

W.E.B. DuBois and the Question of Black Women Intellectuals

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Every attempt to elevate the Negro, whether undertaken by himself or through the philanthropy of others, cannot but prove abortive unless so directed as to utilize the indispensable agency of an elevated and trained womanhood.¹

Bartley McSwine's choice to focus on the figure of W.E.B. DuBois is an important opportunity to reassess the discourse of educational philosophy, for many reasons. I used McSwine's essay as the catalyst for another critique essential to an understanding of DuBois — that is, an assessment of DuBois in relation to his black female contemporaries — or in larger terms, as an example of the function of gender in the production of black intellectual discourse. Too often we forget that it is not only black men who have made contributions to the legacy of African-American intellectual thought, but also black women.

The intellectual work and critical contributions of black women have historically been obscured either as a function of a strategic ideological preoccupation with the "manhood of the race," or as a secondary result of particular institutional realities which limit black women's opportunities to take center stage. Yet throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African-American women intellectuals have grappled with the same issues dealt with by leading black male intellectuals. Their work has had added significance because they have almost always asserted the inextricable roles of gender and sexuality to the cultural conditions wrought by racial marginality and exclusion.

The intellectual work of black women has been central to the critical problems addressed by DuBois and others — even if their names have not. DuBois's relationship with educator Anna Julia Cooper is a useful example to revisit. DuBois's relationship with Cooper gives us a better perspective on the nature of intellectual production in his time, the influence of his contemporaries, and the dynamics through which they were filtered in his work, as well as some clue to the types of obstacles black women have continually faced within the black intellectual community and larger American intellectual tradition. Without diminishing the importance of DuBois as a figure nor the influence of his work, it is important to remember that then, as now, "black" all too often represented an ideological location that was gendered male. The project of racial reform was commonly stated as a problem of recuperating the manhood of the race. As Kevin Gaines summarizes, "a middle class ideology of racial uplift that measured race progress in terms of civilization, manhood, and patriarchal authority."² We see within the strategic concerns of the debate between DuBois and Washington, for example, an emphasis on the education of black men (the image of the boy in a cornfield reading the classics), their preparedness to participate in larger social and economic systems, their ability to serve as providers for traditionally configured households, and very little attention to the ramifications of educating black women.

Yet such a discussion was certainly extant. In 1892, ten years before the publication of *Souls of Black Folk*, Cooper published the text *A Voice from the South*. In her essay, "Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race," Cooper not only places the higher education of black women as a central concern, but asserts the advancement of African-American women to be a necessary condition of racial advancement and social progress.

'I am my Sister's keeper!' should be the hearty response of every man and woman of the race, and this conviction should purify and exalt the narrow, selfish and petty personal aims of life into a noble and sacred purpose.³

While Cooper's arguments are otherwise conservative in contemporary terms, her attention to the role of women in the cultural and political advancement of blacks was, in fact, a vital critical contribution that DuBois was eventually obliged to reckon with. Cooper's central argument in the previous essay and in "What Are We Worth?" was that blacks should be allowed to prove their value to the progression of Western civilization through their accomplishments and endeavors in areas such as the arts and education. Her argument that the status of women represented a fundamental measure of civilization is not without problem, but its potency in advancing the cause of African-American women is undeniable.

In the introduction to the Schomburg edition of *A Voice From the South*, literary scholar Mary Helen Washington recounts the graceful manner in which Cooper dealt with DuBois's slights to her work and political contributions. It seems clear, despite any explicit acknowledgment on DuBois's part, that Cooper's book and its ideas were highly influential upon the form and content of his own work. His text *Souls of Black Folk* takes on similar themes and follows a structure similar to Cooper's book, and his central role in the later Harlem Renaissance reflects an agreement with Cooper's tenets. I recount the experiences and words of Cooper not to disparage DuBois's legacy or to devalue his contribution to the discourse of educational philosophy. Nor am I making a comment on DuBois's intent insofar as his interaction with Cooper, but only upon her obscured presence in a community of scholars. I do so to prevent the reenactment of an injustice already visited upon the intellectual production of African-American women. DuBois's oversights regarding the work and intellectual contributions of women such as Cooper, unfortunately, has resonance with similar exclusions throughout the formulation and canonization of black intellectual work and political activism. Even now, while we reclaim the contributions of black intellectuals, we continually embody such contributions and their legacy as male.

Joy James's 1997 book, *Transcending the Talented Tenth: Black Leaders and American Intellectuals*, is crucial in critically engaging the shortcomings and legacy of DuBois's philosophy on questions of gender equality and class bias. Additionally, the work of scholars Paula Giddings, Kevin Gaines, and Hazel Carby, as well as the biographies of DuBois's contemporaries, such as that of Ida Wells-Barnett, are invaluable in recovering the entire scope of intellectual discourse in DuBois's day and gaining a sense of the terms of participation upon which it was waged. We must remain conscious of the ways some intellectual productions and institutional

structures may contribute to the foreclosure or elimination of other scholars to participate fully. What lessons are there to be learned?

Certainly, Bartley McSwine's essay is a unique and valuable contribution for the links that he emphasizes between DuBois and his teachers William James, Josiah Royce, and George Santayana. DuBois's interest and development of the concept of duty in relation to the question of racial uplift seems an important factor in understanding not only his work, but also the development of African-American intellectual thought and political activism throughout the twentieth century. The three questions he uses to open his paper — Who was W.E.B. DuBois? What was his educational philosophy, and why is it important to us today? — are the appropriate beginning to a consideration of DuBois's inclusion into the field of educational philosophy. However, the inclusion of DuBois into the discourse of educational philosophy should be accompanied by a sophisticated consideration of the ideological preoccupations of race, its intersection with questions of gender, and the ramifications of such limitations on intellectual production.

1. Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (1892, reprint, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 28-29.

2. Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 129.

3. Cooper, *A Voice From the South*, 32.