

W.E.B Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk*: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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ABSTRACT

The third year of this millennium marks the centennial of the publication of W.E.B Du Bois' history-making book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In this study, we move from the man to the book to determine what it was that made it the quintessential expression of the hopes and fears of American blacks after the civil war. We equally interrogate the text's relevance not only today, but also tomorrow.

Key words: double-consciousness, talented tenth, civic rights, equality, liberty, democracy, sorrow songs.

RÉSUMÉ

L'année 2003 marque le centième anniversaire de la publication du célèbre ouvrage de W.E.B Du Bois *Ames Noires*. Dans cette étude, nous partons de l'homme à son œuvre pour déterminer ce qui a fait du texte la quintessence d'expression d'espoir et de peur des noirs américains après la guerre civile. Nous interrogeons aussi, non seulement la pertinence du texte aujourd'hui mais aussi et surtout sa pertinence demain.

Mots clés : double prise de conscience, le dixième talentueux, droits civiques, égalité, démocratie, liberté, cantiques du chagrin.

In the next few pages, we intend to initiate a conversation on the centennial of the publication of Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. We will look at the main ideas raised in the book and try to determine to what extent some of the issues raised then are still relevant today. Even if *The Souls of Black Folk* spoke to us then and will speak to us today, will it, perhaps, be able to speak to us tomorrow?

Du Bois the Man.

Born on 23 February 1868 in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, he attended high school there and later moved to Fisk in Tennessee instead of Harvard or Amherst which were close by. This was probably due to racial considerations, but the journey South was salutary because it enabled Du Bois to have real close contact with blacks in a way that he never could have in the North. Not only did he see more beautiful black women than he had ever seen in his seventeen years, he publicly declared his stand vis-à-vis these people, thus:

I am a Negro, and I glory in the name! I am proud of black blood that flows in my veins... I have come here... to join hands with my people. (Broderick, *W.E.B Du Bois*, 8)

And among those people were the poor blacks of the Tennessee country-side, middle class sons and daughters of the University. He spent two summers in the country-side teaching the poor blacks and learning their ways.

After Fisk, he gained admission to Harvard University to read history, philosophy and economics and here he was lucky to meet some of the best minds of that epoch, amongst whom were William James, the psychologist and George Santayana, the philosopher. Of particular significance during his Harvard years was his study abroad period in the University of Berlin where he worked with Gustav Schmoller (1892-94). As fate would have it, Du Bois had identified the architect of German reunification Otto Von Bismarck as his hero. In *Dusk of Dawn* he describes the relationship thus:

Bismarck was my hero. He had made a nation out of a mass of bickering peoples. He had dominated the whole development with his strength... this foreshadowed in my mind the kind of thing that American Ne-

groes must do, marching forth with strength and determination under trained leadership. (*Black Titan*, 52)

More importantly, it was during this sojourn in Germany that he clearly defined, on his 25th birthday, his life's mission. He stated thus in his note book:

The hot dark blood of that black fore-father born king of men—is beating at my heart, and I know that I am either a genius or a fool... this I do know: be the Truth what it may I will seek it on the pure assumption that it is worth seeking—and Heaven nor Hell, God nor Devil shall turn me from my purpose till I die. I will in this second quarter century of my life, enter the dark forest of the unknown world for which I have so many years served my apprenticeship—the chart and compass the world furnishes me I have little faith in—yet, I have none better—I will seek till I find—and die. These are my plans; to make a name in science, to make a name in literature and thus to raise my race. Or perhaps to raise a visible empire in Africa thro' England, France, or Germany. (*Black Titan*, 214)

And back in Harvard, he wrote his thesis on *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America 1638-1870*, and this was published as the first text in the Harvard Historical Series in 1896. The second significant text he published was *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899). In this study, Du Bois put science into sociology and it is generally considered as the first serious sociological study published anywhere in the world.

NAACP.

From Harvard, Du Bois accepted a teaching position at Atlanta University where his research work produced the Atlanta University Studies on the American Negro. The most significant publication in the early 1900s was of course, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois' radicalism kept the authorities of Atlanta University on their toes since they depended on white philanthropy. A lynching at Springfield Illinois in 1907 pushed Du Bois and some of his friends and white liberals to form the NAACP¹ whose purpose was to serve as the vanguard of the black struggle in America. He served as the editor of the *Crisis*, the organ of

the NAACP from 1910-34. Other than documenting cases of social injustice and discrimination, this organ also served as a medium for the display of young artistic talent. Those who were to constitute what was later called the Harlem Renaissance had their first poems published in the pages of the *Crisis*.

Pan Africanism

Du Bois' battles were against racial oppression and discrimination at home and national liberation from colonialism abroad. To this end, he linked the struggle of blacks in America to that of blacks in Africa and the Caribbean. With Sylvester Williams of Trinidad, George Padmore of Guyana and a number of Haitians, he launched the Pan-African Congress in London in 1900. The subsequent ones held in 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, and 1945, this last being of particular significance since some of the continent's future leaders such as Jomo Kenyatta and Kwame Nkrumah participated in that Manchester meeting.

It is, however, important to focus a little bit on the second Pan-African congress of Paris in 1919 because it is of particular significance for us as Cameroonians. Du Bois felt that it was important to make a representation at the conference of Versailles after the "war to make the world safe for democracy". He felt that it was necessary for this democracy to be extended to those in Africa and other colonised areas. Because he could not be accepted as an official delegate, he went to Paris as a press correspondent and William Monroe Trotter, of the National Equal Rights League and editor of the *Boston Guardian* who was refused a visa, travelled to Paris disguised as a cook.² At Versailles, both Du Bois and Trotter were given the cold shoulder by Woodrow Wilson and others.

This only steeled Du Bois' determination. With the help of Blaise Diagne, the deputy from Senegal and Commissaire Général for the recruitment of African troops who had the ear of Georges Clemenceau, Du Bois was able to organise the second Pan-African congress in Paris in February 1919 with representatives from the West Indies, the United States and Africa. This was, of course, much to the embarrassment of the American Secretary of State Polk who had publicly stated that under no circumstances would Du Bois be allowed to hold his meeting in Paris.

This second Congress specifically asked that the German colonies be turned over to an international

organisation instead of being handled by various colonial powers. Out of this idea came the Mandates Commission. In a very real sense then, we owe a great debt of gratitude to W.E.B Du Bois!³

The Return to the Motherland – 1961-63

Under constant surveillance for possible involvement in "un-American activities", disappointed with the Talented Tenth of both races who seemed trapped in American materialism, Du Bois decided to give up American citizenship and to return to the land of his forefathers to become a Ghanaian citizen. Six days before his ninety-fifth birthday and six months before his death, on the eve of the March on Washington, this elder African statesman wrote:

My great-grand father was carried from the Gulf of Guinea. I have returned that my dust may mingle with the dust of my fore-fathers. There is not much time for me. But now, my life will flow on in the vigorous, young stream of Ghanaian life which lifts the African personality to its proper place among men. And I shall not have lived in vain. (*Black Titan*, 67)

The Souls of Black Folk.

When it appeared in 1903, Du Bois' book was considered the most important text that was published since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. If for some here was the new Prometheus who had stolen fire to hand over to his people so that they could free themselves, others saw the book as a snare, a dangerous weapon that was going to poison, rather than improve, race relations. If for the *Atlanta Constitution* the book was the product of a northern black who had lived in, but did not understand, the south, for the *Nashville Banner*, things were much worse. It states its case thus:

This book is dangerous for the Negro to read, for it will only excite discontent and fill his imagination with things that do not exist, or things that should not bear upon his mind. (*Black Titan*, 50)

So, what then was contained in this book that could perhaps excite discontent? To answer this question, we shall examine some of the essays in the *The Souls*. The first chapter, "Of our Spiritual Strivings", sets the tone of the work. Coming as it did during the period of the Reconstruction, that is, after the civil war, Du Bois' task was, through reasoned argument, to show

to what extent the promises made to the freedmen were or were not kept, to show to what extent the self-evident truths of the American constitution were applicable to those within the veil. Noting that it is a strange experience being a problem, he states that in school they were to exchange visiting cards but the girl he was to exchange cards with, refused his own, on account, of course, of his colour. (*The Souls*, 44) And the inevitable question that some of his black classmates asked was:

Why did God make me a stranger and an outcast in my own house? (45)

He states that the twoness that inhabits him, a Negro, an American, yields “no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (idem). Analysing this psychological situation further, he enunciates this now classic statement:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness,⁴ this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (idem).

He goes further to add that:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon, by his fellows, without having the *doors of Opportunity* closed roughly in his face. (45-46)

He noted that the psychic duality that inhabited the African-American, “has sent them often wooing false

gods and invoking false means of salvation, and at times has even seemed about to make them ashamed of themselves” (47). He adds that for the slave, slavery was the “sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice,... Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites” (idem). Unfortunately, the freedman, the freed slave, did “not find in freedom, his promised land” (48). For the black person to be able to hold his/her own in his world, two things were needed, the power of the ballot and book-learning. If the one could confer political power, the other could bring about self-consciousness, self-realization and self-respect. And Du Bois intimated that without these two: the ballot and education, the black person could not be sure he would not be placed into a second slavery. And this poignant statement:

To be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of dollars is the very bottom of hardships. (49)

He adds that the black struggle is simply towards fostering “the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack”. (52)

TWENTIETH CENTURY, RACE AND FREEDOM

Du Bois notes that the Emancipation Proclamation did not, unfortunately, emancipate the black man because during the period of reconstruction, what was given or promised the black man, was as soon taken away. The “forty acres and a mule” that were promised each slave was a dream that was never fulfilled. Though Fisk, Atlanta, Hampton and Howard Universities were founded during this period, the South believed that an educated Negro was a dangerous Negro and all was done to deprive blacks of the ballot.

Though many freedmen put their hard-earned dollars into the Freedmen's bank, this was so badly managed that the freedmen's savings disappeared taking along with them faith in men, faith in saving and faith in thrift. All of these problems, Du Bois contended,

had as their source, the color-line. In his words:

The Problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Africa and Asia, in America and the islands of the sea. It was a phase of this problem that caused the civil war. (54)

WASHINGTON, EDUCATION AND THE TALENTED TENTH

Unquestionably the leading black spokesperson at the time when *The Souls of Black Folk* was published, Du Bois nevertheless felt that Washington's policies were not going to serve the higher and long-term interests of blacks in the area of education and political and civic rights. In the area of education, Washington had founded Tuskegee Institute⁵ whose focus was on industrial education which was considered as a model for black youths. As far as Du Bois could determine, for Washington:

...the picture of a lone black boy poring over a French grammar amid the weeds and dirt of a neglected home soon seemed to him the acme of absurdities. (81)

For Du Bois, without higher education opportunities for blacks, there will be no possibility of training even those needed to provide industrial education. Besides, he argued, "the true college is not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes" (115). In addition, without college education, the Talented Tenth, the gifted in every race, the exceptional man whose role was to lift "his duller brethren slowly and painfully to his vantage-ground" (127) would be deprived of their sacred mission. Education, in sum, should be to

teach the workers to work and philosophers to think, make carpenters of carpenters, and philosophers of philosophers and fops of fools. (119)

In other words, each must be educated according to their ability.⁶ And so, for him, through every civilized and peaceful method, blacks had to strive for the rights that the world accords all men. Du Bois warned, and time showed that he was right. He asked:

By taking away their best equipped teachers and leaders, by slamming the door of opportunity in the faces of their bolder and brighter minds, will you make them satisfied with their lot? Or will you not rather

transfer their leading from the hands of men taught to think to the hands of untrained demagogues.⁷ (135)

As for himself, he notes:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas,⁸ where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls... I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn or condescension.⁹ (139)

In terms of the surrendering of the political and civic rights of blacks by Washington, this for Du Bois, was contained in the Atlanta Exposition Address (1895) or what has gone down in history as the "Atlanta Compromise". In it Washington stated; "In all things purely social we shall be as separate as the fingers, and yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress". (Long, 147) This, to Du Bois and other radicals, amounted to a complete surrender of the demand for civil and political equality, amounted to an endorsement of the alleged inferiority of blacks. Individuals have the right to shape the laws under which they live and work, for "only by arming every hand with a ballot,—with the right to have a voice in the policy of the state, that the greatest good of the greatest number could be attained". (196)

Noting that deception was the natural defence of the weak against the strong, in part because slave revolts led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner proved the hopelessness of physical defence, he warned that this notwithstanding:

Some day the Awakening will come, when the pent-up vigor of ten million million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living—Liberty, justice, and Right—is marked "For white People Only."¹⁰ (225)

THE LEGACY

In talking about Du Bois legacy, that is, what he bequeathed to us, we shall first examine his role as a Pan-Africanist, as a crusader for the rights of non-white persons and later we shall see in what ways *The Souls of Black Folk* speaks to us today, and without a doubt perhaps tomorrow, as we struggle against mountains of prejudice, oppression and discrimination.

Through the Pan-African congresses, Du Bois sought to make the African countries self-governing and he continued single-mindedly along this way till the 1945 Pan-African Congress in which were involved some of the future leaders of independent Africa. The Pan-African Congresses culminated in the founding of the Organisation of African Unity in 1963 which has today evolved into the African Union. This is Du Bois' gift to us. The import of his action is with us today in the 21st century, as the first conference of African Heads of State of the African Union met in Addis Ababa in February 2003.

Whether in the United States or in Africa, he had argued for group solidarity, for the building of strong institutions so that when negotiating with another group, they negotiate from a position of strength rather than that of weakness. It appears to me that this is what the NEPAD, the New Partnership for African Development, is all about. He at the beginning of the last century enunciated his theory that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker to the lighter races in Africa and Asia, in America and the islands of the sea. He argued that the color-line was brought about as a result of Empire, "the domination of white Europe over black Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income and ideas". Thus, Du Bois had conceived of the idea of the Third World half a century before the leaders of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Islands of the seas met in Bandung in Indonesia in 1955.

I submit that the area of intellectual inquiry today known as Postcolonial Studies which, among other things, shows Euro-American scholarship especially, though not exclusively, of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a series of constructions of otherness, began neither with the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 nor with Gareth Griffith's *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) but with Du Bois' scholarly research work. It was in *The Souls of Black Folk* that there was the first real attempt for the margin to write to the center. The groundwork had therefore been laid by Du Bois for the move from an activist to a textual culture that is a characteristic of most academies today, especially since the 1970s.

As for the legacy of Du Bois' classic, I think it is to minority, black or Third World discourse what Aristotle's poetics is to literary criticism. Everything

else that has been said since this history-making text was published, is something of a footnote. I agree with those who state that Du Bois' book served as a kind of harbinger of Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Jr. etc. But to this list must be added Langston Hughes, (who acknowledged that *The Souls* was the first book that he read on his own) Countee Cullen, Claude McKay and Jean Toomer. But to this list must also be added Leopold Sedar Senghor, Leon Gontran Damas, Aimé Césaire and Peter Abrahams. We cannot, I believe, properly understand Steve Biko and his Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa without an awareness of some of the issues first raised in *The Souls*.

In his essay, "Of the Passing of the First Born," Du Bois rejoices over his son's death because he is not dead, but has escaped, is not bond, but free. Now gone, "no taunt shall madden his happy boyhood" (231). This is the issue raised in Countee Cullen's poem "Incident" in which the persona, a young child says:

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking at me.
Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger".

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December,
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.
(*The Black Poets*, 99)

You probably also remember that in the section "Of The Sorrow Songs" which closes the book, he notes that:

Through all the sorrow of The Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things... Sometimes it is a faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear, that sometime, somewhere, *men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins*.(274)

I know that you do hear in that last statement, Martin Luther King, Jr's famous "I have a dream", delivered

in Washington in 1963 on the eve of Du Bois' death in Accra, Ghana. These same kinds of echoes or resonances, which testify to the fact that Du Bois provided the over-all framework from which blacks and others could express the aches and pains in their souls, can also be found in Countee Cullen's "Heritage" and "Yet do I Marvel", in Langston Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", "American Heartbreak", "I, Too", "Mother to Son", "Cross", as well as Claude McKay's "Tiger", "If we must die", "The white City" etc.

As one goes through the pages of Du Bois' classic, the recurrent themes that emerge are liberty and freedom, justice, equal opportunity and democracy. As we make our timid steps into the 21st century, we note that the issues which were of such paramount importance to Du Bois a century ago are just as important today as they were then. When in "Of Mr Booker T. Washington and Others" he says:

Honest and earnest criticism from those whose interests are most nearly touched—criticism of writers by readers, of government by those governed, of leaders by those led,—this is the soul of democracy and the safeguard of modern society. (83)

He is speaking to us with the accent of the 21st century. Were we to pause a moment and listen to Du Bois, then perhaps we could spare ourselves the misery and social dislocation that is everywhere visible in the four quarters of the African continent. In today's world of globalisation, where the gap between the rich and the poor is wider than it was two decades ago, Du Bois' message in the *The Souls* is more relevant than ever. I am convinced that if one looks carefully at the crowds protesting against the policies of the World Trade Organisation, one will find marching at the forefront of that cross-section of humanity, a man, head held high, and on his right hand, a copy of *The Souls of Black Folk*. Or, perhaps, is it the spirit of *The Souls*? For, in that book, Du Bois so well expressed the souls of one people, his people, that it became representative of the timeless universal human soul in its eternal quest for those timeless truths: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

NOTES

1. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.
2. See Richard B. Moore "Du Bois and Pan-Africa" in

Black Titan, 190.

3. Just to show how far Du Bois was ahead of his time, at the January 1919 Pan-African Congress in Paris, one of the resolutions was "That: every native child should be taught to read his own language, and that of the trustee state, that all who wished would have higher technical instruction, that all who wished would have the highest cultural training, and all who wished would be trained as teachers". *Black Titan*, (146-47).
4. What Du Bois termed the double-consciousness was characterised by Richard Wright as the double-vision. There are parallels between these concepts and Gloria Anzaldua's "new mestiza consciousness and Calderon and Saldivar's "borderlands theory". For more on this see Walter D. Mignolo, *Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*. N.J: Princeton University Press, 2000.
5. It is worth noting that Achimota College in Ghana and Yaba Technical Institute in Nigeria were patterned after Tuskegee Institute. This is hardly surprising when one remembers that Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana were among the first Africans to study in the United States of America. Both of them were students at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.
6. The 1998 UNESCO World declaration on higher education for the twenty-first century which held in Paris focused on the same kinds of preoccupations Du Bois voiced in 1903. Article 17 of that declaration re-affirmed inter-alia "the right of all people to education and the right of access to higher education based on individual merit and capacity" (23).
7. In the 1960s, blacks adopted different radical positions spearheaded by the Black Power Movement, the SNCC and the Black Panther Party, which saw counter-violence as the only weapon that could check white power which had put blacks down for so long. Some of these uncompromising attitudes came about in part, as the result of the publication of the American edition of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1963 by Grove Press. Again, the centennial of *The Souls* coincides with the 40th anniversary of the publication of the American edition of Fanon's text.
8. Alexandre Dumas was a man of "colour". In Du Bois' company, he would have had no reason to wince.
9. Du Bois was convinced that prejudice was the result of ignorance and that it could be eradicated through science which leads to truth.
10. Here again, one sees Du Bois' prescience. He had foreseen what would happen in the 1960s. Amidst chants of "Black Power" and "Freedom", in Watts, Chicago and Mississippi, black marchers sang:
 Jingle bells,
 Shotgun shells
 Freedom all the way,
 Oh what fun it is to blast
 A trooper man away.

For more on this see Vincent Harding's very engaging narrative *The Other American Revolution* (1980).

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