

THE *Gift* OF **BLACK FOLK**



W. E. B.
DU BOIS



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W.E.B DU BOIS



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FOREWORD

During a time when the United States needed to be reminded of the contributions Black people have made to its democracy, freedom, music, literature, and more, W.E.B. Du Bois took on the task of enumerating the gifts that we've provided to our country. When I began reading *The Gift of Black Folk*, I approached the book with apprehension. I'm African American and felt that the value of our lives didn't need to be laid out in a treatise to convince the misguided that Black people have made a significant impact throughout time and across our land. But as I continued to read, the story that unfolded was one that I had never anticipated.

I didn't expect to become overwhelmed by the appearance of Black culture and voices in every corner of American life. On the one hand, DuBois' systematic evaluation is a defense of something that should not need defending. But on the other hand, it's a beautiful ode to the humanity of Black people poured over America, helping to make it what it is today. We did not build or sustain this country alone, and it also would not have emerged to be what it is today without us.

We the People of the United States, all of us, have left our indelible mark on America the Beautiful. And though the seasoning that Black people have added to the collective feast has, at times, been shaken out under duress, it has been amazingly flavorful all the same. We have worked mightily to uphold our dignity and express joy even when acknowledgment of the depth of our fingerprint on American culture is threatened by hatred or indifference.

Nearly one hundred years have passed since Du Bois crafted this story of the role Black people played in the making of America. And today, our country is entirely changed and yet so much the same. The idea that the United States is not a European country but a conglomerate of many different cultures and backgrounds coming together to weave a beautiful and robust tapestry has taken root. At the same time, some are still ignorant regarding the threads that Black people have sewn.

Our American ideal of “togetherness,” though faltering now as always, is and will always be right. We need each other. Du Bois knew this, and he left us with *The Gift of Black Folk* to refresh our minds lest we forget. May we learn for ourselves as we teach our children and their children that our strength lies not in our numbers or our might, but our humility and consistent clinging to a perfect ideal.

Amber O'Neal Johnston
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INTRODUCTION

It is not uncommon for casual thinkers to assume that the United States of America is practically a continuation of English nationality. Our speech is English and the English played so large a part in our beginnings that it is easy to fall more or less consciously into the thought that the history of this nation has been but a continuation and development of these beginnings. A little reflection, however, quickly convinces us that at least there was present French influence in the Mississippi Valley and Spanish influence in the southeast and southwest. Everything else however that has been added to the American nationality is often looked upon as a sort of dilution of more or less doubtful value: peoples that had to be assimilated as far as possible and made over to the original and basic type. Thus we continually speak of Germans and Scandinavians, of Irish and Jews, Poles, Austrians and Hungarians; and, with few exceptions, we regard the coming of the Negroes as an unmitigated error and a national liability.

It is high time that this course of our thinking should be changed. America is conglomerate. This is at once her problem and her glory—perhaps indeed her sole and greatest reason for being. Her physical foundation is not English and while it is primarily it is not entirely European. It represents peculiarly a coming together of the peoples of the world. American institutions have been borrowed from England and France in the main, but with contributions from many and widely scattered groups. American history has no prototype and has been developed from the various racial elements. Despite the fact that our mother tongue is called English we have developed an American speech with its idiosyncrasies and idioms, a speech whose purity is not to be measured by its conformity to the speech of the British Isles. And finally the American spirit is a new and interesting result of

diverse threads of thought and feeling coming not only from America but from Europe and Asia and indeed from Africa.

This essay is an attempt to set forth more clearly than has hitherto been done the effect which the Negro has had upon American life. Its thesis is that despite slavery, war and caste, and despite our present Negro problem, the American Negro is and has been a distinct asset to this country and has brought a contribution without which America could not have been; and that perhaps the essence of our so-called Negro problem is the failure to recognize this fact and to continue to act as though the Negro was what we once imagined and wanted to imagine him—a representative of a subhuman species fitted only for subordination.

A moment's thought will easily convince open minded persons that the contribution of the Negro to American nationality as slave, freedman and citizen was far from negligible. No element in American life has so subtly and yet clearly woven itself into the warp and woof of our thinking and acting as the American Negro. He came with the first explorers and helped in exploration. His labor was from the first the foundation of the American prosperity and the cause of the rapid growth of the new world in economic and social importance. Modern democracy rests not simply on the striving white men in Europe and America but also on the persistent struggle of the black men in America for two centuries. The military defense of this land has depended upon Negro soldiers from the time of the Colonial wars down to the struggle of the World War. Not only does the Negro appear, reappear and persist in American literature but a Negro American literature has arisen of deep significance, and Negro folk lore and music are among the choicest heritages of this land.

Finally the Negro had played a peculiar spiritual role in America as a sort of living, breathing test of our ideals and an example of the faith, hope and tolerance of our religion.

PRESCRIPT

Who made America? Who made this land that swings its empire from the Atlantic to the Sea of Peace and from Snow to Fire—this realm of New Freedom, with Opportunity and Ideal unlimited?

Now that its foundations are laid, deep but bare, there are those as always who would forget the humble builders, toiling wan mornings and blazing noons, and picture America as the last reasoned blossom of mighty ancestors; of those great and glorious world builders and rulers who know and see and do all things forever and ever, amen! How singular and blind! For the glory of the world is the possibilities of the commonplace and America is America even because it shows, as never before, the power of the common, ordinary, unlovely man. This is real democracy and not that vain and eternal striving to regard the world as the abiding place of exceptional genius with great black wastes of hereditary idiots.

We who know may not forget but must forever spread the splendid sordid truth that out of the most lowly and persecuted of men, Man made America. And that what Man has here begun with all its want and imperfection, with all its magnificent promise and grotesque failure will some day blossom in the souls of the Lowly.

THE BLACK EXPLORERS

CHAPTER I

How the Negro helped in the discovery of America
and gave his ancient customs to the land.

Garcia de Montalvo published in 1510 a Spanish romance which said: "Know ye that on the right hand of the Indies there is an island called California very near the Terrestrial Paradise which is peopled with black women without any men among them, because they were accustomed to live after the fashion of the Amazons. They were of strong and hardy bodies, of ardent courage and of great force."¹

The legend that the Negro race had touched America even before the day of Columbus rests upon a certain basis of fact: First, the Negro countenance, clear and unmistakable, occurs repeatedly in Indian carvings, among the relics of the Mound Builders and in Mexican temples.² Secondly, there are evidences of Negro customs among the Indians in their religious worship; in their methods of building defenses such as the mounds probably were; and particularly in customs of trade. Columbus said that he had been told of a land southwest of the Cape Verde Islands where the black folk had been trading and had used in their trade the well known African alloy of gold called guanin.³

"There can be no question whatever as to the reality of the statement in regard to the presence in America of the African pombeiros⁴ previous to Columbus because the guani is a Mandingo word and the very alloy is of African origin. In 1501 a law was passed forbidding persons to sell guanin to the Indians of Hispaniola."⁵

Wiener thinks "The presence of Negroes with their trading masters in America before Columbus is proved by the representation

of Negroes in American sculpture and design, by the occurrence of a black nation at Darien early in the 16th century, but more specifically by Columbus' emphatic reference to Negro traders from Guinea, who trafficked in a gold alloy, *guanin*, of precisely the same composition and bearing the same name, as frequently referred to by early writers in Africa."⁶

And thirdly, many of the productions of America which have hitherto been considered as indigenous and brought into use especially by the Indians, may easily have been African in origin, as for instance, tobacco, cotton, sweet potatoes and peanuts. It is quite possible that many if not all of these came through the African Negro, being in some cases indigenous to Negro Africa and in other cases transmitted from the Arabs by the Negroes. Tobacco particularly was known in Africa and is mentioned in early America continually in connection with the Negroes. All of these things were spread in America along the same routes starting with the mingling of Negroes and Indians in the West Indies and coming up through Florida and on to Canada. The Arawak Indians, who especially show the effects of contact with Negroes, and fugitive Negroes, together with Negroid Caribs, migrated northward and it was they who led Ponce de Leon to search for the Fountain Bimini where old men became young.⁷

Oviedo says that the sweet potato "came with that evil lot of Negroes and it has taken very well and it is profitable and good sustenance for the Negroes of whom there is a greater number than is necessary on account of their rebellions."⁸ In the same way maize and sugar cane may have been imported from Africa.

Further than this the raising of bread roots, manioc, yam and sweet potatoes may have come to America from Guinea by way of Brazil. From Brazil the culture of these crops spread and many of the words referring to them are of undoubted African origin.

Negroes probably reached the eastern part of South America from the West Indies while others from the same source went

north along the roads marked by the Mound Builders as far as Canada.

“The chief cultural influence of the Negro in America was exerted by a Negro colony in Mexico, most likely from Teotihuacan and Tuxtla, who may have been instrumental in establishing the city of Mexico. From here their influence pervaded the neighboring tribes and ultimately, directly or indirectly, reached Peru.”⁹

The mounds of the “Mound Builders” were probably replicas of Negro forts in Africa. “That this tendency to build forts and stockades proceeded from the Antilles, whence the Arawaks had come in the beginning of the sixteenth century, is proved by the presence of similar works in Cuba. These are found in the most abandoned and least-explored part of the island and there can be little doubt that they were locations of fugitive Negro and Indian stockades, precisely such as were in use in Africa. It is not possible to prove the direct participation of the Negroes in the fortifications of the North American Indians, but as the civilizing influence on the Indians to a great extent proceeded from Cuba over Florida towards the Huron Country in the north, the solution of the question of the Mound Builders is to be looked for in the perpetuation of Arawak or Carib methods, acquired from the Negroes, as well attested by Ovando’s complaint in 1503 that the Negroes spoiled the manners of the Indians; and transferred to the white traders, who not only adopted the methods of the Indians, but frequently lived among the Indians as part of them, especially in Brazil where we have ample documentary evidence of the fact.”¹⁰

All this is prehistoric and in part conjectural and yet it seems reasonable to suppose that much in custom, trade and religion which has been regarded as characteristic of the American Indian arose from strong Negro influences of the pre-Columbian period.

After the discovery of America by Columbus many Negroes came with the early explorers. Many of these early black men were

civilized Christians and sprung from the large numbers of Negroes imported into Spain and Portugal during the fifteenth century, where they replaced as laborers the expelled Moors. Afterward came the mass of slaves brought by the direct African slave trade.

From the beginning of the fifteenth century mention of the Negro in America becomes frequent. In 1501 they were permitted to enter the colonies; in 1503 the Governor of Hispaniola sought to prohibit their transportation to America because they fled to the Indians and taught them bad manners. By 1506 they were coming again because the work of one Negro was worth more than that of four Indians. In 1518 the new sugar culture in Spain and the Canary Islands began to be transferred to the West Indies and Negroes were required as laborers. In 1521 Negroes were not to be used on errands because they incited Indians to rebellion and the following year they rose in rebellion on Diego Columbus' mill. In 1540, in Quivera, Mexico, there was a Negro priest and in 1542 there were at Guamango, Mexico, three Brotherhoods of the True Cross of Spaniards, one of which was of Negroes and one of Indians.

Thus the Negro is seen not only entering as a laborer but becoming a part of the civilization of the New World. Helps says: "Very early in the history of the American Continent there are circumstances to show that Negroes were gradually entering into that part of the New World. They constantly appear at remarkable points in the narrative. When the Marquis Pizarro had been slain by the conspirators, his body was dragged to the Cathedral by two Negroes. The murdered Factor, Illan Suarez, was buried by Negroes and Indians. After the battle of Anaquito, the head of the unfortunate Viceroy, Blasco Nunez Vela, was cut off by a Negro. On the outbreak of the great earthquake at Guatemala, the most remarkable figure in that night's terrors was a gigantic Negro, who was seen in many parts of the city, and who assisted

no one, however much he was implored. In the narrative of the return of Las Casas to his diocese, it has been seen that he was attended by a Negro. And many other instances might be adduced, showing that, in the decade from 1535 to 1545, Negroes had come to form part of the household of the wealthier colonists. At the same time, in the West Indian Islands which had borne the first shock of the conquest, and where the Indians had been more swiftly destroyed, the Negroes were beginning to form the bulk of the population; and the licenses for importation were steadily increasing in number."¹¹

Continually they appear with the explorers. Nuflo de Olana, a Negro, was with Balboa when he discovered the Pacific Ocean,¹² and afterward thirty Negroes helped Balboa direct the work of over 500 Indians in transporting the material for his ships across the mountains to the South Sea.¹³

Cortes carried Negroes and Indians with him from Cuba to Mexico and one of these Negroes was the first to sow and reap grain in Mexico. There were two Negroes with Velas in 1520 and 200 black slaves with Alvarado on his desperate expedition to Quito. Almagro and Valdivia in 1525 were saved from death by Negroes.¹⁴

As early as 1528 there were about 10,000 Negroes in the New World. We hear of one sent as an agent of the Spanish to burn a native village in Honduras. In 1539 they accompanied De Soto and one of them stayed among the Indians in Alabama and became the first settler from the old world. In 1555 in Santiago de Chile a free Negro owns land in the town. Menendez had a company of trained Negro artisans and agriculturalists when he founded St. Augustine in 1565 and in 1570 Negroes founded the town of Santiago del Principe.

In most of these cases probably leadership and initiative on the part of the early Negro pioneers in America was only spasmodic or a matter of accident. But this was not always true and there is

one well-known case which, despite the propaganda of 400 years, survives as a clear and important instance of Negro leadership in exploration. This is the romantic story of Stephen Dorantes or as he is usually called, Estevanico, who sailed from Spain in 1527 with the expedition of Panfilo de Narvaez.¹⁵ This fleet of five vessels and 600 colonists and soldiers started from Cuba and landed in Tampa Bay in 1582. But disaster followed disaster until at last there were but four survivors of whom one was Estevanico "an Arab Negro from Azamor on the Atlantic coast of Morocco"; he is elsewhere described as "black" and a "person of intelligence." Besides him there was his master Dorantes and two other Spaniards, de Vaca and Maldonado.¹⁶ For six years these men maintained themselves by practicing medicine among the Indians, and were the first to reach Mexico from Florida by the overland route.

Estevanico and de Vaca went forward to meet the outposts of the Spaniards established in Mexico. Estevanico returned with an escort and brought on the other two men. The four then went west to the present Mexican cities, Chihuahua and Sonora and reached Culiacan, the capital of the state of Sinaloa, in April, 1536.

Coronado was governor of Sinaloa and on hearing the story of the wanderers, he immediately hastened with them to the viceroy, Mendoza, in the city of Mexico. They told the viceroy not only of their own adventures but what they had heard of the rich lands toward the North and of the cities with houses four and five stories high which were really the Pueblos of New Mexican Indians. Mendoza was eager to explore these lands. He had already heard something about them and he and Cortes had planned to make the exploration together but could not agree upon terms. Cortes therefore hurried to fit out a small fleet in 1537. He took 400 Spaniards and 300 Negroes, sailed up the Gulf of California and called the country "California". He then returned to Spain for the last time.

Meantime, de Vaca and Maldonado after several unsuccessful

attempts also went to Spain leaving Dorantes and Estevanico. Dorantes refused to take part in the proposed expedition to the North but sold his slave Estevanico to Mendoza. Certain Franciscan Monks joined the expedition and Fray Marcos de Niza became the leader, having already had some experience in exploration in Peru. Estevanico, because of his knowledge of the Indian language and especially of the sign language, was the guide, and the party started North for what the viceroy dreamed were the Seven Cities of Cibola. They left March 7th, 1539, and arrived at Vacapa in central Sinaloa on the 21st. Fray Marcos, probably from timidity, sent Estevanico on ahead with an escort of Indians whom he could send back as messengers.¹⁷ The Negro marked his journey by large wooden crosses and in this way with Estevanico far ahead they traveled for two weeks until suddenly Fray Marcos was met by a fleeing band of badly frightened Indians who told him that Estevanico had reached Cibola and had been killed. Fray Marcos named the country "El Nuevo Reyno de San Francisco" but being himself scared, distributed among the Indians everything which his party had in their packs, except the vestments for saying Mass, and traveling by double marches, returned to Mexico.

Meantime let us follow the adventure of Estevanico: Knowing how much depended upon appearance in that unknown and savage land, Estevanico traveled in magnificence, decorated with bells and feathers and carrying a symbolic gourd which was recognized among the Indian tribes thereabouts as a symbol of authority. When he reached the Pueblos, the Indian chiefs were in a quandary. First of all they recognized in Estevanico's retinue, numbers of their ancient Indian enemies. Secondly, they were frightened because Estevanico informed them "that two white men were coming behind him who had been sent by a great Lord and knew about the things in the sky and that they were coming to instruct them in divine matters." They had good reason to fear

that this meant the onslaught of some powerful enemy. And, moreover, they were puzzled because this black man came as a representative of white men: "The Lord of Cibola, inquiring of him whether he had other brethren, he answered that he had an infinite number and that they had a great store of weapons with them and that they were not very far thence. When they heard this, many of the chief men consulted together and resolved to kill him that he might not give news unto these brethren where they dwelt¹⁸ and that for this cause they slew him and cut him into many pieces, which were divided among all the chief Lords that they might know assuredly that he was dead..."

This climax is still told in a legend current among the Zuni Indians today: "It is to be believed that a long time ago, when roofs lay over the walls of Kya-ki-me, when smoke hung over the house-tops, and the ladder rounds were still unbroken in Kya-ki-me, then the black Mexicans came from their abodes in Everlasting Summerland. One day, unexpectedly, out of Hemlock Canon they came, and descended to Kya-ki-me. But when they said they would enter the covered way, it seems that our ancients looked not gently at them; for with these black Mexicans came many Indians of So-no-li, as they call it now,... who were enemies of our ancients. Therefore, these our ancients, being always bad-tempered, and quick to anger, made fools of themselves after their fashion, rushing into their town and out of their town, shouting, skipping and shooting with their sling-stones and arrows and tossing their war-clubs. Then the Indians of So-no-li set up a great howl, and thus they and our ancients did much ill to one another. Then and thus was killed by our ancients, right where the stone stands down by the arroyo of Kya-ki-me, one of the black Mexicans, a large man with chilli lips [i.e., lips swollen from eating chilli peppers] and some of the Indians they killed, catching others. Then the rest ran away, chased by our grandfathers, and went back toward their country in the Land of Everlasting Summer..."¹⁹

The village reached by Estevanico was Hawi-kih as it was called by the Indians and Grenada as the Spaniards named it. It is fifteen miles southwest of the present village of Zuni and is thus within New Mexico and east of the boundary between New Mexico and Arizona. Thus Estevanico was the first European to discover Arizona and New Mexico. Fray Marcos returned with Coronado and came as far as the village in 1540 while Mendoza sent others to pursue explorations that same year within the present confines of Arizona and they brought back various stories of the death of Estevanico.

After that for 40 years explorations rested until 1582 when again the Spaniards entered the territory. With all the Spanish explorers in Florida, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Kansas, there were Negro slaves and helpers but none with the initiative, perseverance and success of Estevanico.

In the after pioneering that took place in later days in the great western wilderness, the Negro was often present. There was a black man with Lewis and Clark in 1804; Jacob Dodson, a free Negro of Washington, volunteered to accompany Fremont in his California expedition of 1843. He was among the 25 persons selected by Fremont to accompany him in the discovery of Clamath Lake and also in his ride from Los Angeles to Monterey. Among the early settlers of California coming up from Mexico were many Negroes and mulattoes.²⁰

William Alexander Leidsdroff was the most distinguished Negro pioneer of California and at one time lived in the largest house in San Francisco. He owned the first steamship sailing in San Francisco Bay, and was a prominent business man, a member of the City Council and treasurer and member of the school committee. H. H. Bancroft says: "William Alexander Leidsdroff, a native of Danish West Indies, son of a Dane by a mulattress, who came to the United States as a boy and became a master of vessels sailing between New York and New Orleans, came to

California as manager of the 'Julia Ann,' on which he made later trips to the Islands, down to 1845." His correspondence from 1845, when he became United States Vice-Consul is a valuable source of historical information. Many Negroes came in the rush of the "forty-niners" as pioneers and miners as well as slaves.

The Negro's work as a pioneer extends down until our day. The late Commodore Peary who discovered the North Pole said: "Matthew A. Henson, my Negro assistant, has been with me in one capacity or another since my second trip to Nicaragua in 1887. I have taken him on each and all of my expeditions, except the first, and also without exception on each of my farthest sledge trips. This position I have given him primarily because of his adaptability and fitness for the work, and secondly on account of his loyalty. He is a better dog driver and can handle a sledge better than any man living, except some of the best Esquimo hunters themselves." This leaves Henson today as the only living human being who has stood at the North Pole.

POSTSCRIPT

Listen to the Winds, O God the Reader, that wail across the whip-cords stretched taut on broken human hearts; listen to the Bones, the bare bleached bones of slaves, that line the lanes of Seven Seas and beat eternal tom-toms in the forests of the laboring deep; listen to the Blood, the cold thick blood that spills its filth across the fields and flowers of the Free; listen to the Souls that wing and thrill and weep and scream and sob and sing above it all. What shall these things mean, O God the Reader? You know. You know.

If you enjoyed *The Gift of Black Folk*, you'll enjoy reading about Mary McLeod Bethune—she was a gift to the entire world.



Mary McLeod Bethune, by Emma Gelders Sterne, is the inspiring true story of a young girl determined to read, who went on to become a teacher, the founder of a college and a hospital, an adviser to politicians, and a great humanitarian. The first of her family born into freedom, Mrs. Bethune worked tirelessly to educate Black people, both children and adults, and to provide them with healthcare, all as a foundation for lifting themselves out of poverty and illiteracy.

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—Amber O'Neal Johnston
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In 1924, **William Edward Burghardt (W.E.B.) Du Bois** (1868-1963) penned *The Gift of Black Folk* in response to systemic racism in the United States, showing that “...the American spirit is a new and interesting result of diverse threads of thought and feeling coming not only from America but from Europe and Asia and indeed from Africa.”

Du Bois was the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University, and later became a professor of history, sociology, and economics at Atlanta University. In 1909 he co-founded the NAACP. Du Bois was a lifelong leader and proponent of civil rights.

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