

# Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society

## Double Consciousness

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The term *double consciousness* is used in reference to W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, when referring to a dual awareness developed by Black Americans in the United States: knowledge of one's own individual identity, as well as knowledge about how one will be read through a racial lens. This duality is also frequently interpreted as a dual and sometimes conflicting sense of being both American and not fully American, and likewise as the dual sense of being both American and African. Each interpretation has had its own trajectory in U.S. and international philosophy and thought, but they all reference the same basic theme of contradiction and complexity in the African American experience, as this entry describes.

## Double Consciousness Defined

The phrase *double consciousness* itself stemmed from a passage in the first chapter of Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, called "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." In this chapter, Du Bois describes how the descendants of Africans feel not a single self-consciousness but a sense of twoness, of being a U.S. citizen as well as a Black. These two identities represent two simultaneous [p. 412 ↓] selves—American and African or American and Black.

Although today the term *double consciousness* is almost always solely attributed to Du Bois and his work, the term itself was not created by him and would have been familiar to his contemporaries. The term had currency in at least two major avenues available to his educated readership: in medical psychology to refer to cases of split personality and in literature speaking of a transcendental division between the divine and the material world, which inhibited true self-realization. In each case, Du Bois likely relied on the phrase to make his ideas familiar to his readers, both in rallying Black Americans and in creating a basis of empathy among White Americans.

In the psychological literature, the idea of double consciousness, made popular by several cases of split personality highlighted in *Harper's* magazine, made clear that the two selves were not only distinct but fundamentally opposed to each other. Although

seen to be abnormal, the state of double consciousness was not seen as deviant; there was genuine sympathy and integrity attached to the subjects of this psychological double consciousness. This created a helpful and non-damaging metaphor and familiar language for Du Bois when he spoke about the dignity of this struggle for African Americans, who Du Bois posited as struggling to synthesize an integrated self out of two conflicting identities.

The term was similarly useful for those readers familiar with literature and transcendental thought. Much of Du Bois's work carries a deeply spiritual aspect, and many have interpreted his concept of double consciousness to refer to what Du Bois felt African Americans had to offer U.S. society: a deeply spiritual African identity, which could help to offset the harms and conflict many felt inherent to the materialism of U.S. society. This strain of literary thought was well known in Ralph Waldo Emerson's work, and was likewise adopted by many philosophers of the time, including Du Bois's mentor at Harvard, William James.

## The Veil

In Du Bois's thought, it is the veil that grants Black Americans a double consciousness. The veil has variously been interpreted as race itself and its impact on the lives of Black Americans, the racial lens through which White Americans view Black Americans, and the double consciousness with which Black Americans experience their world. Du Bois spoke of the veil in the same chapter as his passage about double consciousness. In this context, Du Bois was writing about the first time he became aware of the role his race played in his life, when a classmate of his, a White girl, refused to exchange cards with him: the veil of race cast him as different in his classmate's eyes. Du Bois uses the terminology of the veil many times throughout *The Souls of Black Folk*, always referring to the ways in which the true humanity of Black Americans had been inhibited by the evils and the constraints of U.S. racism.

Because the term *double consciousness* would have been familiar to educated readers of Du Bois's time, he was able to speak of his idea of a second sight, the perspective and body of knowledge that African Americans develop from their lives looking out from the veil of race. Du Bois saw this second sight, this spiritual alternative to mainstream

White America, as both a gift and a burden for Black Americans, and likewise central to the experience of a double consciousness.

As such, the concept of the veil is central to understanding double consciousness. The veil, for Du Bois, is something which Black Americans possess from birth, and is the very thing that makes it difficult for them to see themselves through the eyes of others, especially White people. Likewise, this veil of race both structures opportunity for African Americans and inhibits racial understanding between races in the United States. In terms of opportunity, Du Bois writes about the world “beyond the veil,” in which White Americans experience no racial constraints on their lives and ability to make choices.

For Black Americans, the veil stands between them and White America, inhibiting access to the privileges reserved for White Americans. This veil, in turn, prevents a true ability to see the problems of race for many White Americans. Although Black Americans are gifted by this second sight, which allows for a first-hand understanding of the problems of U.S. racism as well as the ability to operate in both a White and a Black world, White Americans' sight is limited. White Americans do not generally have the desire or the impetus to navigate Black America, and as such do not develop this dual awareness that has been central to the Black experience in the United States.

Although the role of double consciousness, this life looking out from the veil of race, has strongly negatively [p. 413 ↓ ] affected the lives of Black Americans and other non-Whites in the United States, it is important to note how Du Bois also saw double consciousness as a gift. This “second sight” for Du Bois was not only a burden to bear with dignity, but also a common experience around which Black Americans could forge coalitions and share their standpoint with U.S. society. The struggle for an integrated, more whole self could also serve as a metaphor for a vision of an integrated, more whole U.S. society, one in which the veil of race does not limit the realization of Black Americans' humanity but, rather, advances the nation from the zero-sum mentality of racism.

# The Consciousness of White People

A conversation about double consciousness is perhaps incomplete without giving attention to the ways in which White Americans do not experience it. If the veil is a reference for the ways in which African Americans' lives have been structured by racial prejudice, then by the same process, White Americans' lives have benefited from life free of the veil. Because White Americans' race is often rendered a non-race—that is, because White Americans are seen as the norm among U.S. citizens—White Americans are free from both life underneath the veil and the double consciousness that stems from it. As a result, White Americans are often seen in terms of their individual attributes and personalities, rather than being viewed as representatives of their race and accordingly feared, distrusted, ignored, or otherwise marginalized. This has led to the reality that many White Americans do not recognize the role that their race plays in their lives, and thus, the inability to develop the kind of race consciousness that minorities in the United States may develop as a result of the veil.

The experience of double consciousness is still present along racial lines in the United States. U.S. lives are still often structured by racial privilege and disadvantage, and the association between Whiteness and ideas of true U.S. entitlement persist. As such, more than 100 years after Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk*, the United States still faces “the problem of the color line,” and non-White U.S. residents must still develop a dual awareness of themselves as individuals and likewise how they will be viewed according to the stereotypes of their race.

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*See also*

Further Readings

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