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The Struggle to be Black and an American Citizen

John Kelly '08

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Henry Louis Gates' stunning portrayal of Anatole Broyard's struggle to reconcile his African American heritage with his desire to be a respected writer provides a glimpse into the current problems suffocating the advancement of blacks in American society. As Gates describes, "the man wanted to be appreciated not for being black but for being a writer, even though his pretending not to be black was stopping him from writing" (p. 203). This inability for blacks to reconcile their African descent with their American citizenry contributes to a profound hopelessness in the African American community. To uncover the foundations for this despair, W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* laments the presence of a vast, smothering veil that continuously reinforces the separation between races. Faced with this constant reminder of their perceived inferiority, many members of the black community resign themselves to the inevitability of their second-rate citizenship. Therefore, instead of attempting to tackle the countless obstacles that obstruct the path toward equality they remain suppressed by this veil. Though separated by nearly a century, Cornel West in his book entitled *Race Matters* identifies a similar trend in the modern African American community. While the visible constraints of racism evaporated through the Civil Rights Movement, West still asserts the

presence of the insidious veil of psychological separation. To solve the problems facing the African American community both Du Bois and West seek to redefine the parameters for assimilation into American society, thereby counteracting the sense of despondency that threatens to dissolve the African American community.

While writing *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois lived under the restrictions of the Jim Crow Laws and faced blatant racism on a daily basis. As a member of the elite intellectual class, Du Bois had unparalleled access to the upper echelons of white society. However, even with his stunning intellectual abilities he still had to deal with the condescending attitudes of whites and the unasked question of "How does it feel to be a problem?" (p. 43) For Du Bois, this cultural segregation represents a veil that is nearly impossible for blacks to break through because of the color of their skin. Instead of trying to infiltrate this impenetrable veil, he believes "that wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil" (p. 143) implying that Du Bois thinks he can use education to unite the black community in their efforts to escape the inherent prejudices of society. Unfortunately, through his personal tribulations in teaching this truth, Du Bois realizes education remains largely inaccessible to the majority of blacks. With this limited access he notices a

sense of nihilism permeating throughout the black community. As defined by West, this nihilism is "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaningless, hopelessness, and (most important) loneliness." (p. 23) In his society, Du Bois views the concrete obstacles imposed through the Jim Crow Laws as the main contributor to this sense of nihilism. Through his personal experience as a teacher in a rural Tennessee community, Du Bois realizes that even enlightenment through education may not be strong enough to counteract nihilism and the vicious conditions of segregation. When he begins teaching he is thrilled by his pupil's unquenchable thirst for learning and the prospect of a bright future for these children armed with educations. However, upon his return ten years later Du Bois must deal with the bleak reality that his students are dead, imprisoned, or working on farms which ultimately dampens his enthusiasm for the notion of progress. Through his personal experience Du Bois realizes the tragedy of a society that provides glimpses of freedom through education and then deliberately slams the door in the faces of the hopeful through segregation.

Unlike Du Bois, Cornel West writes during a time of unrestricted societal freedoms for black citizens of America. Though unhindered by the draining effects of legal segregation, West identifies a disturbing trend that poses a grave threat to the vitality of the African American community. He finds that many citizens have become complacent in their struggle for equality and the anger that ignited the Civil Rights Movement has largely faded. This circumstance would be acceptable if blacks uniformly received equal treatment, however the subtle influences

of cultural segregation through economic differences creates a severely uneven playing field. West demonstrates the extent of this stagnation through his assertion that the quantity of black intellectuals and politicians has never been so high, but the quality of both groups so low (p. 53). He believes the cause of this trend originates from the dissolution of tangible examples of segregation, which prevents blacks from having an external scapegoat for their failures. Instead they view their letdowns as a reflection of personal flaws and translate this disappointment into self-loathing. This leads to a sense of nihilism that stifles progress in the black community. Unfortunately, the true cause of their failures lies in the cultural forms of discrimination, which range from unequal housing to poor school districts that create a situation in which African Americans are almost always destined to fail. Yet, in a society that West believes still views blacks as "problem people" (p. 5) a unified movement has failed to redress the subtle prejudices that handicap the success of African Americans because of this nihilism.

Without constant reminders of cultural segregation, white Americans will look to the Civil Rights movement to ease their conscience. This enables the majority to slip back into their vanilla suburbs and avoid confronting the uncomfortable reality that modern society is filled with discriminatory practices toward blacks. To rectify the current situation West believes disillusioned members of the black community must make it a priority to notify America's deliberate disregard for the ideals outlined in the Constitution. These steps will force America as a whole into "grasping the structural and

institutional processes that have disfigured, deformed, and devastated black America" (p. 69). Unfortunately, West feels the prospect of this occurring is bleak because the middle-class blacks who previously ushered in this movement have largely emigrated toward the superficial comforts of materialism in an effort to assimilate into white society. With this widespread migration previous bulwarks against nihilism like religious congregations and civic community have significantly weakened. The combination of these factors contributes to the "psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America" (p. 20). These problems illustrate that West feels it will be a difficult task to make America more accepting of blacks.

Though facing similar circumstances, Du Bois and West advocate the use of different strategies to offset the effects of racism. The end goal for both authors is to provide a country that enables African Americans to reconcile their heritage with their American citizenry to form one all-encompassing self that successfully merges these identities. West articulates these hopes when he envisions a time when "the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor deflections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life" (p. 6). To obtain this enviable end, Du Bois embraces the idea of the talented tenth or those privileged members of the African American population that have access to a liberal arts education. This conviction reflects the nature of the time period in which most blacks had limited access to education. Therefore, Du Bois expects those blacks lucky and intelligent enough to attend Fisk,

Howard, Morehouse and other black colleges to return to their communities to strengthen the education of future generations. With this process in effect, Du Bois believes this will narrow the educational gap between whites and blacks and through their access to enlightened ideals inspire members of the African American community to demand an improvement of their substandard position in society.

West approaches this goal differently because the visible restrictions placed on blacks had been removed by the 1990's. Instead he seeks to address the nihilism that runs rampant throughout African American communities. West believes a two-tiered approach of improving the crisis of black leadership and re-connecting the middle class with poor black communities will lead to progress. An inspiring leader can make American society as a whole, but more importantly blacks aware of the subtle institutional racism that impedes their path to success. Bolstered by this realization, West believes it is only a matter of time before the awakening of a social movement that spreads throughout all class levels of the African American community. Buoyed by this new found enthusiasm, West believes the middle-class blacks will return to those cities they abandoned and salvage their communities from despair. Through the re-entry of the middle class he thinks the integrity of the religious and civic institutions will be restored. The varying approaches of Du Bois and West illustrate how the differing circumstances between 1903 and 1993 influence the adoption of strategies to improve the plight of African Americans in America.

For each of these men they hope that through their efforts they can further black's continuous quest to break free from the constraints of racism. Du Bois describes this when he says he hopes for a society that "makes it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (p. 45). With this simple ideal in mind both Du Bois and West identify the danger of enabling hopelessness to penetrate the black community. However, throughout The Souls of Black Folk Du Bois adopts a much more optimistic attitude toward the future. Though he realizes immediate changes are unlikely, he clearly envisions a time in the distant future

when blacks and whites will peacefully co-exist and embrace each other's cultures. For West, in Race Matters he discusses how the dissolution of blatant racism through the Civil Rights Movement did not lead to the hopeful dreams of W.E.B. Du Bois. Instead blatant racism has been replaced by subtle segregation that disheartens the entire African American community. Du Bois might be unrealistically optimistic, but the emergence of a bright-eyed intellectual might solve the crisis of leadership and lead blacks closer to Du Bois's hope for a truly culturally integrated society.