Southern Whites to the revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831. For the African-Americans involved in this revolt, one unintended consequence was the quashing of any chance for slaves to receive education because directly after this uprising, every slave state passed laws forbidding slaves to learn to read and write and banned schools for slaves (Miles).

The philosophical differences toward education between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois can be explained in part by their backgrounds and the thirty-five years that separate their writing. However, considering his post-Civil War background, Washington's willingness to paint a rosy picture about the state of African Americans and their education is rather puzzling. At a time when lynching was rampant, Booker T. Washington believed that the humanity and self-interest of the White citizens would lead to progress for African Americans (267-68). His optimism seems unfounded, considering that an estimated ten thousand African Americans were lynched in the twenty year period from 1878 to 1898 (Miles). However, by 1935, W. E. B. DuBois had developed an alternative view from Washington's: DuBois proposed that attempting to educate children in an environment where they were resented and despised was too high a price to pay for the limited achievement that most could attain in the environment of White schools (296). Self-respect and self-esteem are essential ingredients for the successful educational experience of African-American children and children of any race.

Carter Woodson makes a compelling argument for the need to instill self-respect in young African Americans. He explains that when they are taught in classes and textbooks that their culture is inferior, their aspirations and hopes die. The killing of the spirit is "the worst sort of lynching" (Woodson 396-97). Children need role models to guide them as they are growing up. Without positive role models that they can relate to, children grow up despising themselves and wishing to change aspects of themselves that are impossible to alter. Toni Morrison poignantly portrays this idea in the novel, *The Bluest Eye*. A young black girl, Pecola, prays for blue eyes every night and thinks that this one feature will solve all of her problems, great and small (Jokinenon). Only a damaged self-image could lead to such a warped sense of reality. An educational experience that presents every aspect of African-American culture as unworthy creates individuals torn between two worlds. In such an environment of segregated Southern schools in the first half of the twentieth century, Black children were educated in the White world and trained to begin life as Europeanized Whites, while being told to return to their people, where they had to act in a certain way and endure certain restrictions (Woodson 398). This idea may seem extreme in our twenty-first century world, but racism, which creates a situation where African Americans live in two worlds, still exists. It may be more sophisticated and subtle than before, but it is still more common than we would like to think and no less dangerous or damaging.

In his lecture, Dr. Vernon Miles painted a sobering picture of a society unable to accept or value its own diversity. Today segregation is recurring in communities and schools as Whites leave the inner city for the suburbs. Even more disturbing is the fact that now there are more black men in prison than in college (Miles). Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to Congress,

stated in her 1970 book *Unbought and Unbossed* that racism is so widespread and universal in this country that it has become invisible because it is so normal. A current television commercial clearly illustrates Chisholm's idea that racism is very much alive: two female co-workers, one White, one Black, enter an elevator. They are chatting when the elevator stops and opens to admit another passenger. This passenger is a Black youth wearing headphones. The White woman clutches her purse tightly to her chest as the elevator closes. At the next stop, the two women get off and the Black woman asks, "What was that thing you did with your purse?" The White woman answers, "Oh, that was just a natural reaction." "Not to me, it isn't," replies the Black woman (National Underground Railroad Freedom Center).

Combating racism is a way to overcome deficiencies in the educational system. Dr. Miles commented that either of the methods suggested by Booker T. Washington or W. E. B. DuBois to accomplish the goals of educating African-Americans would take an enormous amount of time. If we are truly serious about righting past wrongs and celebrating the wonderful diversity of our country, I propose that we, as a nation, declare our resolve to eliminate racism by the end of the decade, just as President Kennedy committed America to landing humans on the moon before the end of the 1960's. Then no child of any race would be forced to endure the indignities that bruise the spirit and injure the soul.

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