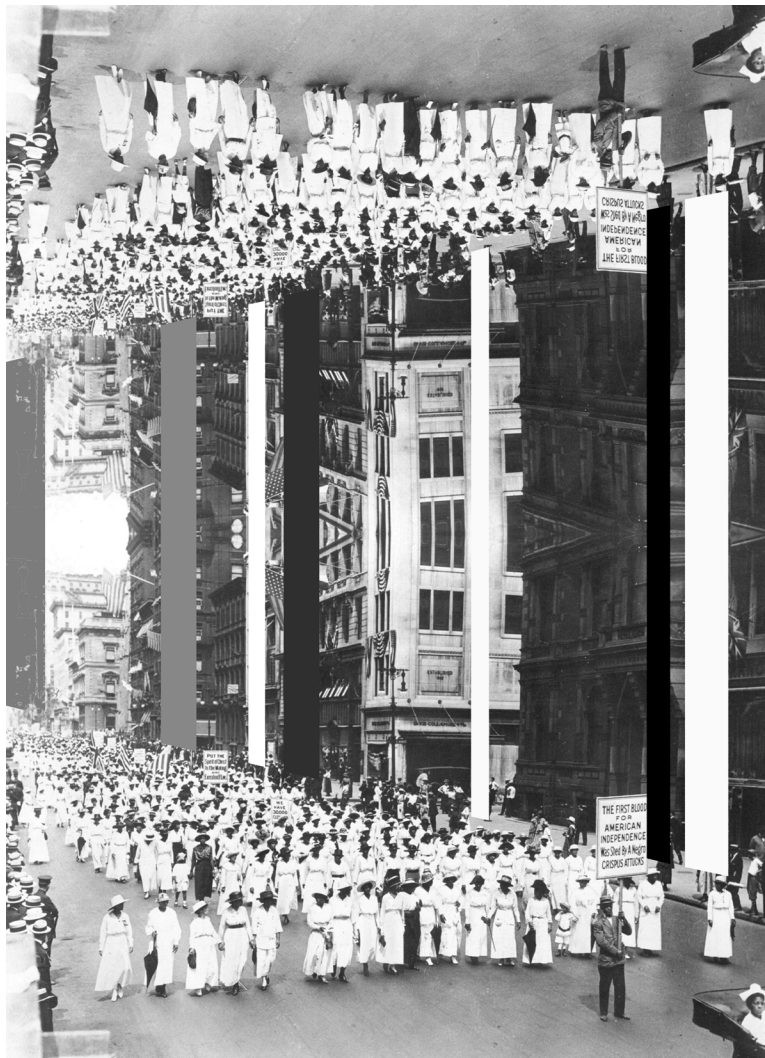


# DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS IN TODAY'S BLACK AMERICA



## ABSTRACT

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois introduces double consciousness as a result of racial prejudice and oppression. Explained as a state of confliction felt by black Americans, Du Bois presents double consciousness as integral to understanding the black experience. Later philosophers question the importance of double consciousness to current race discussions, but this paper contends that double consciousness provides valuable insights into black and white relations. To do this, I will utilize the modern slang term, “Oreo,” to highlight how a perceived incompatibility between blacks and whites could prevent America from achieving a greater unity.

Despite the decades since emancipation, America still struggles with issues of race. We continue to be a society of disunity, violence, and anger toward one another—a melting pot threatening to boil over. The “negro problem” (the race problem), as it was called by W.E.B. Du Bois in his “Study of the Negro Problems,” is a complex number of social problems related specifically to race issues.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I explore a small—but significant—piece of Du Bois’ theory: double consciousness. First discussed in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the value of double consciousness has been criticized by recent philosophers. The plausibility of a universal double consciousness has been called into question, deemed a political “tactic” by Allen and an absurdity by Reed.<sup>2</sup> However, I plan to argue that double consciousness remains a relevant theory to America today and that through its understanding we can find unique insights into the current relationship between blacks and whites. To start, I will define Du Boisian double consciousness utilizing Du Bois’ various works, then discuss the critiques of Du Bois’ mentioned above. Expounding upon Du Bois’ theory to discuss the double consciousness of today, I will use the modern slur, “Oreo,” to highlight a current worldview of incompatibility between blacks and whites. This perceived incompatibility could prevent American society from dealing with the bigger issue we face: racial prejudice.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois establishes several features of double consciousness. First, double consciousness is not a “true self-consciousness,” which is defined as an awareness of the self.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it is the “peculiar sensation” of “always looking at one’s self through the

- 1 Robert Goodings-Williams, “W.E.B. Du Bois,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last updated summer 2018, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/dubois/>; W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Study of the Negro Problems,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11, no. 1 (Jan. 1898): 3.
- 2 John P. Pittman, “Double Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last updated March 21, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/double-consciousness/>; Adolph Reed Jr., *W.E.B. Du Bois and American Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125.
- 3 Joel Smith, “Self-Consciousness,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last updated July 13, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness/>.



eyes of others,” and “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”<sup>4</sup> Du Bois lays claim to two things. The first is the awareness of a second “self” created by “others” who dislike you. The second is the feeling, or “sensation,” that comes from reflecting on the second self.<sup>5</sup> This second consciousness is not a second you but rather society’s concept of what-it-is-to-be black created by those “others”—white Americans—whose racial prejudice results in disdain toward the dark race.<sup>6</sup> Lawrie Balfour calls double consciousness “an internal echo of white America’s judgement” on blacks,<sup>7</sup> and as Du Bois explains in his “Conservation of Races” essay, at times judgement about a black person’s “natural abilities” or “political, intellectual, and moral status” appears incorrect, altered by prejudice.<sup>8</sup> In another oft quoted section, Du Bois adds that black Americans “ever [feel their] twoness” as “an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals.”<sup>9</sup> This feeling of “twoness,” of a conflict between the selves, is constant. The souls, thoughts, strivings, and ideals he mentions initially go unspecified, but as Du Bois describes examples of the white world teaching contrary negative beliefs about the black race, the picture grows clearer. The first example considers doctors and ministers taught by whites to be ashamed of the “lowly” tasks of their black brethren. The second is about the black artist who cannot revel in the beauty of her own culture without confusion. The whites—her influential patrons—despise her race and find nothing worthy in black “soul-beauty.”<sup>10</sup> Forced to see themselves through hateful eyes in a world controlled and ordered by those who condemn them, Du Bois believed it inevitable that blacks would learn to question, belittle, and degrade themselves—as this is what happens to those living under oppression and hatred.<sup>11</sup> It does not seem far-fetched to Du Bois that some of these negative feelings would be internalized, meaning that blacks began to take up that hateful charge against themselves as well.<sup>12</sup> Hegel’s phenomenology tells us that having our humanity rejected results in anguish, and I believe that Du Bois considered the hatred of black

4 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 9.

5 Frank M. Kirkland, “On Du Bois’ Notion of Double Consciousness,” *Philosophy Compass* 8, no. 2 (2013): 139.

6 Goodings-Williams, “W.E.B. Du Bois.”

7 Lawrie Balfour, “A Most Disagreeable Mirror: Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness,” *Political Theory* 26, no. 3 (June 1998): 349.

8 Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” accessed April 2018, par. 1, <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-conservation-of-races/>.

9 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 9.

10 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 10.

11 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 13.

12 Ernest Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness: The Unsustainable Argument,” *Massachusetts Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 224.

identity to have similar results.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Du Bois did not give clear cut examples of the thoughts, strivings, or ideals, because he did not believe they were needed. Individual strivings could vary depending on environment, but the overall anguish of double consciousness itself was universal. As a state of conflict, double consciousness was felt by black Americans struggling with a prejudiced definition of “blackness,” or what-it-is-to-be black, given by a contemptuous white America. This definition can be hateful, shaming, or contrary to how blacks perceive themselves, but it always results in a sensation of duplicity that entails internal strife.

While a powerful sentiment, double consciousness has not gone without critique. I will not deal exhaustively with all issues found with Du Bois’ double consciousness in this paper but rather focus on one of the most impactful—the universality objection. Ernest Allen Jr. believes Du Bois was speaking specifically to the educated black elite of the time: the Talented Tenth.<sup>14</sup> Allen points out that Du Bois’ examples of conflict—the black minister, doctor, and artist—were things only the Talented Tenth could understand.<sup>15</sup> Raised within educated white society, Allen believes the Talented Tenth, of which Du Bois was a part, had already given up their black ideals for the white American way of life. Without any black ideals of their own, there could not have been a conflict between black and white ideals as Du Bois claimed.<sup>16</sup> Allen believes Du Bois’ created the existence of *distinct* black and white ideals to prove that blacks were capable of holding ideals in any form. This was meant to stop white Americans’ continuous denial of black humanity.<sup>17</sup> Du Bois hoped, according to Allen, that having whites’ respect would provide the Talented Tenth with the self-esteem and power to eventually bring blacks completely into American society.<sup>18</sup> If Allen is right, double consciousness portrayed as a universal sensation was merely a tactic to gain sympathy and approval from a white audience. In reality, it was nothing more than the issue of a select few used to help Du Bois achieve certain political goals.<sup>19</sup>

Allen was not the only one to question the universality of double consciousness. Adolf Reed Jr. thinks a feeling of divided identity amongst the general black populace is absurd, but Du Bois’ reputation as a prominent black thinker causes many readers to assume double consciousness exists—even without evidence.<sup>20</sup> There are black Americans, such as Molefi Kete Asante, who claim never feeling double

13 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 227.

14 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 228-29.

15 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 229.

16 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 221.

17 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 230.

18 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 236.

19 Pittman, “Double Consciousness.”

20 Reed Jr., *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 125; 97.



consciousness.<sup>21</sup> Even if some sort of double consciousness existed, there seems to be no reason to assume it was felt the same way by every black American.<sup>22</sup> For most, the universality issue seems to pose a two-pronged objection: (1) it is unlikely that double consciousness as Du Bois formulated it ever (or could ever) universally affect the general population of black Americans, and (2), as (1) seems improbable, Du Boisian double consciousness has little value to understanding the black American experience today.

Before we can combat the universality objection, we must first establish that double consciousness exists. To do this, I look to the term “Oreo,” which is a slang word I often heard used by my white peers while growing up. It was explained to me as meaning “black on the outside, white on the inside.” Merriam-Webster defines the term more fully as “a black person who adopts the characteristic mentality and behavior of white middle-class society.”<sup>23</sup> The term reveals a world view consistent with double consciousness. By implying that there is more to being black than just skin, one defines what-it-is-to-be black as having at least two components: skin tone, and a certain set of characteristics. To be black instead of an “Oreo,” I must have black skin *and* a certain set of “black” characteristics. Like the double consciousness I defined on page 4, the term shows the presence of a societal definition of what-it-is-to-be black beyond having black skin. So, there *is* evidence for a black societal definition, but we must take it further. As Allen says, finding a foundation for double consciousness at any point in time “does not imply that every black individual [has] felt the pulls of divided loyalties in the same way, or even that he or she experienced any such tension at all.”<sup>24</sup> I will agree that it is unlikely double consciousness is felt by every black American, but I deny that this fact prevents double consciousness from being valuable in understanding current black relations.

Double consciousness, as I have articulated it in this paper, utilizes the idea of a societal definition of blackness. It is possible that while not all black Americans are aware of the definition, it could still exist. Black Americans who find themselves in frequent contact with white Americans are far more likely to become victims of double consciousness, since double consciousness requires contact with whomever defines the second self. In *Souls*, Du Bois mentions the first time he understood that there was a social barrier was after he was rejected by a white classmate.<sup>25</sup> Alternatively, Asante, who claimed he

21 Pittman, “Double Consciousness.”

22 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 244.

23 Merriam Webster Online, s.v. “Oreo,” accessed April 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/Oreo>.

24 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 244.

25 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8.

did not feel double consciousness, grew up in a tight knit community of Africans who did not believe they were inferior to whites. Asante admits that he and his community had “no reference points outside of [themselves]” and adds that had he gone to school with whites as a child, things could have been different.<sup>26</sup> It seems experiencing double consciousness requires frequent contact with white Americans, possibly because dealings with whites puts one in frequent interaction with the prejudiced definition of blackness. Being constantly reminded of such a negative interpretation of what-it-is-to-be black could then cause double consciousness. Blacks who do not interact with whites as often would be less likely to experience double consciousness, as they are less likely to be in frequent contact with a negative idea of blackness. Allen himself explains that separation was the choice for many blacks who, in the hopes of security, receded from main American society and formed their own communities.<sup>27</sup> Doing so would have prevented opportunities to come into contact with the negative definition of blackness and thus would have protected blacks from the effects of double consciousness.

While it is possible that Du Bois explained this veil as a separate symptom of prejudice, it seems that current society has inserted a similar incompatibility directly into our definition of what-it-is-to-be black. My white peers could not fathom that I could have black skin and characteristics in common with them, yet still fall under the jurisdiction of blackness. Therefore, instead of amending what black meant so that I would be included, I was cut out completely. My white peers’ idea of black remained intact, while I was forcibly re-identified. This idea that I could not have any trait in common with my white peers and still keep my black identity is a troublesome one. If a part of what defines white and black are incompatible things, we may be unable to relate, unite, or coexist.

Du Bois believed that in the solution of the race problem, America would reach a unity he calls the “ideal human brotherhood.” This solution would be a time where blacks did not struggle for equal claim against other races, but rather worked in unity with others to form a better American society. Du Bois believed blacks and whites both had talents that could amend one another’s faults.<sup>28</sup> There was little reason for drastic separation, as, in the ways that mattered, blacks and whites were akin enough to strive for their own race ideals and still help one another at the same time.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, the segregation of races was not built on a difference between black and white identities but rather on the prejudice that remained after emancipation. Prejudice kept the

26 Pittman, “Double Consciousness.”

27 Allen Jr., “Du Boisian Double Consciousness,” 244.

28 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 14.

29 Du Bois, “The Conservation of Races,” 17.



veil that withheld blacks from the white world and created toxic double consciousness, and prejudice continues to do so. Double consciousness still alters modern minds, a societal definition of black still hangs over our heads, and though the definition could be different now than what it was for Du Bois, what remains is the barrier that held blacks and whites apart. The societal definition of blackness still has input in how blacks are seen, how they are allowed to interact with the world, and how the world is allowed to interact with them. These attributes of double consciousness are merely secondary symptoms of the larger problem: prejudice. However, without understanding that society includes a fundamental basis of disunity in the very definition of black and white identities, we cannot possibly begin to unravel such a knot as the race problem.

Double consciousness continues to have further implications. If the term “Oreo” implies a societal definition for blackness, then we must ask if there is a societal definition of whiteness as well. It seems possible that there is, but still, whites would not have double consciousness. To understand why, I define double consciousness using neutral terms below:

A state of confliction felt by an identity group, X, struggling with a prejudiced definition of what-it-is-to-be X given by a contemptuous oppressing group, Y. This definition can be hateful, shaming, or contrary to how X perceives themselves but results in a sensation of duplicity that entails internal strife.

Du Bois believed that racial prejudice created double consciousness, and much of black racial prejudice can be attributed to going from oppression to oppressor-and-oppressed cohabitation. There is little evidence that white Americans have had a similar experience, but other races with histories of oppression may be able to relate. For an identity group, X, to claim double consciousness, they must be an oppressed group with an oppressor, Y. If Y does not have power (be that political, social, or economical) over X, X cannot claim double consciousness. This is because Y’s prejudice and power gives them the capability to cause tangible consequences for X. So, whites (as Y) would not have a claim to double consciousness even though a definition of whiteness would exist. However, oppressed groups within America (and possibly otherwise) *could* claim a sense of double consciousness as long as they fit the requirements above.

Further still, there is the fact that “Oreo” is used by both blacks and whites to refer to the same type of person. Blacks use the term derogatorily, whereas, as I said before, whites do so and believe it a compliment. Could blacks’ definition of blackness be the same as the whites’? It seems more probable than not, as I did not fit the definition of either for the same reasons, implying similar requirements. This on

its own elicits many questions about how deeply a societal definition can affect us, even without our awareness.

I do not have time to fully explore all the questions that can arise from the presence of a contemporary double consciousness, but it is evident that double consciousness has important implications in the race discussions of today. While an incompatibility between blacks and whites persists within the very way we define ourselves, we will be unable to pursue the American unity for which many hope. Though double consciousness is but a piece in the complex puzzle that is today’s race issue, it holds within intriguing details of the circumstances under which black and white Americans live and interact. It would do us well as a nation to continue studying double consciousness as a symptom of racial prejudice but to never forget that it is a symptom, not the disease. Until we are able to combat racial prejudice, and all of its convoluted history, double consciousness will remain a herald of our defeat against one of America’s greatest shames.





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L.E. Walker is a junior at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tennessee, where she double majors in philosophy and psychology. Her current philosophical interests include moral philosophy, philosophy of mind, phenomenology, and anything Immanuel Kant. After graduation, she plans to pursue a PhD in philosophy and become a professor.

