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**"THE EDUCATION (OR MIS-EDUCATION?) OF
W.E.B. DUBOIS, MARTIN LUTHER KING, AND TONI
MORRISON"**

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**“The Education (or Mis-Education?) of
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**Paper presented at the 19th Annual Conversation on the Liberal Arts,
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**By James B. LaGrand
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I begin with a personal anecdote from the life of a university teacher and administrator. Recently, I became the new director of my school’s honors program. Among my goals are to increase the number of racial and ethnic minority students who hear about, consider, and hopefully join our program and to start a new book-of-the-year program to foster culture and conversation among students in the program. I eventually decided that Homer’s *Odyssey* would serve as the first such book-of-the-year for our program. As I shared my plans with colleagues and acquaintances, I noticed that some saw these two goals--increasing access and reading a classic text like *The Odyssey* together--as being in tension, even as contradictory. Perhaps some attending at this conference might respond similarly.

This anecdote can be extended to help us explore the relationship between two of the biggest projects for those of us today who care about liberal arts education, including the humanities. These two projects are: 1) to increase access to this education for groups who have lacked such access in the past, and 2) through our teaching, speaking, and writing to serve as apologists for the effects of reading life-changing texts. My paper addresses a number of questions regarding these two goals. Are they in tension in our time? Have they been viewed as being in tension in the past? Why might some see tension between them and others not?

Our conference’s call for papers seems to touch on these issues. It acknowledges that some past approaches to the liberal arts have been “narrow,” “self-interested,” and the product of

“privilege,” that they have replicated “exclusion” and the “racial status quo,” rather than “inclusion.” We have also increasingly heard these notes from higher education organizations in recent years. A 2018 report by The American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) encourages educators to pursue “equity-mindedness.” Among other things this means that white educators especially need to “recognize whiteness as a racial identity that accrues privilege and power.” The Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) has also been encouraging white educators to consider their racial identity, not only because of its relationship to systemic privilege but also because Christians should take seriously the “unbiblical nature of that privilege as it comes at the expense of other people of color and is antithetical to God’s design of human value.” Some CCCCU scholars have recently expressed frustration about Christian colleges’ passive approach to racial issues, arguing that this is both a moral and a practical issue. They write that we “must address issues of racism in order to increase racial diversity ... because changing demographics show that the future of higher education must include students of color in order to survive.”¹

Going back to the opening anecdote, we might ask how these trends and concerns within higher education relate specifically to curricula and reading lists, even to something particular like assigning a group of students to read Homer’s *Odyssey* together. Do some works exclude racial or ethnic minority readers and so become unacceptably narrow and exclusive? If so, what are they? To what degree is a writer like Homer “white,” in the sense that he speaks out of a particular, bounded identity and reaches only a sub-set of readers again based out of this

¹ Association of American Colleges & Universities, “A Vision for Equity” (2018), 54; Nate Risdon, Alexander Jun, and Allison Ash, “A Call to Listen, Respond, and Connect: White Christians for Racial Justice in the CCCCU,” *Advance* 7:2 (2016) <http://advance.cccu.org/stories/a-call-to-listen-respond-and-connect>; Allison Ash, Karen Clark, and Alexander Jun, “The Paradox of Faith: White Administrators and Anti-Racism Advocacy in Christian Higher Education,” *Christian Higher Education* 16 (2017): 250.

identity? Addressing these questions will be important for those who care about the development of the humanities and the liberal arts as a whole in the future.

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The primary focus of this paper will be on the education of three 20th-century African-American leaders: W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Toni Morrison. But the title also holds out the possibility that these three were not educated properly, but rather mis-educated. This term comes from the title of Carter Woodson's 1933 book, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Woodson was born in Virginia in 1875 to formerly-enslaved parents. Growing up during the post-Reconstruction Jim Crow era, Woodson saw white-controlled schools and educational materials ignoring the accomplishments and contributions of Black Americans. His 1933 book argued that the education system was quite literally mis-educating Black Americans about who they were and what they had done, making them ignore or dismiss their own history. Woodson was especially frustrated that some middle-class educated Black leaders themselves contributed to this trend out of self-interest or cowardice. Woodson concluded that they had "contempt toward their own people" since in the schools over which they had influence they led Blacks to "admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African." In response to this "white-washed" history, Woodson called for fellow African Americans to "do for himself what his oppressors will never do for him" and to incorporate more Black history into the schools. This project culminated in the nationwide observation of Black History Month beginning in 1976.²

Since then, a focus on particular identities (including racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual) that stand apart from and often opposed to broader identities has increased in the academy. Some

² Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (Washington, D.C.: Associated Publishers, 1933).

in the humanities have been inspired by Paulo Freire whose use of “critical pedagogy” emphasizes the need to identify the oppressor and the oppressed in order to teach and learn justly.³

Beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, more academics studying justice focused on group-based oppression rather than the traditional liberal approach that saw proper procedure and equal treatment of all individuals as the key factors. Iris Marion Young, one of the leaders of this movement, saw her task as persuading people “that the discourse of oppression makes sense of much of our social experience.” At about the same time, Peggy McIntosh began popularizing the concept of group privilege, arguing that it is essential for understanding of oneself and others.⁴

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw took account of these group memberships, drawing increased interest in the academy, and analyzed them through what she called “intersectionality.” Rather than treating race or gender as separate and mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, she encouraged us to these and other identities as reinforcing one another in explaining discrimination and mistreatment. Advocates of critical race theory have encouraged the use of these tools to critically interrogate identity, inter-group relations, as well as history and literature. An illustration of the growing interest in group identity is the encouragement by Ali Michael, director of the Race Institute for K-12 Educators, for teachers to see racial identity as more than just a “tool” with which to think and teach and write. Indeed, Michael says, it’s the whole “toolbox.”⁵

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 39; Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” Working Paper 189, Wellesley Centers for Women, 1988.

⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989):139-167; Keonghee Tao Han and Judson Laughter eds., *Critical Race Theory in Teacher Education: Informing Classroom Culture and Practice* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2019); Robert D. Reason, “Engaging White Students on Multicultural Campuses,” in Stephen John Quaye and Shaun R. Harper, eds., *Student Engagement in Higher Education:*

These recent academic emphases, along with postcolonial theory, have prompted debates on college and university campuses about what students should read and view and examine. Stanford University, after significant campus discussion and media attention, dropped their required Western Civ course in 1988. Some faculty members and students criticized the curriculum's fifteen common texts in religion, philosophy, political thought, science, and literature as too narrow, even as a "straightjacket." The course was replaced with a new one, "Culture, Ideas, and Values," that kept some of the old components, but also more flexibility and attention to non-western and minority voices. Recently, Yale's Art History department announced that this will be the last year for of its most popular general education courses in recent decades, "Introduction to Art History: Renaissance to the Present." It will be replaced by new courses, including some that include "artistic critiques related to gender, race, and capitalism ... as well as art's relationship to climate change." The chair of the Art History department noted that the long-time introduction to art history course highlighted the western tradition, an approach he views as "problematic" and which will be remedied by the new Art History curriculum.⁶

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Critical theory, privilege, intersectionality, and postcolonialism initially do not seem to have much relevance for the reading of a text like Homer's *Odyssey* and vice versa. Does this mean that it and other classical texts are not relevant for readers who members of racial or ethnic

Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations, 2d ed (New York: Routledge, 2015), 75-87; Sharon M. Ravitch, "Pluralism, Power, and Politics: Discourses of Diverse Pedagogies and Pedagogies of Diversity," in Norah Peters-Davis and Jeffrey Shultz, eds., *Challenges of Multicultural Education: Teaching and Taking Diversity Courses* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 2-3; Ali Michael, *Raising Race Questions: Whiteness and Inquiry in Education* (New York: Teacher's College Press, 2015), 4.

⁶ Larry Gordon, "Stanford Debates Its View of Western Culture," *Los Angeles Times* (February 3, 1988) <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-02-03-mn-27224-story.html>; Margaret Hedeman and Matt Kristoffersen, "Art History Department to Scrap Survey Course," *Yale Daily News* (January 24, 2020) <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2020/01/24/art-history-department-to-scrap-survey-course/>.

minority groups? The evaluation of texts like *The Odyssey* and the consideration of whether it should be assigned today can be approached using different lenses or interpretive tools. *The Odyssey* can certainly be defended on its own terms--based on the insights it offers and the craft it displays. But rather than pursuing this line of thought, I will look at *The Odyssey* and other classic texts *historically*, as they were engaged by people in the past. History's concerns are different from this of other fields. The discipline of History asks not so much what is or what should be or what might be, but rather what happened.⁷

The three historical figures whose education we will explore are W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King, and Toni Morrison. There are several reasons for this. They are among the most important figures in all of African-American history because of how they influenced the law, politics, society, culture, education, and the arts. They managed to access higher education, overcoming challenges and restrictions in the process. And they each experienced a liberal arts education. After examining DuBois' and King's and Morrison's educations and taking into account recent theoretical work on race, we will be prepared to assess whether their educations were narrow or fulsome, whether they were mal-educated or educated well.

One of the things for which W.E.B. DuBois is best-known for was his commitment to a full rigorous education for Black Americans. In striving for influence, his frequent rival was Booker T. Washington, the founder of the Tuskegee Institute and advocate of industrial education as a way for Blacks to advance during a time of segregation and racial violence. DuBois charged Washington with being too accommodating to those groups and forces that were opposed to Black interests and Black power. He promoted his vision for Black uplift and

⁷ James B. LaGrand, "The Problems of Preaching through History," in John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller, eds., *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian's Vocation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010): 187-213.

critiqued that of Washington in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Fairly or not, DuBois painted Washington as counseling submission in the face of racial opposition. DuBois was vigilant about the need for Blacks to have access to higher education, writing, “Negroes must insist continually, in season and out of season, that voting is necessary to modern manhood, that color discrimination is barbarism, and that black boys need education as well as white boys.”⁸

This vigilance was in large part the result of his experience with higher education at Nashville’s Fisk University starting in 1885. Although he would eventually study at several of the world’s greatest universities, part of him never left Fisk. Later in his life, DuBois would write, “I was at Harvard but not of it. I was a student of Berlin, but still a son of Fisk.”⁹ DuBois often wrote fondly of his time at Fisk. To him, it had all the quintessential positive features of the small, residential liberal arts college.

[The faculty] lived and ate together, studied and worked, hoped and harkened in the dawning light. In actual formal content their curriculum was doubtless old-fashioned, but in educational power it was supreme, for it was the contact of living souls.¹⁰

At the time DuBois attended Fisk, it had a traditional liberal arts curriculum. There DuBois studied Greek, Latin, French, German, theology, mathematics, physical science, music, moral philosophy, literature, and history.¹¹ The influence of the classes DuBois took and the texts he read can be seen in many areas of both his public and private life, including in what is one of the best-known excerpts from *The Souls of Black Folk* at the end of chapter 6 where DuBois reflects on the nature and ramifications of education:

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I
move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and

⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 55.

⁹ Shawn Leigh Alexander, *W. E. B. DuBois: An American Intellectual and Activist* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 9.

¹⁰ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 100.

¹¹ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. DuBois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 76.

welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?¹²

These are remarkable words. They show a familiarity with and reverence for a wide range of writers and thinkers. They reference and play with long-standing classical images. (Perhaps the veil relates to Plato's cave, as some scholars have suggested?) And these words demonstrate the empowerment and confidence that came from DuBois' education. His boldness in speaking to a hypocritical America is rooted in his deep, extensive education.

DuBois, like all lovers of liberal arts education in every age, faced difficulties in convincing others to love as he did. This type of education can seem costly and impractical, especially to a group like poor Black sharecroppers during the time DuBois was a student at Fisk in the 1880s. For two summers, DuBois lived among them as he taught at a small, poor, all-Black country school near Watertown, Tennessee. He reported being enchanted by the experience of teaching these children: "The fine faith the children had in the wisdom of their teacher was truly marvelous. We read and spelled together, wrote a little, picked flowers, sang, and listened to stories of the world beyond the hill."

Yet these schoolchildren were also often needed at home—to help look after younger siblings and to work the fields. When attendance dwindled, DuBois visited his students' homes and tried to convince parents with doubts about book-learning to permit their sons and daughters

¹² DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 109.

to resume their studies again. His rhetorical strategy during these home visits drew directly from the liberal arts education he was receiving at Fisk. Here is how he described his approach:

Toiling up the hill, and getting as far into the cabin as possible, I put Cicero *pro Archia Poeta* into the simplest English with local applications, and usually convinced them—for a week or so.

DuBois says no more about how he paraphrased and translated Cicero for Black parents who had been prevented from pursuing any education themselves. But it is likely he struck relevant notes in Cicero concerning identity, status, citizenship, and virtue to convince poor Black parents to permit their children to receive an education.¹³

It should be noted that great writers and thinkers was not all DuBois came to love while he was at Fisk. He also came to love the variety of Black people he came to know on Fisk's campus and in Nashville. He writes, "I was thrilled to be for the first time among so many people of my own color or rather of such various and extraordinary colors, which I had only glimpsed before, but who it seemed were bound to me by new and exciting and eternal ties."¹⁴ Clearly, for DuBois there was no conflict between his love for beauty and the pursuit of the truth and his love for his own people.

Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up with relatively more opportunities than other young Black Americans of his time. His childhood home was on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, described as the "richest Negro street in the world" in the early twentieth century because of its many Black-owned businesses, theaters, and churches. Yet member of the King family, too, faced segregation and other forms of racial proscription regularly. Atlanta's leaders cared little about the city's segregated schools attended by Black students like young Martin Luther King. As keen a student as he was, he was reading at only an eighth-grade level at the time he graduated high

¹³ DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 64-65.

¹⁴ Alexander, *W. E. B. DuBois*, 8.

school. Access to education was a great challenge for King as it was for other African Americans.

King blossomed at Atlanta's Morehouse College, which he entered in the fall of 1944 at the age of fifteen. In his four years there, he took a full slate of liberal arts courses (Philosophy, Classics, Composition, Literature, Shakespeare, American Literature, History of Civilization, Math, French, Physics, Biology) as well Bible and Church History (a result of the school's Christian identity), and social science courses (Psychology, Sociology, Contemporary Social Trends, Social Psychology, Social Institutions, Social Legislation, Intercultural Relations) that increasingly interested him. One of King's biographers has written that that King "benefitted from Morehouse's liberal arts curriculum and from the personal attention of the school's faculty."¹⁵

While a student at Morehouse, he also met Coretta Scott, the woman who would become his wife. She later recalled how the thinkers he encountered in his classes were always on his mind:

Martin had a scholarly mind, and as he told me about diving into philosophy, I realized the depth and breadth of his learning. He had studied the great German philosophers, among them Kant and Hegel and Nietzsche. He was influenced by Hegel and hated Nietzsche, whose *Will to Power* almost brought Martin to despair of his hope of influencing the world through the power of love, though it served as an antidote for Hegel's easy optimism.¹⁶

During his junior year at Morehouse, King had an essay published in Fisk's student newspaper entitled "The Purpose of Education," in which he said that education's function should be two-fold. "On the one hand it should discipline the mind for sustained and persistent

¹⁵ Clayborne Carson et. al., eds., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume I: Called to Serve, January 1929-June 1951* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 38-41.

¹⁶ Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), 57.

speculation. On the other hand it should integrate human life around central, focusing ideals.”

This latter focus, he noted, was often neglected in the educational system. He expressed concern at the way some students took either a blasé or a mercenary approach toward education. King also stressed education’s need for morals so it might have the necessary “compass” to aim at worthy objectives.¹⁷

During his years at school, King was influenced by many figures, including Hegel, Thoreau, Marx, Gandhi, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Paul Tillich. One King scholar has written that Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience “stirred him more deeply and permanently than any other classroom encounter of the period.” Even after his studies at Fisk, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University, King found that the ideas he encountered in school stayed with him. In 1954, he accepted a call to Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, and became a leader in the bus boycott there, which relied on the strategy of non-violent resistance. Asked about where the ideas for this came from, King wrote the speech that would greatly increase his fame nationwide, “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,” in 1958. It references Thoreau, Rauschenbusch, Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill, and Locke. Throughout the speech, the influence of Hegelian dialectic is clear. The ideas and texts of King’s liberal arts education would continue to play an important role in his leadership of the civil rights movement until he was assassinated in 1968.¹⁸

Toni Morrison is among the most critically-acclaimed and beloved writers of our time. The inspirations for the characters in her stories came from African-American folklore and myths shared by family members, as well as her experience studying Classics starting in high

¹⁷ Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. Volume I*, 122.

¹⁸ David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography*, 3d ed (Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 20; Martin Luther King, Jr., “My Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” (September 1, 1958) <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/my-pilgrimage-nonviolence>.

school in Lorain, Ohio, and then at Howard University in Washington, D.C. There, she majored in English and minored in Classics, graduating in 1953.¹⁹

These experiences clearly helped shape her teaching and writing. After earning her Master's degree, she returned to Howard in 1957 where she taught Black students who would go on to prominence in many fields, including the scholar Houston Baker and the activist Stokely Carmichael who both attended in the early 1960s. After Morrison passed away in 2019, Baker remembered his first English class with her during his freshman year at Howard in 1961 when Morrison was a young professor. One of the first stories she assigned the class was William Faulkner's "The Bear." Baker recalled that one of the students in the class, who he would later learn was Carmichael, dismissed the assignment as irrelevant and inane given the political, social, and racial crises present all around them. Carmichael suggested that the class should be reading Mao and Che Guevara rather than Faulkner. Baker recalls what happened next.

Without so much as a small readjustment of her professorial posture, Professor Morrison answered: "Mr. Carmichael, scripture tells us there is a time and place for every occasion. For today, the time before us is reserved for Faulkner's masterpiece 'The Bear.' Please, let us continue, in season, with Faulkner's astonishing creative achievement."²⁰

Tessa Roynon has noted the rich range of materials Morrison drew on in her novels: "Classical myth, literature, history, social practice, and religious ritual make their presence felt." African religion, philosophy, and folklore informed her work. So too did conversation partners including Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, Virgil, Ovid, Cotton Mather, Willa Cather, Pauline Hopkins, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Homer's *Odyssey* seemed to influence the writing of several of

¹⁹ Tessa Roynon, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition: Transforming American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

²⁰ Houston A. Baker, Jr., "Our Professor: A Toni Morrison Memory" (August 13, 2019) <https://dukeupress.wordpress.com/2019/08/13/our-professor-a-toni-morrison-memory/>.

her novels. Roynon notes the “contrapuntal relationship” between *The Odyssey* and Morrison’s novel *Home* (2012). And Judith Fletcher notes the “profound concern with naming” in both *The Odyssey* and Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), in the which midwife is named Circe, the Greek mythological figure whose island Odysseus visits along with his companions.²¹

For Morrison, race clearly mattered in one sense. But she also resisted an over-emphasis on representation and social purposes for literature. Her intellectual toolbox--the collection of experiences and thoughts and texts that formed her--was vast and varied. It included racial experiences and thinking, but also went beyond this. This meant that both Black and white readers were often surprised at her writing. In a 1981 interview, Morrison stated:

Black readers often ask me, “Why are your books so melancholy, so sad? Why don’t you ever write about something that works, about relationships that are healthy?” There is a comic mode, meaning the union of the sexes, that I don’t write. I write what I suppose could be called the tragic mode in which there is some catharsis and revelation. There’s a whole lot of space in between, but my inclination is in the tragic direction. Maybe it’s a consequence of my being a classics minor.²²

Morrison often suggested that her understanding of human life was deeply rooted in her life of reading, what might be fairly described as the liberal arts curriculum that she pursued both in and out of the classroom. Asked about her relationship to the classics, Morrison said:

I loved the classics when I was in school. There was this incredible thing the Greeks did, not only in Homer and the *Iliad*, but also in the plays, because they could use the chorus. And they said ... -- she makes a desperate, quick gasp, and her voice comes out high, like a little girl – “Don’t do it! Oh, stop! That’s your Ma!” And you feel this complexity. That’s what makes human beings more interesting than cabbages. Because they have the capacity to infuriate and to delight in one stroke, and there is no one thing going.²³

²¹ Roynon, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition*; Judith Fletcher, “Signifying Circe in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” *The Classical World* 99 (Summer 2006): 405-418.

²² Thomas LeClair, “‘The Language Must Not Sweat:’ A Conversation With Toni Morrison,” *The New Republic* (March 21, 1981).

²³ Maggie Lewis, “Toni Morrison: Writing from the Inside Out,” *Christian Science Monitor* (April 23, 1981).

Too often in the “canon wars” and passionate debates about curricula and common readings on university campuses in recent decades, rival groups have focused on the “one thing” needing to be defended – whether defending the West or high culture or racial representation or white fragility. Morrison provides a helpful counterpoint to this tendency. She delights in the complexity of human life. She regularly offered critiques of American culture; indeed her background in Classics was fundamental to this critique.²⁴ Yet she also devoted her enjoys to pure enjoyment – of beauty and languages and cultures. In a public lecture on “the Afro-American Presence in American Literature” presented during the height of the canon wars of the late 1980s, Morrison seemed to warn her listeners against excessive interest in social or political representation that might distract them from beauty and wonder: “The form (Greek tragedy) makes available these varieties of provocative love because *it* is masterly—not because the civilization that is its referent was flawless or superior to all others.”²⁵

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It seems clear by not that the way that DuBois and King and Morrison engaged their liberal arts education was *not* narrow. It did not follow a straight line. It was not a matter of simple assimilation or acculturation. It was full of important dialogues and tensions and contradictions and questioning. Much of this important work for these figures, including their protest of injustice, was rooted in their liberal arts education.

When figures like DuBois and King and Morrison are portrayed on university campuses today, our interest taken in them and the message we hear is often the same. They were “activists” who “spoke truth to power,” and we should go and do likewise. There is nothing

²⁴ Roynon, *Toni Morrison and the Classical Tradition*, 3.

²⁵ Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28:1 (Winter 1989): 3.

inaccurate about this message, but it is limiting. These people were also readers and students with rich and varied intellectual make-ups that we might focus on, especially on university campuses. For example, DuBois' love of Mozart's music, King's use of Hegel's philosophy, Morrison's fascination with Greek tragedy were important and inextricable parts of who they were.

It is challenging in our time to balance these types of interests alongside goals of attending to things like diversity and equity. Sadly, some academics and scholars have been unhelpful, keeping too tight a grasp on classic texts and conveying the message (intentionally or not) that great works of human accomplishment belong more to some groups than to others. Ralph Ellison experienced this when he was in Italy on a fellowship from 1955 to 1957 working on a new book. While there, he developed a deep interest in the Roman antiquity and mythology, but resented the gate-keepers who seemed to doubt that a Black man could develop these interests. Ellison wrote of his experience: "Some of the classical people here [at the American Academy in Rome] are snobbish about this mess but it belongs to anyone who can dig it."²⁶

Indeed, the great literary and cultural works of the human race do belong to us all. Racism has interfered with our ability to recognize this. So, too, does the practice of what has been called "identity politics" seen on university campuses. Although its roots are understandable and some of its goals well-intentioned, even a progressive like Mark Lilla in recently evaluating identity politics sees it as contributing to balkanization, a lack of common purpose, and resistance to building solidarity.²⁷

²⁶ Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray, *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Vintage, 2000).

²⁷ Mark Lilla, *The Once and Future Liberal: After Identity Politics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

As a teacher, I want my students, like those of DuBois, to have contact with living souls. I wish to follow King in the project of disciplining students' the mind for sustained and persistent speculation. I am inspired to emulate Morrison in trying to illustrate the complexity of human life, that which makes the humanities inherently interesting. This will lead to certain choices about the philosophy of education that guides my teaching and the curriculum I put before my students.

This education project is not necessarily the same as the various types of training sessions and problematizing exercises to which we've grown accustomed recently. There certainly is a place for discussion of privilege, racial identity, and anti-racism work in education. But I hope that at the same time those of us in the humanities especially continue to energetically promote the benefits of reading such figures as Homer and Sophocles and Cicero and Hegel and Thoreau. We should do so not out of any sense of particularized pride or ownership, but out of recognition and thanks for the ways in they are among those that have illuminated the thinking and writing of so many diverse people through the ages.