

The background of the cover is a detailed pencil sketch of several faces, likely of African descent, wearing traditional headwraps. The sketches are rendered in various shades of gray, with fine lines and shading that give a sense of depth and texture. The faces are positioned in a way that they appear to be looking down or slightly to the side, creating a contemplative and intellectual atmosphere. The overall style is artistic and scholarly.

THE BLACK INTELLECTUAL TRADITION

READING FREEDOM IN
CLASSICAL LITERATURE

ANGEL ADAMS PARHAM, PhD
ANIKA PRATHER, PhD



The Black Intellectual Tradition: Reading Freedom in Classical Literature

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

All of us in the United States have a shared story that has been largely forgotten: our common heritage in the classics and the liberal arts. This heritage has united, instructed, and inspired us all—slave and free, White and Black—over the few centuries of our history as a nation. As we have in recent years collectively wandered far away from the gracious and firm tutelage of the classics, much has been lost. These works were the ancient teachers that Black leaders used to hold our nation accountable to standards that we pointed toward but so often failed to uphold. *The Black Intellectual Tradition* offers back to us all, as Americans, a shared relationship with our living tradition in the Greco-Roman and Christian classics.

I served for seven years as the academic dean and then the principal of Logos Academy in York, Pennsylvania, a school with a student body that closely reflected the surrounding neighborhood's demographics of one-third White, one third-Hispanic, and one-third African American. During my time there, I was immersed in narratives of families, extended families, floods, changing neighborhoods, racial violence from past decades, and yesterday's lunch-table conversation topics. We studied, sang, prayed, played, and ate together every day, and to this day I continue to ponder the stories and lessons I learned from those diverse neighbors. Those interactions reinforced for me the sense I had as a third-culture kid growing up in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, that humans inhabit old stories and that, in some real sense, we are made up of stories.

While during those years my own primary learning was taking place through the remarkable people I was getting to know within the hallways, classrooms, and community of our school, I also got to know two men whose good teaching drove home for me some of those lessons. One of them, Father Moses Berry, I met in person. The other, Wendell Berry, I have met only in the pages of books.

Father Moses Berry, a nationally recognized speaker on African American history and issues in African American spirituality, visited Logos Academy carrying a treasure trove of artifacts to share alongside stories of his enslaved ancestors. In those stories, he made clear the dignity of slaves and the powerful lessons that they have to teach regarding every human life. While Father Moses always grounded his points in folk wisdom, he also spoke the language of the classics, and students were spellbound as he illuminated the deep links between

the writings of Christian saints and that of American heroes such as W. E. B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Jr. One basic point that Father Moses relayed over and over is that all of his stories of dignity amid slavery and suffering belong to every American as a national treasure.

While I had already read and loved much of Wendell Berry's work before working at Logos, I had not been aware of his work *The Hidden Wound* until a friend pointed me to it. It was when I read that essay on racism that Berry became a second voice that shaped my experience while serving at Logos Academy.

In *The Hidden Wound*, Berry shares the following profound realization:

If white people have suffered less obviously from racism than black people, they have nevertheless suffered greatly; the cost has been greater perhaps than we can yet know. If the white man has inflicted the wound of racism upon black men, the cost has been that he would receive the mirror image of that wound into himself. As the master, or as a member of the dominant race, he has felt little compulsion to acknowledge it or speak of it; the more painful it has grown the more deeply he has hidden it within himself. But the wound is there, and it is a profound disorder, as great a damage in his mind as it is in his society.¹

Berry insists, as did Father Moses, that our wounds as well as our gifts are shared as an entire nation. Our human dignity in small things, despite our wounds, is a common heritage. With a focus on particular people and their way of being present to their place, Berry spends much of his book expounding on the same kinds of simple lessons in humanity that were the focus of the stories Father Moses shared at Logos Academy. *The Hidden Wound* is not about the guilt or damage that divides us. Instead, it is about our shared need to learn the good gifts of dwelling together.

In *The Black Intellectual Tradition*, Dr. Anika Prather and Dr. Angel Parham invite us all to return to a critical aspect of this shared inheritance and to a vital source of mutual healing. When I learned in the course of my own work at Classical Academic Press about what each of these authors was doing for organizations serving the renewal of classical Christian education, I was encouraged and inspired by a vision of our national story that has been obscured.

With their distinct voices and insights, Dr. Prather and Dr. Parham reopen for us a heritage of shared love and insight into the great books, and this heri-

1. Wendell Berry, *The Hidden Wound* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2010), 5.

tage has the capacity to mend wounds—both the visible and the hidden. When we learn about the ways in which the classics carried profound meaning for both our country’s founding fathers as well as for their slaves and then, later, for those—White and Black—who fought for civil rights, we learn to appreciate and treasure anew our shared human dignity and the classics themselves as a source of wisdom that belongs equally to all.

Great books have always offered the capacity to free us, to restore to us our humanity, and to ground us in our particular places. Dr. Parham and Dr. Prather invite us into the stories of how for more than a century the classics were loved and applied by a host of Black teachers, students, authors, and activists. These heroes of classical education in America span the full course of our nation’s history.

In a nation increasingly given to division and to the shallow distractions of consumerism that leave us uprooted and isolated, our schools and homes stand in great need of this forgotten American tradition with its wealth of teachers who suffered long and who have visions to share from within the wisdom of our common past.

—Jesse Hake, Vice President of Production
Classical Academic Press

INTRODUCTION

Dr. Angel Parham

While many classical schools in the United States are overwhelmingly white in faculty, staff, and student body, there is also a significant subset of classical schools that are working in many diverse contexts and that have a great deal of racial and ethnic diversity. Many students, parents, and faculty I have met at these racially and ethnically diverse schools are longing for an increase in writings by authors from a variety of backgrounds. These readers will find much to savor in *The Black Intellectual Tradition*. But for some administrators and faculty, it will seem unnecessary and burdensome to be intentional about giving increased attention to the writing of Black intellectuals. There is already so much material to cover, and the corpus of classical and canonical work is fairly set. Why, then, introduce yet more reading that seems to be unrelated to this classical core? Indeed, some will object that the very idea of adding more writings by Black intellectuals consists of no more than bowing to current calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and will object that this is not the politics or ethos they want to promote in their schools.

To those who are reluctant or even opposed to a serious engagement with Black writers in classical curricula, I ask this question: Is our commitment as classical educators primarily to the pursuit and cultivation of truth, goodness, and beauty in our students? If so, then I contend that it is essential that you read this book and assess its core argument, which is that any education that is committed to truth, goodness, and beauty will achieve only a pale vision of this commitment if it fails to engage the writings of Black intellectuals in a serious and substantial way.¹

I am aware that this is an enormous claim, and yet I stand by it. Again and again we ask in classical circles: What does it mean to be human? What is the nature of the good life? When we overlook the voices of Black writers, we neglect a large portion of the Great Conversation on these questions and how they have been debated and addressed in Western societies. Who better than exceptional Black writers such as Phillis Wheatley, Frederick Douglass, and Toni Morrison to address the question of what it means to be human?

1. While I believe our book will speak to persons across the world, the writers we discuss are mainly African American and the historical context is overwhelmingly American as this is the context from which we write and the place we know best.

These writers, who were thought of as inhuman or not fully human, wrote back against this negative judgment, calling Western writers to live up to their own standards. And so many of those who were consigned to the most wretched kind of existence in slavery and inter-generational oppression were nevertheless able to discern and live out the truth of the gospel and to testify with their lives to the vibrancy and freedom of life in Christ. Without these voices, we lose a crucial aspect of the Great Conversation and enjoy only a portion of the promise these great texts hold for all of us.

If, on the other hand, the commitment is not to a list, but rather to providing an education rich in truth, goodness, and beauty, then we must take seriously the argument that Black writers are essential to an education that cultivates these qualities.

Some may concede, “Well, certainly Black writers have much to add to the conversation, but our curriculum is already rather full. We have a long list of classic and canonical writings to get through and adding the works of a significant number of Black writers who have not traditionally been considered classic or canonical takes us away from our purpose.” I will admit that if the main goal is to get through a list of books, then this argument has merit. But if, on the other hand, the commitment is not to a list, but rather to providing an education rich in truth, goodness, and beauty, then we must take seriously the argument that Black writers are essential to an education that cultivates these qualities. The book list and the transcendentals are not necessarily in competition. Rather than allowing our teaching to be enslaved to a pre-existing list, we can read traditional Western texts in conversation with great writings by diverse authors who help us to understand dimensions of truth, goodness, and beauty that we simply *cannot* access without drawing on their unique experiences and ways of being in and seeing the world. In this sense, the writings of Black intellectuals are an essential part of *all* of our students’ education in truth, goodness, and beauty.

Each of my chapters addresses one of the transcendentals—truth, goodness, beauty—by examining the work of Black writers whose thoughts guide us in thinking through what that transcendental means. The first chapter, on truth, follows the personal and spiritual journey of Olaudah Equiano, an enslaved man who suffers much abuse before finally purchasing his own freedom. The aim here is to help us to confront the truth of great injustices in our past by examining the life of a writer who endured this injustice while also eschewing bitterness and maintaining a deep faith. Certainly we, today, can face the

difficult truths of our history without devolving into bitterness that tears us apart. The second chapter, on goodness, considers the lives and writing of Anna Julia Cooper and Martin Luther King, Jr. Both Cooper and King lived lives sacrificially devoted to the good of others during times that were characterized by extreme injustices. They show us how to nurture what is good in the midst of very challenging circumstances that might otherwise discourage us. Finally, the third chapter, on beauty, is devoted to a discussion of Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*. Here we see how Morrison uses her literary art to engage the imagination, helping us to enter into the suffering of others in order to better understand the history and experience of people who may otherwise remain far from our comprehension.

This book is aimed at many different kinds of readers. For those in the classical renewal who long to see more diverse voices in the curriculum, our work here will be an encouragement. For those who are curious and wonder what it could look like to incorporate more Black writers, our book will provide some practical suggestions. And for those who are skeptical or resistant to increasing the number of Black writers in the curriculum, we ask your indulgence. We invite you to read what we have to say, for we believe that you will find much here that will provide food for your soul—rich food you will be eager to share with others.

Dr. Anika Prather

This book is an invitation to rethink the works of the canon by revealing how they have intersected with the story of Black people. Join us in stepping away from the traditional perspective of “preserving the West,” and see the Great Books as a sort of portal into understanding the very soul of humanity. We invite you to see it as the canon of *human* civilization. Realizing that the works of the canon were a way to gain inspiration and wisdom from the human stories of the past is why Black people were drawn to them. As they would read each text, they came to learn that their life experience was not unique and also gained insight into how to navigate their tragic circumstances. The canon gave them hope when all seemed dark, because they read about what was *true* about the humanity they shared with those who saw them as less than human. They read these works because they saw what was *good* about being human and that main good characteristic is the ability to think for themselves. As enslaved and oppressed people, reading from the canon exercised their chained mind until their mentality became strong enough to set themselves free. They read works from the canon because the words were *beautiful* in how the authors described the human experience and the world around them. Black people came to see that the world was much bigger than the plantation or Jim Crow.

James Baldwin expresses so well why reading the canon had such an impact on Black people when they read them:

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was [books that] taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who had ever been alive.²

From the time Black people were brought to America, their main desire was to be seen as equally human. When they read from the canon, they were transported to another world where, as DuBois says, “There was no scorn or condescension.”³

In writing this book, it is my hope that as each story is told about the Black Classical Tradition, the reader will come to fully understand just how important these texts were to the liberation of Black people. Being able to write this book along with Dr. Angel Parham is truly a blessing because we share a passion for bringing this story to light. Our passion is not just because of what we have learned about our ancestors, but because, as educators, we have seen firsthand the impact reading these texts has on students of color. These experiences connect to the narratives of those we will share about in this text. Making this connection between our experience, the experience of our students, and the experience of Black people from the past solidifies in our minds the universal power of the canon. I am excited to share my experience with bringing the classical tradition to not just the Black community but to all people, so that we can all come to embrace the idea of the canon being our shared heritage.

I have chosen to focus my chapters on Anna Julia Cooper because she has been a source of inspiration on my journey into classical education. Her life and work in classical education embodies the points Dr. Parham and I seek to illuminate in this book. Many only see Cooper as a feminist, but she was primarily a classical educator who felt that classical education was an integral part of Black people’s progress in America. Each of my chapters will also be rooted in one of her essays from the book *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, which includes her book *A Voice from the South*. At the end of each of my chapters, reflection questions are provided to aid the reader in pondering how to implement Anna’s strategies and philosophy into his or her own classical classroom or homeschool co-op, especially when dealing with diverse students.

2. James Baldwin, quoted in Jane Howard, “Doom and Glory of Knowing Who You Are,” LIFE Magazine, May 24, 1963, 89.

3. W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 109. PDF.

It is my hope that as I share the story of Anna Julia Cooper, we can all come to learn from her as we observe her journey from enslavement to classical education. May Anna Julia Cooper's story bring to life all of the concepts brought to light in Dr. Parham's exploration of the Black classical tradition. It is my hope that this narrative will be inspiring and meaningful to all those who read it.

