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The Relevance and Redefining of Du Bois's Talented Tenth: Two Centuries Later

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*“There is no such thing as an average human being.
If you have a normal brain you are superior.”
- Dr. Benjamin Carson*

1903 was a seminal year. In that year, the man for whom the Teddy Bear was named (Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt) was President of the United States of America. In 1903, while the British were taking over Africa’s Fulani Empire (Salamone), Panama established its independence. During this time, the Wright brothers acquired the patent that would result in Orville Wright’s making the first documented air flight. On the ground, the first Tour de France bicycle race was held, the first coast-to-coast automobile trip was completed (from San Francisco to New York), and New York’s Williamsburg Bridge opened. Apparently, 1903 was the year for transportation because it was also the year that noted scholar and philosopher William Edward Burghardt Du Bois published his essay “The Talented Tenth”—a prescription for transporting African Americans (then commonly known as Negroes) from their current position of disempowerment to one of collective empowerment and elevation. However, W.E.B. Du Bois was not the first to ever utilize the term “Talented Tenth.” At a time when segregation was the rule, higher education was not readily accessible to all seeking it, and long before persons of color received voting rights, Reverend Henry Lyman Morehouse (a White Northerner for whom Morehouse College was named) published his essay “The Talented Tenth” (circa 1896). He would begin with tackling the issue of education for the Negro. “In the discussion concerning Negro education we should not forget the talented tenth man. An ordinary education may answer for the nine men of mediocrity; but if this is all we offer the talented tenth man, we make a prodigious mistake” (Morehouse, par. 1).

Morehouse’s text and concept laid the groundwork for what the world would come to know as Du Bois’s “Talented Tenth” essay/theory. In Du Bois’s discussion of this notion, the focus of education (tightly intertwined with a call for heightened morality) remained intact, but he expanded on Morehouse’s project by applying it not just to the students of Augusta Institute (later renamed Morehouse College) but to the highly talented among *all* African Americans. As a result of its high profile and its emphasis on the importance of top intellectuals and artists of the race, however, the concept would also become known as an elitist (and sometimes sexist) theory that would not be readily embraced or accepted as valid and/or inclusionary. Whatever revisions Du Bois would later make in an attempt to redefine and/or broaden his theory would be ill promoted and infrequently acknowledged. Yet, in spite of the criticism, Du Bois’s concept has had a powerful impact on American culture. With that in mind, the writer will attempt to explore and examine Du Bois’s theory within a contemporary context.

Though Du Bois does take time to mention (Black) women in his prose, feminist critics have often found fault with his routine use of “man” in referring to Blacks. However and obviously, a people and community include more than one gender—just as the *Talented Tenth* would be made up of men and women. In her arguments regarding women’s role in the progress of Negroes, Evelyn Brooks-Higginbotham dedicates a chapter in her book *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* to “The Female Talented Tenth.” While championing Du Bois and loosely defining his theory as one which “symbolized the best and brightest in all societies, African Americans not exempted...” (21) she interjects the

history, necessity, and value of incorporating women within the schema of the *Talented Tenth*. “Northern white efforts, specifically those of the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS) and its women’s auxiliaries in New England and the Midwest, played a seminal role in the development of educated black leaders” (21).

The efforts of the ABHMS may have provided some fuel for Du Bois in the promotion of his famed prescription for success (in emulating the ideals and achievements of White middle class society via the encouragement and recognition of a Black one), as they too promoted education for the Black masses. According to Higginbotham, in an 1865 report from the ABHMS, the group “designated the training of black men for the ministry as the most direct, accessible and effective way of teaching the mass of colored people” (21). However, before 1875 they broadened their goals to include the collegiate training of Black women. By 1872, Shaw University would welcome women—many of whom would soon become members of the Talented Tenth. Arguing that slavery had deprived Blacks of role models, they (like W.E.B. Du Bois) saw the benefits of gender inclusiveness (within education) and the lack thereof as “short sighted and suicidal” (Higginbotham 25). Hence, Higginbotham notes, the ABHMS attempted to woo naysayers by espousing that an advancement in Black society was one from which all society members—regardless of ethnicity and gender—would benefit. “They were convinced that black women left an indelible imprint on the character of society...” (24)—quite a progressive stance at the time.

As stated in the introduction, Du Bois promoted his concept of the Talented Tenth at a time when Negroes were severely disempowered as well as disenfranchised. The time period being only 40 years after emancipation in the United States placed the Negro in a position of seeking elevation from approximately 400 years of legal chattel slavery. Needless to say, the ending of slavery did not immediately place the Negro in a position of elevation, let alone equality. Negative views and images of the Negro, who in 1903 had only recently become barely acknowledged as human, permeated American society. Most went from a position of physical enslavement to one of social and economic enslavement as sharecroppers. A ruling regime, infuriated, insecure, and concerned that the ending of slavery would dethrone them from a position of power, reinforced negative stereotypes about Blacks and put into place numerous “separate but [not] equal” laws. These laws, habits, and mentalities would continue to perpetuate White patriarchy while subjugating the Black masses. Under this system, African Americans remained at the lowest of the socioeconomic ladder and faced many daily and legitimized degradations. Consequently, affluent, educated, and socially conscious Blacks (along with sympathetic White allies) independently and collectively sought to find ways to right these wrongs. Some, like Booker T. Washington, a prominent Black educator, advocated for the elevation of the Negro via the access and application of vocational/industrial education (Harlan). Conversely, Du Bois believed and promoted the idea that formal education geared toward professions (e.g. physicians, educators, and attorneys) that did not focus on industrial trades was the ticket Blacks needed in order to board the train of elevation and empowerment. “To attempt to establish any sort of a system of common and industrial school training, without *first* providing for the higher training of the very best teachers, is simply throwing your money to the winds” (32). With that purpose in mind, Du Bois published his “The Talented Tenth” essay within the collaborative book, *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-Day*.

Du Bois's essay would passionately lay out what he perceived to be the problems of the Negro and his firm and detailed suggestion for how to solve them, education being the key component of that solution. However, in doing so Du Bois recognized that not all Negroes were equipped to be leaders and elevators of the Black race. This belief led to Du Bois's underscoring Reverend Henry Lyman Morehouse's equation of ten percent of the Black race. "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races" (33).

Fast forward to two centuries later and African Americans now occupy positions in business as corporate CEOs and can routinely be seen participating as high ranking government officials extending all the way to Commander-in-Chief. In 2012 Barak Obama (a Black man who shares with Du Bois an *alma mater* of Harvard University) was reelected as President of the United States for a second term. However, the Black masses are still in a position of disempowerment that has the critically thinking Black community questioning, "Just how far we have come?" Inquiring minds want to know if a Talented Tenth still exists. If they do, are they still the elitist bourgeois (often of lighter complexion) Du Bois seemingly characterized, and what is their responsibility to the Black community? Is education still the key? These are all questions Black intellectuals, as well as many who occupy the ranks of the masses, grapple with.

In their book, *The Rich and the Rest of Us: A Poverty Manifesto*, authors Tavis Smiley and Dr. Cornel West shed light on saddening statistics relating to the state of inequality in the education currently provided to Blacks. In this book, as parallels are drawn between poverty and education, Smiley and West emphasize the lack of opportunities that would enable one to participate as the Black community's Talented Tenth.

We do not believe the Black/white achievement gap captures the complexity of the education crisis in America. Although there have been modest gains in the reducing this gap, Black children still score lower on mathematics and reading tests than white. And more than 50 percent of Black children drop out of high school as compared to 30 percent of students overall. (118)

As achievement in education can easily be equated to overall success, and higher education is now much more readily accessible to all, Blacks still lag far behind in all areas of access to opportunity except consumerism, though they earn less and acquire fewer tangible assets than their White counterparts. In *Racial Segregation and the Black/White Achievement Gap, 1992 To 2009*, Dennis J. Condron et al. state and underscore the severity and impact of racial inequality.

In the contemporary United States, the educational achievement gap between white and black students constitutes an important barrier to black/white economic equality, - factors ranging from inequalities in students' social class backgrounds to differences in cultural

orientations toward schooling to various inequalities between and with schools themselves. (130)

Condron's article goes on to say that this discrepancy is due to "the fact that black and white students in the United States by and large do not attend the same schools" (130). This is particularly relevant within the confines of a modern perspective of a Black Talented Tenth because it makes a direct correlation between America's failing education system (most aptly as it applies to its Black citizens) and an effective Talented Tenth. Consequently, a system which creates a deficit in its production of the well-educated and successful aids in the perpetuation of an underclass by depriving that same class of available role models. Simply stated, if there were more equity in education wherein American institutions of education equipped Black students with the skill set and intellectual prowess necessary for functioning competitively in local as well as global environments, a Talented Tenth might easily be exponentially increased to a Talented Seventieth.

In exploring criteria for whom and what today's Talented Tenth looks like, a recent *Ebony* article takes a stab at compiling an "Annual List of the Most Influential African Americans." The contributing authors of the "*Ebony* Power 100" article "reflected on the people, politics, issues and cultural phenomena that have kept us transfixed and impacted our lives" (126). In recognizing the diversity of the Black community and acknowledging the fact that "power" means different things to different people, the authors selected "the 100 primary influencers and game changers who have made vital accomplishments during the past year" (126) as the list "highlights individuals from a number of disciplines: creative arts, media, politics, business, religion, sports, environmental, philanthropy, digerati and even young emerging leaders" (Bobo, et al. 126).

In a technological era where fleeting iconic status is cemented through media outlets and social networking sites, citizens are inundated with supposed iconic images of those who are adept in song, dance, folly, and athletics. If it were not for awards ceremonies (e.g. The NAACP Image Awards and B.E.T.'s Black Girls Rock) and sporadic news stories of Black accomplishment, one would have to look long and hard to find examples of African American academic prowess and racial achievement. That is not to say that the Black community is without its intellectuals but merely to point out that there seems to have been a shift in priorities. This shift very well may be responsible for what some might lament as a stagnation in Black progression.

With a changing in America's economic environment, the move from an age of industrialization to an information age, and a longstanding recession, even degreed Blacks are not guaranteed employment and the opportunities that present growth and elevation. Further, the potential Talented Tenth of today is a "me generation," not the "we generation" of the past. Consequently, much less focus is placed upon communal efforts and responsibility. One wonders sometimes if the Black community has forgotten that there can be no community without "unity" (both etymologically and literally), or have they just gotten caught up in perceived success through individual financial gain and strivings? There's an African proverb that eloquently captures these sentiments. In recognizing the benefit of strength through unity, African ancestors noted, "One tree does not make a forest."

Toward the end of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's life, he too acknowledged the need for redefining his Talented Tenth theory to be one which was more inclusive. His theory took on a "double consciousness" of its own in that he came to believe and understand that "the souls of Black folks" stood to be in consistent conflict if the Black community could not be elevated with the intellectual elite working hand-in-hand with the masses. Unfortunately, this metamorphosis in ideology is one he is infrequently credited with—particularly through the lens of those who are comfortable seeing him as no more than an academic elitist. That being said, though the term may not be as relevant today as it was when it was conceived, the mission is just as valuable.

"But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change."

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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