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'Dusk of Dawn': An Essay toward an Old Concept of Race; or, on the Death of Michael Brown

Dana A. Williams

On August 9, 2014, just before the start of the academic year for most universities in the United States, Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American male, was shot to death by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. As the picture of the nearly 1000 Howard University students standing with their hands up went viral on social media, many faculty at Howard, much like their peers all over the country, with their fingers on the pulse of the deep pain black people were feeling—familiar yet incessantly new—began to reimagine how to teach what was happening in Ferguson to their students. Any number of approaches to #teachingferguson, as the phenomenon was represented on Twitter, could have been taken. One of the most instructive approaches, however, relied on a return to America's preeminent sociologist, W. E. B. Du Bois, who warned us in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the problem of the 20th century would be the problem of the color line. Not even DuBois, however, would have likely imagined that the problem would extend into the 21st century and with such a painful stronghold.

As fate would have it, earlier that summer, the College of Arts and Sciences Freshman Seminar Leadership Team at Howard had selected Du Bois's *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques, 1906-1960* as its common text. As we noted in the announcement of the selection,

Du Bois's book, like immediately previous Freshman Seminar common texts by Wole Soyinka (*Of Africa*) and Ngugi wa Thiongo (*Something Torn and New*), explores Africana ways of knowing and being in a multilateral engagement with Africa, its Diaspora, and the larger world.... In a series of ten essays first delivered largely as talks at HBCU commencement exercises, Du Bois considers the process, value, and purpose of education as a liberating practice of human freedom.¹

We had taken as our theme "The Elder and the Apprentice," and there was no truer elder than Du Bois. Who could argue that his "articulation of uniquely African American approaches to the role of the university in the development of free people is unparalleled in the annals of Africana and modern world educational

¹ The Fall 2014 team consisted of Segun Ggbadegsin, who was then interim Dean of the College; Greg Carr, Chair of Afro-American Studies and author of the announcement as published at <http://undergraduatestudies.howard.edu/about/common-text>; and me.

philosophy"?² He positioned himself ideologically with the traditions, history, and cultures of African peoples even in this regard. "Once upon a time," Du Bois wrote, in "The Field and Function of the Negro College," which is included in the collection,

I saw the functioning of a perfect system of education. It was in West Africa, beside a broad river.... There under the Yorubas and other Sudanese and Bantu tribes, the education of the child began almost before it could walk.... They sat in council with their elders and learned the history and science and art of the tribe, and practiced all in their daily life.... Nothing more perfect has been invented than this system of training among primitive African tribes. (*Education* 112-13)

As a co-leader of the seminar team, I looked for ways to connect that text to the contemporary moment so that the past could speak to the present in ways that would help our students, many of whom had not imagined the reality of the world they lived in (where black lives do not always matter) prior to Brown's killing, even after Trayvon Martin's, which was an incident, not a pattern in their minds. Two quotes in particular, both of which I examine closely in this essay, stood out for me as we prepared to orient the nearly 1000 College of Arts and Sciences Freshman in the seminar.³ The first involved what Du Bois outlined in "The Hampton Idea" as "the Great Fear," and the second warned of how white supremacy reacts to the Great Fear with manipulation, of which we must constantly be tremendously cautious. The "Great Fear" arises, according to Du Bois, "...when the course of procedure, which will turn indolence into energy, hesitation into confidence, and diffidence into self-assertion—when the well-known and world-tried methods of human awakening are mentioned in regard to us and ours..." (*Education* 24).

² <http://undergraduatestudies.howard.edu/about/common-text>.

³ The import of using Du Bois to read the assault on black bodies extends well beyond the use of *The Education of Black People* at Howard as the common reading for freshman students. I used this experience to frame my remarks on a panel on Ferguson at the 2015 CLA convention in Dallas, Texas, for two reasons. First, so many of us (CLA members) were grappling with how to talk about and then how to teach Ferguson as text. It was Twitter posts about teaching and theorizing Ferguson, in fact, that inspired Tony Bolden to organize the panel. Second, it is incredibly unlikely that I would have come to Du Bois as the critical lens through which to read the problematic of Michael Brown's bravado absent having to teach *The Education of Black People*. Yet, I am ever certain that this lens is not just viable but significant. Not to contextualize my remarks amid the circumstances out of which they emerged would be disingenuous and would devalue the premium I place on teaching as a crucial element of my scholarly pursuits. I take some care to note, too, the frequent commentary CLA colleagues made during my years as Program Chair that even as some of the best panels at the conference were on teaching there were too few panels that affirmed the importance of teaching and learning in the work that we do.

An ominous hush falls, he argues, and fear emerges the moment people of color begin to assert themselves. The response following the hush and the fear depends largely on how people have been trained to respond to the moment of change and transformation—they either accept and applaud it or resist it with manipulation: “... put their rights in the background.... and above all, watch and ward against the first appearance of arrogance or self-assertion or consciousness of great power.... and if their young men will dream dreams, let them be dreams of cornbread and molasses” (25). If this fails, violence inevitably ensues.

An awareness of the emergence and cause of the fear and an understanding of the probable responses to it are instructive well beyond Howard’s Freshman Seminar and command our attention as teachers of languages and literatures as we try to help our students understand how language, rhetoric, and discourse work in academic and non-academic settings alike and how they can be used to respond to strongholds of power. We do well to remember James Baldwin’s warning, so skillfully expressed in “If Black English Isn’t a Language, Then Tell me, What Is?”: “People evolve a language in order to describe and thus control their circumstances, or in order not to be submerged by a reality that they cannot articulate. (And, if they cannot articulate it, they *are* submerged).”⁴ At the crux of my argument is the issue of rhetoric and its many layers—rhetoric as everyday language use with the intent to persuade (honestly or otherwise); rhetoric as a skill or art form related to writing and speaking, again especially to influence; and rhetoric as a study of principles and rules that govern and/or inform the composing process. So, the way I tarry with language (Darren Wilson’s, the officer who shot Michael Brown, and Du Bois’s) to create sufficient scaffolding for the weighty argument Du Bois beckons us to carry as scholar-teachers tasked with educating students about ushering in and sustaining liberating practices of human freedom is appropriate and unavoidable.⁵ I beckon you to tarry with me.

When Officer Darren Wilson first approached Michael Brown and Dorian Johnson (the young man who was with Brown at the time of the shooting), it was because the two young men were walking in the middle of the suburban street,

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-english.html> Accessed 07/13/15.

⁵ The commentary that follows is based on Wilson’s grand jury testimony as represented at <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2014/11/25/366519644/ferguson-docs-officer-darren-wilsons-testimony> and at <http://www.cnn.com/interactive/2014/11/us/ferguson-grand-jury-docs/index.html>, which includes the transcript of the full testimony of all witnesses, Wilson included.

potentially preventing traffic from passing through easily.⁶ According to his grand jury testimony, Wilson asked Johnson why the two young men were not walking on the sidewalk. The reply, Wilson claims, was that they had almost reached their destination, which one of the young men pointed toward. Brown then came toward the police car, Wilson reported, and used vulgar language, at which point Wilson called for backup because he noticed that Brown was wearing a black shirt and was holding cigarillos, thereby leading Wilson to connect Brown to an earlier call (which Wilson notes he heard only partially) about a “stealing in progress” where a suspect wearing a black shirt had stolen a box of cigarillos. Wilson then reversed his car and cut the young men off, since they continued to walk in the street, and he beckoned Brown to him. Unprovoked, Brown, according to Wilson hit him with a “full-on swing,” not to be confused with a successful swing that lands or connects, which we can assume would have left more evidence of injury than the minor injuries Wilson sustained after Brown allegedly man-handled him. “[W]hen I grabbed him,” Wilson testified, “the only way I can describe it is I felt like a 5-year-old holding on to Hulk Hogan.” Quickly, he began to fear for his life because he could feel Brown’s fingers reaching for the trigger; so, Wilson begins to shoot. After several shots and misses, Brown looks at Wilson with “the most intense aggressive face.... it looks like a demon, that’s how angry he looked.” Wilson shields his face, and Brown starts to run away; then Wilson begins to pursue him. Rather than stop and get on the ground as instructed, Brown turns and makes “like a grunting, like aggravated sound.” And despite seeing Brown’s “body kind of jerk” after at least one of the shots connects and then seeing him flinch again after another does as well, Wilson feels compelled to shoot another round of bullets because Brown “was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting at him. And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn’t even there, I wasn’t even anything in his way.” I recount the story at length, using quotes of Wilson’s testimony at key moments, to call attention to Wilson’s narration of Brown as a character, as a figure who (or “that” since Wilson dehumanizes Brown at times) has a firm and clear, even if misplaced, sense of himself that is too uncanny for Wilson’s comfort.

Even before Wilson’s testimony became public, what I could not get out of my mind was the way black men who have been gunned down are narrated as too full of bravado. Yet, no one seemed to recognize the terrible irony that Trayvon Martin lost his life because he performed fearlessness too well for a bully whose own

⁶ One of my students from St. Louis, Missouri, shared with my Freshman English for English majors class that semester the tendency of young people in that area who were unaffiliated with a gang to avoid the sidewalks (both of which identified different gang affiliations) as a clear indicator of non-affiliation. Brown and Johnson’s walking in the street can therefore (and ironically) be read as an attempt to enable their safety.

bravado was informed largely by a hate and fear so deep that he felt compelled to react violently. Martin had fallen victim to the “Great Fear” and white supremacy’s reaction to it. So had Brown and the people of Ferguson, where the deployment of the National Guard reinforced what many of us have known all along—that black people are enemies of the state. Black people’s bravado is insufferable. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and too many other young black men to name had an unacceptable swagger that revealed that they were of a generation imbibed with confidence and self-assertion, real or feigned, often to their own detriment.⁷ The colloquialism “stay woke,” in any of its many forms—as an assertion (“I stay woke”) or as a warning (which would make it an update of the missive “don’t sleep”)—is probably this generation’s clearest articulation meant to confirm its human awakening.⁸

Du Bois warns us of the dire consequences of being noticeably and notably “woke”:

...the foundation of the great fear is this: when a human being becomes suddenly conscious of the tremendous powers lying latent within him, when from the puzzled contemplation of a half-known self, he arises to the powerful assertion of a self, conscious of his might, then there is loosed upon the world possibilities of good or of evil that make men pause. And when this happens in the case of a class or nation or a race, the world fears or rejoices according to the way in which it has been trained to contemplate change in the conditions of the class or race in question.... (*Education* 24)

Du Bois’s outlining of the great fear’s foundation and then the response to it prompts us to read Darren Wilson’s description of Michael Brown very differently. Instead of reading him as a monster, as Wilson does, might we read his “bulking up” and running through the shots, his anger at being shot, and his looking through Wilson as if he nor nothing else is there as a sudden consciousness of his latent powers and of himself, as a powerful assertion of a self awareness of his might. That Michael Brown cannot be loose(d) in the world, and his death becomes

⁷ Tamir Rice’s height and weight become as much of a story as his fatal shooting at one point. The 12-year-old boy was 5’7” and 195 lbs, making him foremost a threat, not an adolescent, in the eyes of some.

⁸ Erykah Badu’s “Master Teacher” is probably the best example of a cultural worker’s use of the phrase. She repeats the line “I stay woke” throughout the song and then most compellingly in response to the control flow or conditional statement “What if there were no niggas/Only master teachers.” I am also influenced in my thinking here by Adam Banks’s contention (in unpublished remarks made at Howard’s Humanities Division Symposium on Du Bois, Rhetoric, and Transformative Leadership in April 2015) that we have much to learn by examining young people’s “everyday” rhetoric and their refusal to have their humanity compromised any longer.

inevitable because Wilson and his ilk (officers who, out of fear or otherwise, lack sufficient respect for black life) have not been trained to contemplate the change in the conditions of a race of people but rather simply to extinguish any threatening manifestation of the changed condition.⁹ “Under such circumstances,” Du Bois argues, our duty as educators “toward those children whom we are educating” is first to “carefully understand the age in which we live; above all, we must realize that this is an age of tremendous activity; that today no race which is not prepared to put forth the full might of its carefully developed powers can hope to maintain itself as a world power....” (*Education* 25). The goal for me as a teacher in the wake of Ferguson as a potential watershed moment for black people is indeed to help my students understand the age in which we live, and the only way I can achieve this or even a tentative approximation of it is to unpack the most recent iteration of systemic racism.

In *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, Du Bois charts the varied concepts of race that have been used to preserve power. At Harvard, he faced “scientific race dogma” (*Dusk* 49). The physical and biological development of the Negro made him inferior. Then, in Germany, “race became a matter of culture and cultural history” (49), and since Africans supposedly had no culture or cultural history, Africans must be inferior. The concept of race shifted again, of course, when neither argument could reasonably be made any longer, but the underlying impulse of discrimination against and presumed even if unproven inferiority of black people continued. And that must be at the base of any understanding of the world in which we live. Once we establish that reality as a common point of departure, the hard work of moving beyond it ensues. And as Du Bois suggests, “The problem of the future world [in response to race as an unyielding and threatening problem] is the charting, by means of intelligent reason, of a path not simply through the resistances of physical force, but through the vaster and far more intricate jungle of ideas conditioned on unconscious and subconscious reflexes of living things” (xxxiii). Violence in Ferguson is actually the

⁹ A critical, though fictional, representation of this inability to process changes in racial dynamics after a generation awakens and stays “woke” happens in “The Lawn Chair” episode of Shonda Rhimes’s “Scandal” on ABC, an episode that foreshadows the police’s planting of a weapon on a killed black body, as was the case with Michael Slager’s shooting of Walter Scott in South Carolina and then seemingly strategically dropping the taser closer to Scott’s body a few weeks after the episode first aired. In the episode, the officer emotionally confesses that he puts his life on the line for people who do not respect his authority, which is inextricably tied to his whiteness. The officer cannot imagine a world where Black people do not accept their perceived inferiority. The officer complains about driving into the city daily to protect “them,” the ungrateful truants are not delusional enough to believe in such a thing as a post-racial society but who have little regard for him as an agent of the state or his whiteness, without recognizing that not being a part of the community that he is othering and policing is part of the problem.

path of least resistance; the more intricate jungle of ideas can be navigated only by enacting “that part of human training which is devoted specifically and peculiarly into bringing the man into the fullest and roundest development of his powers as a human being” (*Education* 26).¹⁰

To understand how racism continues to evolve and then to understand how Michael Brown’s generation has responded to it with such freedom and self-awareness—enough to warrant if not require their killing—we need only pay careful attention to the public sphere’s rhetoric.¹¹ Among the things we will see, in addition to a woke generation’s charting a path for us, are the fractures and fissures amid the economic, political, and religious topographies that careful attention to language reveal. Economically, people seem less and less willing to continue to be denied a living wage, and untouchables like Walmart and McDonald’s are relenting, even if only minimally.¹² Politically, justice reports are finally available to affirm what black people have known along, that we aren’t treated fairly at any point of a law enforcement process.¹³ And even conservative Republicans feel compelled to “clarify” religious freedom laws that are clearly discriminatory and purposefully so.¹⁴ Juxtapose these small moves toward an idea of humanity against yet another noose found at Duke or a retracted April Fool’s joke in the University of Virginia newspaper or a fraternity’s avowal to keep black people out, and we have to wonder what is really going on. We very well may be witnessing the dispersal of power, and

¹⁰ Du Bois argues that higher education is what enacts that part of human training, but that goal is easily forsaken by a focus on vocational training.

¹¹ What I refer to here as “Brown’s generation” includes young people under the age of 25 who seem to have less fear than generations that precede them, especially as it relates to interactions with authority. The rhetoric around Freddie Gray’s killing in Baltimore was informed heavily by his choice to look police in the eye. Similarly, the video of the young teenage girl attacked in McKinley, Texas, makes clear that her only crime was a refusal to stop talking as the officer commanded, which leads him to cuff and assault her. The response from people of this same generation has been to use social media to organize and to bring attention to these cases. They are fully aware of their right to be treated equally (and as people free to believe in and demand that right), even if they are very aware of the serious limitations of that belief.

¹² In February 2015, Walmart announced that it would increase its minimum wage to employees to at least \$9. On April 1, McDonald’s announced that it would be increasing wages and offering benefits to its employees in those restaurants it owns, though it will not require those restaurants that are franchises to do the same. Both increases came after labor campaigns and political pressure to raise the minimum wage both companies pay their workers.

¹³ On March 4, 2015, the Justice Department released its report on the investigation of the Ferguson Police Department, and the report clearly indicated that racial bias informed many aspects of law enforcement—from arrest warrants for unpaid fines to excessive filing of unwarranted charges against African Americans.

¹⁴ Indiana governor Mike Pence was forced, by political pressure, to sign an amendment to clarify the state’s “Religious Freedom Restoration Act,” which in its original form was seen by many as anti-gay and as weakening LGBT non-discrimination protections.

the sometimes silly/sometimes bold acts of racism we have been seeing recently are a part of the backlash that attends desperate attempts to preserve power. Or, it may be the case that the power structure is willing to concede the rhetorical space as long as power is maintained. But we must fully interrogate the age in which we live and its many activities to determine if the fractures are real or cosmetic; if can the chords be untwined, and if so how? In other words, just how vulnerable is the center of power, and can we exploit this vulnerability to usher in a more human existence and, hence, a better world for all peoples?

I have forgone the traditional thesis-as-argument approach here to make several intertwined points and to reveal how we might best dissolve seemingly indissoluble power structures that disenfranchise and devalue black lives. What Du Bois suggested in 1940 is no less true in 2015: the problem of the future is in charting a way forward and not so much in identifying the reality that is. Those of us who “stay woke” are fully aware of the problems that plague us. Figuring out how we might best forge ahead is a matter of critical awareness of our best thinking in the past and of identifying the fractures that are emerging in old world orders and then breaking them one by one, once and for all. The center of power is grappling mightily with the changing face of our world.¹⁵ If we can intervene strategically at the ideal moment in crucial places and with the precise approach, Michael Brown’s death, ironically, might just be our dusk of dawn.

¹⁵ Consider, for example, *The Nation’s* recent article “5 Hallmarks of the New American Order” among the many warnings of a changing world (by which most people in the United States mean a changing America). <http://www.thenation.com/article/201977/5-hallmarks-new-american-order>. Importantly, this changing face is consumed with the reality that whiteness is no longer the standard nor in the majority. And according to the Pew Report released on April 2, 2015, by 2050, in the United States, “Christians will decline from more than three-quarters of the population in 2010 to two-thirds in 2050, and Judaism will no longer be the largest non-Christian religion. Muslim will be more numerous in the U.S. than people who identify as Jewish on the basis of religion.” <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>. A crucial recognition related to religious conservatism is that objections to funding birth control and to legal abortions are as much about encouraging white women’s reproduction, to combat the shrinking number of white people in the west, as these objections are about any religious beliefs. All of these discourses about “difference” contribute to the backlash against Black lives.

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On the Night of the Verdict

Aimee Suzara

The sky shook, vibrating the bones, making Ilaya's heart beat faster. When the sound grew larger, buzzed loud and big, she knew it was looming in a circle closer to where she lived, by the Lake; then, it would fade again. The sound came and went as though it swung at the end of a lasso being circled around and around, trying to capture a wild horse. *What is the wild horse*, she wondered? *What are they catching?* Was it all those people she saw on the news, little faces bundled in coats and scarves, huddled together and moving? The people, all squished together, reminded her of cattle. Was the helicopter trying to lasso the cattle-people, bring them somewhere? She saw, in the news, that there were policemen in big black suits and helmets, holding sticks, walking in lines between the cars, around the people who crowded the streets of Oakland.

The sky shook, and so did her mother Nena's shoulders. Nena was a writer, and felt things more than regular people felt.

"I don't even need to watch the news to know exactly what's happening. I heard the helicopters, and I knew," said Nena, organizing pillows on the couch, cleaning off glasses and clutter from the coffee table. Her voice got higher and there was a crackle in it, funny, like Ilaya thought an old record player might sound. "This young boy has become...another Emmett Till. It's 2014. Isn't history ever gonna stop repeating?" She organized the magazines on the coffee table, stacking them like cards. "There are students I teach," she shook her head, "who have never heard of Emmett Till. Who don't know what Jim Crow was." She shook her head again. "I don't even know what to say to them tomorrow." Ilaya knew that her mother wasn't really talking to her, but thinking aloud, as she often did. Nena went to the kitchen and washed a few dishes, looking sideways at the news that flashed on Ilaya's face.

Ilaya took a bite of an apple, looked at Nena, and then back at the news. "Mama," she said, "why are they putting that man against a car? Did he do something wrong?"

Nena didn't look up, just said, "just being a black man in this country is something wrong to them, honey. That's the way things are. Just like being brown or being a woman is something wrong. Even if you are as good as you can be."

"But Mama," Ilaya said, "my teacher said we live in a multi-cult-u-ral so-ci-e-ty and that it was a long time ago that people were racist, but now things are better."