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## **“Broad Sympathy”**

Howard University’s DuBoisian Approach to Blackness and  
the Humanities

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**Edited by Tom Nairn and Mary Kalantzis**



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# “Broad Sympathy”

## Howard University’s DuBoisian Approach to Blackness and the Humanities

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### Abstract

*This essay describes the Humanities program at Howard University in Washington, DC and posits it as an exemplar for Humanities programs throughout the world. The strength of the program rests in its two core courses, both of which use select world literature as their primary texts. The program gains its distinction, however, in its pedagogical approach to these texts as opportunities to help students, especially traditionally marginalized students, to see themselves as an integral part in world traditions. The approach to the Humanities at Howard seeks to create a space of “at homeness” for African American students in particular and for marginalized students more generally with all peoples of the world. Thus, it encourages students to honor and to celebrate their own cultural experiences while, at the same time, situating them in the context of the broader world community.*

**Keywords:** Humanities, World Literature, W. E. B. DuBois, Blackness, Pedagogy, African American pedagogy

As one of the nation’s premier Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Howard University has long been the subject of critique and analysis in its approach to distinguishing itself as an affirmatively Black institution of higher learning and in its corresponding approach to exploring *blackness*. In his 1933 commentary, “The Field and Function of the Negro College,” W.E. B. DuBois cites Howard in particular as a school which must resist all attempts to be simply a university rather than a *Negro* university. Instead, he suggests, “there can be no college for Negroes which is not a Negro college” (133). Thus, even as Howard, as an “American Negro university [...] may rightly aspire to a universal culture unhampered by limitations of race and culture” (133), it must as rightly acknowledge its uniqueness and its responsibility to its *Negro* population. Much in the same way that a Spanish university serves the needs of Spanish peoples and French universities seek especially to address French problems before trying to study and to comprehend the problems of the world, “a Negro university in the United States,” according to DuBois, must begin with *Negroes* and “should be founded on a knowledge of the history of their people in Africa and in the United States, and their present condition [...] [I]t begins with that; and then asks how shall these young men and women be trained to earn a living and live a life under the circumstances in which they find themselves or with such changing of those circumstances as time and work and determination will permit” (134).

Bearing this and a number of other philosophical notions of education expressed by DuBois and prominent African American scholars like Alain Locke and Alexander Crummell in mind, Eleanor

W. Traylor, some 60 years later, as chair of the Division of Humanities, sought to honor DuBois’s idea of preparing students for the world in which they live by creating a two-semester course in the Humanities which would encourage students to learn to situate their personal and communal experiences within the broader context of both American and global cultures. As a matter of function, the course was to highlight connections between distinctly Black or diasporic experiences and more universal occurrences ranging from the days of Homer and Sophocles to contemporary America, all the while particularizing these experiences’ affinity with and differences from both communal *Africana* existences and individualized African American identities.

*Broad Sympathy*, the course was to be called, as it was inspired largely by DuBois’ contention that learned men must be equally adept in living and in culture.

Now the training of men is a difficult task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers. If we make money the object of man-training, we shall develop money-makers but not necessarily men; if we make technical skill the object of education, we may possess artisans, but not, in nature men. Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, *broad sympathy*, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of the Higher Education which must underlie true life. (“The Talented Tenth” par. 1; italics added)

Armed with an ambitious charge—to offer students a vast survey of notable “knowledge of the world that was and is,” as it is best portrayed in world literature, and to highlight students’



relationship to this world—*Humanities I & II: “Broad Sympathy,”* as it has now come to be known, seeks to create a space of “at homeness” for students, as African Americans, with peoples of the world. Thus, it encourages students to honor and to celebrate the uniqueness of their blackness, even as it attempts to situate this blackness in the context of the broader world community in which we all must live and, ideally, in which we all can thrive.

That such a course could be useful to the intellectual and emotional success of African American students (and similarly to the intellectual success and well-roundedness of non-African American students) is evidenced by the wealth of recent scholarship on pedagogy and multiculturalism in general and pedagogy and African American studies in particular. Consider, for example, in the case of the latter, the published research of Serge Madhere and A. Wade Boykin of Howard’s *CRESPAR* (Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk), a research center with the explicit function of identifying ways to utilize Afrocentric based curricula and learning styles to create success among at-risk students. As Madhere argues, “Studying the interaction of culture and pedagogy is important because questions have been raised as to whether ‘culturally responsive pedagogy and curricula alone are powerful enough to ameliorate the effects of social stratification, racism, unequal resource distribution, and historical discrimination’” (286). Similarly, Gloria Ladson-Billings’ “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy: A Case of Culturally Relevant Instruction for African American Students” investigates what she terms “culturally relevant teaching” as it relates to students’ success and their ability to overcome factors that potentially place them at risk. As Ladson-Billings suggests, culturally relevant pedagogy prepares students “to effect change in society, not merely to fit into it” and empowers them “intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (382).

More recently, Derrick P. Aldridge has examined the educational thought of DuBois, “extrapolating from his work a model of 6 educational principles” which might “encourage the further examination and development of African American-based educational models” (182). As Aldridge notes, “With the exception of Afrocentric education [see Ani, Asante, and Karenga], little has been done to develop educational and theoretical models or strategies that address the historical and contemporary conditions of African Americans” (182). While Aldridge consciously or unconsciously shows little awareness of Howard’s “Broad Sympathy” course, many of the ideas he asserts as useful guiding DuBoisian philosophical principles for an educational model correspond with the principles of the Howard Humanities course. A key difference between

Aldridge’s model and the Howard Humanities course, however, is that Aldridge’s model is all-encompassing or broad in its subject breath, while the Howard course is specific to world literature. A more negligible distinction is that he centers his model around the premise that specific educational principles (African American-Centered, Communal, Broad-Based, Group Leadership, Pan-Africanist, and Global Education) can be used to address the sociopolitical issues (Psychological Oppression/Identity Ambiguity, Community Instability/Ineffective Institutions, Skill Deficiencies/Knowledge Deficits, Class Conflict/Intra-Group Inequality, and Global Oppression) that African Americans have historically faced in American society. While the Howard Humanities course does, indeed, acknowledge the sociopolitical implications of a DuBoisian approach to the Humanities, the motivating factors under girding the course are as much intellectual and aesthetic as they are sociopolitical.

Arguably, what makes “Broad Sympathy” worthy of distinction and significant as an approach to exploring blackness is, in fact, its attempt to conceptualize rather than to isolate notions of blackness and individual black experiences. The most obvious critique of this tendency is that viewing blackness in the context of global experiences inevitably leads to viewing it through a Western lens. Student protests in the 1960s of the course which preceded “Broad Sympathy” in the university’s Humanities Program of the College of Arts and Sciences made similarly related claims. In response, the college added Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to a curriculum which was previously limited to traditionally Western canonical works from Homer to James Joyce (Logan par. 12). But even after Ellison was included, the appropriateness of exploring the “thoughts of humankind” without including *Africana* texts and without heavily considering an *Africanist* perspective was questionable at best. And if Addison Gayle and the aestheticians of the Black Arts Movement were to be believed, failure to reject all Western thought wholeheartedly rendered any course which claimed to be interested in artistic expressions of humanism or in blackness damagingly *inauthentic*. To preclude this fitting critique, if only in part, “Broad Sympathy,” which was not offered again until the 1990s since political and enrollment constraints had disabled the department as an independent unit, as a revised and contemporary adaptation of the earlier humanities course, adopts Alain Locke’s 1950 impetus to revise American philosophical approaches to learning to such an extent that we acknowledge and respect global experiences, which he conjectured could be achieved only by aggressively expanding the Western world’s values

to accommodate the larger world’s vast cultural personalities.

In response to the *General Education in a Free Society* report issued by the Harvard Committee in 1945, Locke (who taught at Howard and whose name now identifies its College of Arts and Sciences) argued for a new method of university education that would not only change the *scope* of thinking but one which would also change the *way* of thinking (268). In an attempt to exorcise “parochial thinking” and to correct “traditional culture bias,” Locke proposed a methodology he termed *critical relativism*, which called for an evaluation of world cultural values while avoiding the two extremes inherent in such an evaluation—relativism and dogmatism. Summarily stated, critical relativism seeks to situate values in the contexts out of which they are birthed and, concurrently, to acknowledge with “reciprocity and tolerance” the diversity of values and cultures which populate the world. Locke, as a precocious multiculturalist, likely envisioned the implementation of his proposed curricula for all colleges and universities, not just historically black ones. In essence, like DuBois, Locke (acknowledging the reality and value of multiculturalism), issued a call for acceptance of all peoples and their experiences on the basis of humanity rather than on the basis of race. Through the method of critical relativism, students who might otherwise be marginalized could examine classical traditions and texts without being subsumed by them and without forsaking their own values by adopting Western ones. Such is the general methodological approach to the classic texts studied during the course of both semesters of “Broad Sympathy.” And it is particularized for Howard’s overwhelmingly African American population by foregrounding inquiries into blackness from a distinctively Africanist perspective.

In many ways, the course’s invocation of Locke’s notion of critical relativism offers an anticipatory response to the call Helen A. Neville and Sundiata K. Cha-Jua issue as late as 1998 in “Kufundisha: Toward a Pedagogy for Black Studies.” Neville and Cha-Jua astutely note that while Black studies scholars, during the past 25 or so years, have “radically transformed how scholars study the African American experience” (447) and have “produced a paradigm shift by developing models that accentuated the self-activity of African American people” whereby African Americans were subjects rather than objects (448) and while Afracentric scholars who are educators have proposed “the construction of an African-centered educational philosophy to counter Eurocentric hegemony” (448), “what is clearly missing from the Black studies literature is a paradigm to guide pedagogical practices” (449). Further, they argue that “[t]he paucity of literature on pedagogy or

teaching methods in Black studies is compounded by the scarcity of studies on effective teaching strategies with African American college students” (449). James A. Vasquez and Nancy Wainstein make a similar observation, which Neville and Cha-Jua cite:

Almost nothing in the current literature directly addresses the issue of how college faculty members should adapt their instruction to the cultural distinctiveness of minority students.... [In fact,] there remains a peculiar absence of recommendations for instructors about how they might change their own classroom behavior. (qtd. in Neville and Cha-Jua 449).

In response to this lack, Neville and Cha-Jua offer *Kufundisha* (a Kiswahili word which means “to teach”), which articulates an educational epistemology and suggests strategies for classroom praxis (450). Among its eight components are: teaching philosophy, goals and objectives of the discipline and course, learning styles, texts and readings, methods of instruction, methods of evaluation, and learning environment. The course they detail in their case study is an introduction to Black studies which they co-taught at an unnamed large Midwestern university. Among their readings were “an introductory Black studies textbook, a male-centered historical survey, a historical examination of Black women, a sociological text, monographs on Black feminism and Afracentrism, and a reader on African American literature” (458). Like “Broad Sympathy,” Neville and Cha-Jua’s course has been met with great success. What separates the two, however, in addition to their timeliness, is the former’s specialized focus on literature as a way of communicating the intellectual and artistic traditions of the African American.<sup>1</sup>

As detailed in the introduction of the course syllabus, “Broad Sympathy” involves the study of “our desires, our defeats, our triumphs, our sufferings, our joys, and our possibilities” as humans (Traylor and Arana “Humanities I” 2). By examining the lives of human beings who have lived long before them and by investigating the experiences of those who are among their contemporaries, students are better equipped to

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<sup>1</sup> I should note here that while the *Kufundisha* model fails to acknowledge *Broad Sympathy* as a pedagogical approach which initiates the very thing it proposes, this over-cite is likely due to the inaccessibility to published materials related to the course. I should also note here that, during the time Traylor was constructing the course and its corresponding pedagogy, she was interviewed by artist, playwright, and scholar James Hatch, who was then a professor at City College of New York, and he noted that he was teaching a similar course with great success at his university, though he was not formally documenting it for publication. Unfortunately, that the success of these experiments in pedagogy goes undocumented is more often the rule than the exception. *Broad Sympathy: The Howard University Oral Traditions Reader* is now available, among other places, at amazon.com.

construct their own identities and, subsequently, to assert themselves as individuals in a global community. In essence, they avoid the fate of Ellison's *Invisible Man* who, without self-definition or crucial awareness of the world around him, struggles to establish effectively a sense of personal identity and individualism in the context of his community. Instead, the idea of "Broad Sympathy" is to have students "discover, as [they] journey through time and around the global village where the texts of humanistic study lead [them ...] the joy of at homeness with the people of the world, not only when [they] find how alike we [all] are, but, also, how different we may be" (2). And this "at homeness" provides students with the freedom simply *to be* and with the "runnin' space" of former Howard professor and poet Sterling A. Brown's "After Winter":

[...]

The lean months are done with,  
The fat to come.  
His hopes, winter wanderers,  
Hasten home.

*"Butterbeans fo' Clara*

*Sugar corn fo' Grace*

*An' fo' de little feller*

*Runnin' space. . . .*" (513; italics in original)

The charge of the course to its students, then, as issued by Traylor, is valiantly to "Soar!" (4).

Conducted primarily through lectures and class discussion, "Broad Sympathy" seeks to enhance "student understanding of enduring themes of humanistic inquiry." In an attempt to engage students fully and to encourage them to become intellectual thinkers about age-old cultures and traditions, participation is not only encouraged but expected. It accounts for twenty percent of the final grade, and it demands that students attend class regularly and that they are capable of assuming useful roles as contributors of shared learning. Thus, during each class period, students are expected to initiate a line of inquiry; to offer or to seek information relevant to the topic of discussion; to show the relationship of readings from one week to another or to the contemporary moment; to suggest theories and solutions when a problem is encountered; to encourage their peers; and to conceptualize effectively multiple points of view (Traylor and Arana "Humanities I" 7). Writing proficiency is also essential in the course, as the writing assignments account for forty percent of the overall grade. Students are encouraged to view writing as a self-emancipating act as they gain a greater sense "knowledge of the world that was and is" and their relation to it. Accordingly, they must use textual evidence to support their personal narratives or their claims and theories about the themes which govern the course and in their assigned response papers and critical essays. The

other forty percent of the final grade is taken from mid-term and final exam scores, both of which require students to write brief analyses of the major themes and ideas of the course.

The first semester of the sequence explores "cultural collision and resolution, concentrating on various aspects of the epic tradition," while the second semester examines "the relationship of 'the self' to 'the other' in light of the differences between comedy and tragedy—in drama, autobiography, and fiction" (5). The first semester's themes discussed in relation to the assigned texts include: cultural collision and resolution; loss and recovery; tradition and change; the quest for personal integrity; the quest for kinship; the quest for the greatest good (or *summum bonum*); and the examined life (23). The common texts used in all sections of the course to explore these themes range from traditional folktales to the contemporary novel and include Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, selected oral tales from B. Langa and L. Lawrence's *An Oral Traditions Reader*, D. T. Niane's edition of *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali*, Homer's *The Iliad*, select readings of Plato and Socrates, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Students are also encouraged but not required to view Peter Brooks' (director) *The Mahabharata*.

For each unit, students are given a study guide which includes background information about the author, when such is available; suggestions about ways of writing about and reading texts; relevant information about the respective text's genre; insight into cultural traditions and motifs which inform the texts; details about the socio-political context of works; and finally study questions to guide their inquiry of the texts, particularly as they relate to certain themes and to students' relationship to such themes. For example, once students are made aware of select aspects of Ibo society and culture in their examination of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, they are encouraged to locate values in the Ibo society, as revealed in the novel, which make the culture cohesive. What this examination is likely to reveal is that the way the novel treats ideas of kinship, duty, and elders mirrors the way African American cultural traditions tend to treat ideas of kinship, duty, and ancestry. Similarly, in students' study of the oral narrative, they will inevitably see connections between orality at its inception and orality as it appears in the contemporary African American vernacular tradition. And when students begin to investigate the personal factors and/or cultural and historical forces which help shape Okonkwo's identity and character in *Things Fall Apart*, they are also asked to examine how such forces shape their own identity and the identities of people both like and unlike them. Thus almost instinctively, they find themselves experiencing the "at homeness" *broad sympathy* so carefully negotiates.

While making connections between traditional African societies like Achebe’s (or those of the African folktales) and African American cultural traditions may seem quite natural, helping students see their place in Homer’s *Iliad* or in Plato is a more daunting task. But by using *Sundiata*, which details the life of a Mali king and the culture of Mandingo people, to introduce the epic as genre, this tension is slightly eased. The traditional African griot is likened to the Greek poet, and both are compared to the storyteller of *Africana* traditions. Memory, a significant component of all three cultures, is also explored. This is, in fact, why Homer’s *Iliad* is chosen as a required text, rather than written or literary epics like Virgil’s *Aeneid* or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, neither of which place as significant emphasis on memory.

Each of the first semester’s remaining units and their respective texts provides a segue one to another, and all aid in allowing students to study a wide breadth of human experience and societies’ varying responses to it. The epic’s encounters with heroes and gods and Plato and Socrates’ inquiries into morality and the “greatest good” lead to a unit on religions of the world. Appropriately, the unit takes a humanistic approach to religion and engages it from the perspective of rational inquiry. Thus, it introduces students to major types of religion—animism, polythesism, and monotheism and revealed and ethical religions—and to many different methods and approaches, including psychological, historical, phenomenological, hermeneutical methods and Africanist and womanist/feminist approaches. Subsequently, students investigate the origins of African American religious traditions, dating back to slavery. And this leads to a unit on Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative*, which effortlessly connects the preceding units on heroism, morality, and religion and which, ultimately, accommodates the transition into the final unit on Morrison’s neo-slave narrative *Beloved*. Again, that which is familiar is connected to the less familiar as students are asked, among other questions, to locate elements of *Beloved*’s structure that resonate the narrative characteristics of the epic genre; to explore the novel’s likeness to the oral tradition, to cautionary and etiological tales, and to the autobiography; and to examine its representation of the Christian concept of resurrection as well as of African and Eastern concepts of reincarnation.

The second semester’s themes discussed in relation to the assigned texts include: the question of the self and the other; of choice and right action; of conventional wisdom vs. examined thought; of identity; of the community and the pariah; of alienation and reconciliation; and of good and evil. Common required readings for all sections include: Wole Soyinka’s *The Strong Breed*; Sophocles’ *The Theban Plays*, William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *The Tempest*; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust*;

Edward Braithwaite’s *The Arrivants*; James Baldwin’s *Amen Corner*; *Black Elk Speaks*; Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima*; Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha*; and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. Again, students are given historical, socio-political, and intellectual backgrounds of the texts, relevant biographical information about authors, details about themes and genre, and study questions. And again, careful study and subtle guidance enhance the visibility of connections between the more traditional Western texts and *Africana* traditions. Students explore, for example, Mephistopheles’ role in *Faust* in terms of his likeness to the African and African American trickster figure; when Faust talks about two souls living within him, students are reintroduced to DuBois’ concept of double-consciousness; *The Tempest* is read through the lens of colonial imperialism, even as students become made aware of the traditions of language and Renaissance blank verse; interconnections between *The Arrivants* as a post-colonial Caribbean text and *The Tempest* as a colonial text are made; and *Bless Me, Ultima* allows students to see the likeness of Spanish and African American writers’ approaches to their respective distinctly ethnic traditions.

Thus by the end of the two semester course, students have been exposed to a range of global traditions which have allowed authors to transmit both culturally-specific and universal “humanistic wisdom, ideas, and heritage.” Ideally, students have learned to think multi-dimensionally, and they have acquired one of the gifts of *broad sympathy*—“the ability to look forward and backward with some degree of balance” (“Mission” par. 4) and with an accompanying sense of “at homeness” amongst it all. As the readings and the discussions are structured to increase significantly students’ ability to perform critical evaluation and analysis, they are better equipped to function, on their own terms, in a world that demands their ability to respond effectively to being deemed an *Other* as readily as they can respond to being accepted. Conceivably, their broad base of intellectual knowledge about the world and its cultures and their corresponding intimate relationship to it can create a sense of self-definition and confidence about their own traditions and heritage that will abide with them under the most celebratory or the most threatening of circumstances.

Arguably, in addition to encouraging multi-dimensionality, to enhancing students’ ability to perform critical evaluation and analysis, and to fostering appreciation of artistic expressions of humanity, *broad sympathy* also attempts to resolve the African American’s sometimes tragic destiny of double-consciousness. If DuBois’ notion accurately captures the fate of the African American as one who experiences the peculiar sensation of “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that

looks on in amused contempt and pity” (*Souls* 45), *broad sympathy* allows the learned African American, even when he looks at himself through the eyes of others, to see a reflection of the world which others are not quite enlightened enough to see. Thus it is the unenlightened—those who unsuccessfully struggle with conventional wisdom *versus* examined thought, those who cannot reconcile the “self” and the “other,” not the African American—who, ironically, are to be looked upon with pity. *Broad sympathy*, in this sense, becomes an emancipatory act in and of itself. It frees the “self” from the dogmatic, non-democratic, non-pluralistic values Locke writes of in 1950, but it does so without replacing them with ones that are similarly essentialist. And in this way, it gains distinction as an effective supplement to Black Studies, particularly those courses which tend to focus exclusively on *Africana* ideas and ideals. Such approaches are, indeed, useful to helping students to establish and to examine ideas specifically about blackness in general, but they are likely to be too limiting for the purpose of helping them to locate themselves, as living manifestations of contemporary blackness, in an immemorial yet thoroughly modern global context.

Instead, students are encouraged simply just “to be.” Neither their blackness nor their identity is

decided for them. And while some students will undoubtedly succumb to essentialist rhetoric about black authenticity and its austere relationship with Western thought, most will use their experiences in the course to affirm the supposition that, for them as individuals, their knowledge about any notion of the world, like their identity, is best established largely, if not exclusively, in terms of *broad sympathy*—knowledge of the world that was and is and their subsequent relationship to it. And while “Broad Sympathy,” as I describe it here as a useful course in the Humanities, was initially constructed with a specific predilection towards blackness and with the hope of ensuring that African American students in particular achieve a sense of “at homeness” with peoples of the world, at base, the course may serve as a model for achieving “at homeness” for all historically marginalized peoples. Additionally, the majority culture’s exposure to and subsequent adoption of critical relativism in this age of multiculturalism has far-reaching and fruitful implications. Ultimately, situating us all in terms of humanity rather than in terms of race, broad sympathy—knowledge of the world that was and is—reveals the most humanistic of all realizations—that we are all far more alike than we are dissimilar.

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**Dr. Williams** is a rising scholar in contemporary African American literature. Her book-length study of Leon Forrest—*“In the Light of Likeness—Transformed”: The Literary Art of Leon Forrest*—has been recently published the Ohio State University Press.