

Contemporary Relevance of the Du Boisean Duality Construct

Tunde Adeleke

In his classic study, *The Souls of Black Folk* William E. B. Du Bois described the Black American as someone tormented by consciousness of his, "twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." With this poignant observation, Du Bois underscored both the central problematic, and the nuances of Black American identity and experience, representing the duality as an inherently contradictory and conflicted construct. In other words, the black American inherited two identities (American and Negroid) locked in a state of almost perpetual struggles (3). As expected of any conflict, the war of the conflicting ideals held the possibility of one eventually upstaging the other. But Du Bois cautioned against this possibility. Neither identity should assume dominance, since each possessed intrinsic essence and validity. As he argued, the Negro "wishes neither the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanness, for he knows the Negro blood has a message for the world" (3-4). This perspective, or the duality, as it is commonly known, shaped popular and scholarly discourses on black identity for decades to come. The conception of the black American as the product of a dual conflicted heritage became widely acknowledged. More recently, however, this duality has been challenged by many who are driven by conflicting reactions to the realities and experiences of post civil rights America. Certain critical questions beg for consideration: Are the conflicting ideals reconcilable? Is coexistence possible, or is segregation the ultimate end? These are the questions at the root of contemporary discourses on the identity of black Americans. This paper examines these discourses and their implications for Du Bois's duality construct.

In *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1966) underscore the degree to which social experiences shape people's construction of identities. Throughout black American history, the construction and conception of identity has been both historically and

socially determined. The social context and historical experiences have significantly shaped black constructions of identity, and determined the degree to which blacks felt either embraced by or alienated from America (Philipson; Eyerman; Meriwether; Jeffries). As history demonstrates, the degree of alienation or endearment has often correlated with emigrationist or integrationist aspirations and constructions of identity. Thus blacks' self-identification reflected the degree to which they either felt a sense of alienation from, or endearment toward mainstream American society, underscoring a strong connection between identity and social realities.

Contemporary debates on black American identity reflect conflicting responses to the realities of modern America. For blacks, these realities have been both negative and positive, perhaps more negative, especially in the last two decades and half. Many have associated systematic erosions of the gains of the civil rights struggles and affirmative action with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and its legacies, particularly the upsurge of right wing conservatism. The onslaughts on, and progressive erosion of, civil rights, and affirmative action, in the context of inclining significance of race, and the potency of institutional racism, have in combination exacerbated the crisis of hopelessness among blacks, particularly in the urban sector. This has induced frustration, anger and alienation, pushing many blacks to develop ultra-nationalistic or what one author describes as "hyper-nationalistic" ideas and consciousness (Watkins). Centuries of struggles and sojourn notwithstanding, blacks continued to be alienated from America, and in the words of Richard Wright, they remain, 'negative Americans.' Though constitutionally Americans, as Andrew Hacker notes, blacks "subsist as aliens in the only land they know." This alienation is "pervasive and penetrating" with blacks continually confronting obstacles and boundaries erected by whites (Hacker 3-4).

In the last two decades, Black alienation has ignited heated debates on black American identity, resulting in conflicting consciousness of affinity to, and alienation from, America. It has also led to questioning of the relevance and authenticity of Du Bois's duality construct. On the one hand, optimists render a positive portrait of the black experience and of America as malleable and perfectible, projecting a progressive, from-slavery-to-freedom perspective of the black experience. They do not see present predicament or challenges confronting blacks as reflective of inherent structural or race-derived problems, but as normative reflections of black deficiencies that blacks themselves could eventually overcome through industry and perseverance. Pessimists, on the other hand, advance a gloomy from-

slavery-to-racism-to-marginalization rendition of the black experience. According to this perspective, racism constitutes a formidable stumbling block to black advancement. Proponents see a nationwide, deep-seated, racially derived, conspiracy to keep blacks permanently down and alienated. Pessimists contend that the warring ideals may never be reconciled; that they represent distinct ideals of conflicting historical experiences. Optimists, however, downplay the conflict, insisting on the compatibility of the ideals. Some others reject both ideals as inconsequential to the true identity of blacks, projecting the cosmopolitanism of the Diaspora experience, and a universalistic construction of identity. The debates thus reveal conflicting interplay among varying identity constructs—Afrocentric, Americentric, Universalistic and Slavocentric. Perhaps, the dominant ideal in this complex interplay is the Afrocentric, which strongly asserts an African-centered conception of black American identity, one that directly questions Du Bois's duality construct.

Afrocentric scholars take strong position against coexistence and reconciliation. They deem one ideal a negation of the other. Looking at the historical experiences of blacks, Afrocentric scholars contend that the American identity/experience has served to denigrate and destroy the manhood and essence of blacks. They characterize the American experience as hegemonic, with devastating consequences for blacks' sense of identity. Slavery, and the entire American experience, dislocated blacks from their African identity and heritage, and implanted in them negative self-abnegating values and consciousness (*Asante Afrocentric Idea; Afrocentricity; Kemet; Wilson*). The American identity is thus a negation of the African. Fortunately, according to Afrocentric scholars, the African personality and essence proved indestructible. Though maligned and troubled, the African essence survived, and blacks, in spite of misery, degradation and alienation, retain some of the essential cultural attributes of being Africans.

The purpose of Afrocentric epistemology, therefore, is to effect relocation, that is, bring blacks psychologically, mentally and conceptually back to Africa to reclaim and solidify their African identity. The entire Afrocentric paradigm is geared toward re-educating and re-socializing blacks in order to recapture the full essence of the African identity, a much-needed weapon of defense and survival in a world that is considered still very much threatened by Eurocentric forces. To Afrocentrists, therefore, blacks in Diaspora remain Africans, centuries of separation and acculturation in the new world notwithstanding (*Asante Afrocentricity; Richards*). Afrocentrism also represents the affirmation of both political and cultural identity. Blacks

are Africans culturally, and ethnically, but Americans by nationality. The "Afrocentric" essence of blacks has, however, almost completely overshadowed whatever was Eurocentric or Americentric in them. It is plausible to suggest, therefore, that Afrocentrism represents a nullification of the American cultural experience and connection. Ardent defenders of Afrocentric identity include Molefi Asante, Maulana Karenga and Dona Marimba. Asante sees the relationship between Africa and blacks in Diaspora in terms of "confraternity and continuum" (Asante *Afrocentricity* 65). Both share historical and cultural experiences. Both are one and the same people.

In numerous publications, Asante discusses strategies for a cultural reeducation and re-socialization of blacks away from America and toward Africa. The objective is not only to establish the African identity of blacks, but also to impress on blacks (in Africa and the Diaspora) the necessity for unity and collective strength in furtherance and defense of mutual interests (Asante *Afrocentric Idea; Kemet; Malcolm X*). The collective experience of enslavement, racism and subordination was supposed to serve as the foundation for a collective consciousness that would galvanize all blacks behind a consensus on identity that is defined essentially in racial and Pan-African terms. Race, that is, skin color became the leitmotif of identity, suggesting a common place of origin—Africa. Asante consequently questions Du Bois's dual identity paradigm. Personally he claims never to have been troubled by double consciousness. He denied experiencing conflicting ideals, and suggests certain superficiality to the double identity construct (Asante *Malcolm X*). As he contended, "I was never affected by the Du Boisean double-consciousness. I never felt 'two warring souls in one dark body' nor did I experience a conflict over my identity" (136). In defining blacks as Africans, Afrocentrists give the concept 'Africa' an ethnic connotation. The loss of knowledge of African ethnic identity mandates the use of 'Africa' in place of the lost ethnic identity. This Afrocentric conception of identity remains contentious. However, its popularity is growing among a cross section of lower and middle class blacks, those alienated by the state of poverty, discrimination and onslaught on civil rights.

The true Afrocentrist is one who is rid of any double consciousness. Therefore he or she has no doubt of the African identity. Afrocentrism presumes the possibility of expelling or submerging the American component of the warring ideals. Dona Marimba Richards has no scintilla of doubt that black diasporans are Africans. The retentions of Africanism in music, religion, family structure and norms, burial practices, clearly separate blacks from whites ethnically and culturally. As she puts it, "Africa survives in our (i.e., black Americans) spiritual make-up; that it is the strength and

depth of African spirituality and humanism that has allowed for the survival of the African-Americans as a distinctive cultural entity in New Europe; that it is, our spirituality and vitality that defines our response to European culture; and that response is universally African" (1). Afrocentrism de-emphasizes the transforming consequence of the transplantation of blacks, and suggests that the European experience never had any lasting impact on identity. There is no doubt that the experience of domination, exploitation and brutalization bolstered feelings of alienation from the American identity and compelled many blacks to embrace Afrocentrism and uphold the African identity. Race and ethnicity assumed dominance in defining identity and both point to the primacy of Africa. But there was a problem with the lack of direct ethnic identity with Africa. Many blacks resolved this by simply substituting Africa for ethnicity. Africa became both a geographical and ethnic construct. There are, however, several problems with the Afrocentrist rendition of identity. Apart from the pseudo-historical and romanticized images of Africa that it conjures, the attempt to deemphasize or even deny the transforming character of the transplantation experience, a reality that many other blacks, critiques of Afrocentrism, acknowledge and use as the basis of constructing a new identity, is ahistorical.

The Afrocentric paradigm has come under scrutiny and attacks in the last five years. Other contending perspectives on black American identity have become equally assertive. On the opposite side of Afrocentrism stand Slavocentrism and Americentrism. Since Africans were transplanted here to become slaves, slavery became for many, even among the most ardent defenders of the African identity, the basis of self-definition, of developing a new identity that was anything but African. An increasing number of blacks now embrace and articulate a slavocentric worldview. A modern reformulation is found in Keith Richburg's *Out of America: A Black Man Confronts Africa*. A former *Washington Post* Africa Bureau Chief, Richburg spent about three years in Africa, a sojourn that took him to some of the most troubled spots on the continent—Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Zaire, Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Gabon and Mozambique. Horrified and appalled by what he saw, Richburg thanked God that his "ancestors got out" of the continent (Richburg xiv). He then explained why, in his judgment, black Americans are not, and should not be considered Africans. According to him, blacks do not need Africa to validate their identity, since they have had well over 200 years of acculturation and accomplishment in America to be proud of. This should serve as guide, a source of pride and the basis of identity, its ugly dimensions notwithstanding. In essence, according to Richburg, black

Americans already have a solid domestic foundation for constructing an identity worthy of pride. Slavery made this possible. In the prelude to his narrative, Richburg asserts, "condemning slavery should not inhibit us from recognizing mankind's ability to make something good arise often in the aftermath of the most horrible evil" (xiii). Richburg, in effect, fulfils Henry McNeal Turner's nineteenth-century prediction that in future, the world would become more appreciative of the historical value of slavery (Redkey 147).

The Slavocentric construction of identity did not originate with Richburg. Its roots are deeply buried in the nineteenth century. Richburg could also be classified as an Americentrism, a variation of Slavocentrism. The difference is that "America" rather than "slavery" is identified as the underpinning of the experience and basis of identity. Americentrists defined the black experience as a constituent part of a broader American experience. Americentrists emphasize other experiences that are positive in shaping black American identity and character. Blacks are represented as belonging to a much broader historical heritage that was profoundly influenced by western cultural experience. The distinction between the slavocentrist and Americentrism is that while the former emphasized slavery, the latter both acknowledged slavery and situated the black experience within a much wider American/Western experience. The Americentric perspective was born of optimism and faith in the American order. Articulated largely by black conservatives, this perspective owes much of its force to the perceived success of the conservative policies of the Reagan presidency and its legacies. Reagan's counter-revolution and the success of his attacks on civil rights enhanced the appeal of conservatism among Americans. Conservatism acquired respectability and became fashionable. Many began to equate conservatism with mainstream or "real" America. It became the embodiment of traditional American values. This renewed resurgence and ascendance of conservatism emboldened black conservatives, many of whom began to take on the civil rights establishment and its legacies with vigor. For many, Reaganism exemplified the superiority of conservatism over liberalism, underscoring the shortcomings of New Deal Progressivism. Black conservatives began openly to proclaim Americentric identity and values; locating black identity within America, and identifying the future and progress of blacks with core conservative values, in opposition to the African-centered identity. To black conservatives, blacks are as American as any white. They believed that blacks had abundant opportunities to become fully American by subscribing to mainstream conservative values of industry, economy, education and Christian character. They advocated

de-emphasizing race, which they deem irrelevant, and remotely connected to identity. Thus in their revolts against civil rights culture and genre and its seeming location of identity within a conflicted and alienated framework, black conservatives offer an identity rooted in the protestant work ethics. However, Reaganism was a double-edged sword. Just as it inspired black conservatives, it alienated others and induced racist consciousness, pushing many in the direction of Africa.

Americentrists downplayed racism, insisting that blacks were and remain Americans, the onslaughts against black rights notwithstanding. The Americentric paradigm is premised on a positive rendition of black American history as a progressive transition from slavery to freedom, from slaves to Americans. Blacks are depicted as products of essentially American historical/experiential transformations. In black conservative thought, slavery appeared like a fleeting moment in history, long gone, and of no consequence for, or bearings upon, identity. In fact, Richburg only identified slavery as a demarcating construct that completely separated blacks from Africa, positioning transplanted blacks on track to the American experience, which he deemed the substantive identity. Richburg spoke for the many that deem Africa essentially a geographical, rather than a cultural and historical reference point. The real cherished experience is the American, which, in the conservative mind-set is unfortunately being constantly challenged, and rendered much more problematic, by the geographical Africa with which blacks shared racial identity. Black conservatives oppose racial construction of identity, prioritizing culture instead. In their judgment, since black American culture is essentially American, blacks are Americans. What black conservatives have done is turn the Afrocentric, cultural-nationalist paradigm on its head. The latter de-emphasizes the essence of the cultural transformation in America, in order to elevate the geographical and racial factor (Africa). Black conservatives switch the positions, elevating the transformational character of the transplantation experience at the expense of the African factor.

The objection to essentializing Africa in the black American experience is rooted in history. What is different today is the boldness with which slavery is being re-conceptualized by blacks as an institution with ennobling consequences. Another modern day advocate of Slavocentrism is the black American playwright Douglass Turner Ward. He raised the issue in his keynote address during the 1995 meeting of the Southern Conference on Afro-American Studies conference in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Ward articulated what, up to that point, could be described as the clearest expression of Slavocentrism. He distinguished between a Slavocentric and

Afrocentric paradigm. While acknowledging that black Americans have connection with Africa, Ward identified enslavement as the experience that had the greatest impact on black identity. Consequently, since enslavement was essentially institutionalized here in America, Ward argued that the study of the black American experience and, ipso facto, the determination and definition of identity, should focus on, and begin with, the American experience. He boldly proclaimed himself a Slavocentrist.

Slavocentrism is not necessarily pro-America. In fact, it could be anti-America, yet its essence is in locating identity within the American context. Americentrism locates black identity as part of the American experience, beginning with slavery, and emphasizing the transition from slavery to freedom, from African to American. It projects a progressive experiential transformation that is essentially American. Although Slavocentrism equally locates the basis of identity within the American historical experience, its trajectory emphasizes and highlights negative and pessimistic experience. Americentrism is more positive and deemphasizes slavery, dismissing it as a thing of the past that should not figure prominently in identity construction. Douglass Turner Ward, on the other hand, emphasizes slavery, perhaps more as a critique of the American experience, and not necessarily as a positive reference point.

It should be emphasized that not everyone who objects to Afrocentrism subscribes to Slavocentrism. Boston University Economist, Glenn Loury rejects the use of race as the basis of self-definition. As he declared, "In my view, a personal identity wholly dependent on racial contingency falls tragically short of its potential because it embraces too parochial a conception of what is possible, and of what is desirable" (9). Loury conceives of identity in existential terms. One's identity evolves from "reflective deliberation about the meaning of existence for which no political or ethnic program could ever substitute" (9). To the questions, "Who are we?" and "Where did we come from?" the journalist Stanley Crouch finds the answers not in Africa, but in the concept of universal humanity, a concept that is deeply rooted, according to him, in Euro-American civilization. He advances a global view of human development in which people interact with shared values, aspirations and accomplishments. Black Americans are part of this universal historical trajectory, from which they imbibed Euro-American values, ideals and idiosyncrasies (80-94). Put differently, black Americans are very much a part of the Euro-American cultural experience and identity. Blacks, Crouch further contends, were only "partially descended" from Africa (90). Universalists adopt a more abstract stance, prioritizing neither

African nor American identity, identifying instead with a broader stream of human historical and cultural experience. These conflicting perceptions/constructions of identity underscore the complex, problematic, and intractable nature of the identity problem.

The problem, however, is that the notion of "partial" descent is a historical fallacy. Black Americans are truly of African ancestry. No one can dispute the fact that their ancestors were of African origin. There is, however, a need to distinguish between ethnic ancestry, on the one hand, and the cultural identity of black Americans, on the other. It is this distinction that Afrocentrism muddles up. The contention that black Americans are of African ancestry is a truism few will contest. However, to infer that they are culturally and ethnically African, is quite a leap of the imagination and only partially accurate. Crouch's notion of 'partial descent' should be construed culturally. Though historically of African descent, black Americans are not ethnically and culturally African. The new world acculturation process had effected a transformation. They have lost their ethnicity, and much of their African cultural attributes, and acquired new ethnic and cultural identities—they are more appropriately Afro-Americans or Black Americans—products of cultural hybridization. What is significant about all the perspectives on identity discussed—Afrocentric, Slavocentric, Existential, Universalist and Americentric—is that all develop in reaction to the warring ideals and thus reflect certain potency to the ideals. The Afrocentric, which exemplifies a modern representation of Du Bois's Negroid component of the duality, is gaining popularity among urban blacks. Yet, many blacks remain uncomfortable with any conception of identity that is external to the American context. While acknowledging the African background, these blacks define themselves culturally as Americans, preferring the American component of the duality, and resent any attempts to label them Africans. Even the nomenclature "African-American" appears too compromising to many on both sides. The Afrocentrists see it as an erosion of the force and pervasiveness of Africanism. Americentrists view it as a compromise that beclouds the depth of transformation that the American experience entailed. Some blacks have been denounced for rejecting the appellation "African-American" and defining themselves instead as "Americans."¹

¹ It should be noted that the construction of identity among black Americans has historically been driven by an equally strong color phobic consciousness. This created a division between mulattoes and those considered of pure Negro ancestry. In fact, this remains a critical problematic of identity among blacks in the United States.

These conflicting perceptions of identity are undoubtedly the consequences of varying degrees of acculturation. Those who feel completely acculturated into mainstream culture and society are more likely to resent the prefix "African," and define themselves simply as "Americans." Comedienne Whoopi Goldberg (1997) spoke for many in her outrage against those she labeled "cultural demagogues" who emphasize the African connection through the appellation 'African American.' As she explains, "every time you put something in front of the word American, it strips it of its meaning [...] So, no, I am not an African American. I'm not from Africa. I'm from New York" (105-107). For Goldberg and other Americentrists, acknowledging African connection compromises the essence of being American. Furthermore, the transformation and enculturation process was total, obliterating any tinge of the African past. However absurd and Americentric this may sound, it is a position that many blacks subscribe to, although few have the bravery and audacity of a Whoopi Goldberg to proclaim it publicly. Afrocentrists, on the other hand, either deny conflicting consciousness of identity, or claim to have completely overcome such consciousness, and successfully expunged self-abnegating cultural influences from their consciousness, and become mentally and psychologically liberated. They perceive themselves as Africans. Universalists espouse a 'cosmopolitan' cultural identity. It is difficult to imagine how these varying conceptions of identity could ever be reconciled. The fact is, for as long as the ascending trend in racism persists, and attacks on black rights and affirmative action continue unabated, black American sense of alienation from the American identity, and conflicting perceptions of identity, would persist and even intensify. The warring ideals, the strivings between two or more opposed ideals, seemed destined to continue ad *infinitum*, thus underscoring Du Bois's contemporary relevance. However, as the debates show, the ideals have become much more complex than Du Bois recognized. It is not just the duality, anymore. Though Du Bois upheld the two dominant components of his duality, modern disputants seek to dismantle them. Some critics have accused Du Bois of oversimplifying a much more complex experience. The duality construct, they argue, ignores the fact that the black American experience was not molded solely by the two (Negro and American) ideals. Both ideals were configured within a much broader "humanistic" or universalistic framework.

I see the Afrocentric attempt to deny and transcend the duality as more of an emotional reaction to "American," a reflection of alienation. The American component of the identity is so embedded in the Black American

that no amount of Afrocentric affirmations can obliterate it. The same applies to those who seek to deny or transcend Africa—Americentrists or Slavocentrists—who profess a complete Americanized identity. Both err significantly. Historically, it is erroneous to assert or imagine away the African dimension of the black American experience. That the history of blacks in America began in Africa is a historical fact that none but the most ideologically blinded would deny. To imagine somehow that by beginning the history in the American context with slavery would make that person totally a product of the American experience and therefore American in identity is the wildest of wishful thinking. Those African cultural retentions become relevant here. They are living indicators of the roots, dimensions and complexity of the black experience. They cannot be wished away by simply denying their relevance or subsuming them within a universalistic construct as Crouch attempts. The black American is not a product of the American experience, per se. Like the Afrocentrists, Americentrists and Slavocentrists are simply expressing alienation from the Negroid or African identity. Du Bois was perceptive in identifying the two dominant and visible components of black identity—the American and Negroid. The duality is real. It could be argued that almost all other components of the identity constructs today are either directly or indirectly connected to these two dominant components. Even more real and perceptive is the notion of the warring ideals. Both Afrocentrism and Americentrism reflect attempts to ditch one experience for the other. In their schizophrenic attempts to ditch one dimension for the other, both Afrocentrism and Americentrism reflect this tension between competing ideals. The fact is, as Du Bois perceptively argued, neither side would or should give up for the other. Both are intrinsic and relevant to understanding the true identity of the black American.

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