

Dr. Larry Covin on W.E.B. Du Bois and Double Consciousness

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I.

Concepts of Double Consciousness

The dilemma of African Americans, living within the binary reality of being both African and American, is one which inherently possesses existential implications depending upon how African Americans have responded to this bifurcation. In Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, in a chapter aptly titled *Deception*, Thurman describes the dilemma of African Americans as captured in the quandary of all disinherited people. "The underprivileged may decide to juggle the various areas of compromise, on the assumption that the moral quality of compromise operates in an ascending-descending scale. According to this argument, not all issues are equal in significance nor in consequence..."¹ The African American has too often been confronted with a *Sophies Choice*, a type of cognitive dissonance, as it pertains to losing oneself and one's cultural identity, by fully integrating into the dominant culture; or conscientiously becoming a dissident and incurring the full wrath of the dominant culture. "All over the world there are millions of people who are condemned by the powerful in their society to live in ghettos. The choice seems to be the ghetto or suicide...there are great numbers of people who have decided to live, and to

¹ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, (New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949), p.66.

compromise on the matter of place and conditions.”² One might metaphorically describe the social conditions of African Americans, the historical predicament, as a protracted ghetto. Being African in America, is to be confronted with decisions on a daily basis that have existential consequences depending upon the response or responses given. It is this reality that has caused a decompensation in the psychological health and profile of African Americans.

W.E.B. Du Bois posits that the De facto dual citizenship of being black and American is inherently in a state of conflict. Having been inspired by the previous work of psychologists in the field of mental health, dealing with the malady of split personalities, Du Bois makes use of this imagery to describe the Double Consciousness of Africans in America and its resultant psychosis. “...The psychology idea of double consciousness further reinforced what Du Bois had emphasized as the genuinely alternative character of African American ideals. In the classic cases of double consciousness, the dual personalities were not just different from each other but were inevitably in opposition.”³ The occasion for the opposition of these competing realities of Africans in America, and those of European descent, would have catastrophic implications beginning in 1619 until present day.

Du Bois defines Double Consciousness as manifesting in a variety of ways. “...Du Bois used “double consciousness” to refer to at least three different issues-including the first real power of white stereotypes in black life and thought and second the double consciousness created by the practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of the society...”⁴ The

² Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 67.

³ Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Terri Hume Oliver, *The Souls of Black Folk Centenary Edition*, (New York, Norton & Company, 1999), p.242.

⁴ Gates, *Souls of Black Folk*, 238.

effects of double consciousness will have dire consequences for African American culture and institutions.

II.

Historical Facets of Double Conscienceness in African American Culture and Institutions

It is no small wonder that ground zero for the advancement of the Negro, would play out in the context of education, with the epicenter being none other than the classroom. Historically, because of the liberating power of education, every measure was taken to prohibit access to education for persons of color. Miguel A. De La Torre writing in *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, identifies the significance of the classroom and its contributing to the double consciousness effect for black people. “The (class) room is appropriately named, for it is indeed a room of class—a room where students learn the class they belong to and the power and privilege that comes with that class...they will have certain opportunities that are denied to those of lower economic classes.”⁵ The debilitating effect of illiteracy, and its resulting contribution to the double consciousness of the Negro, has been a historic aspect of the struggle between black people and white people. This struggle began soon after the arrival of Africans on the shores of this country. Heather Andrea Williams, in an article titled *SELF-TAUGHT* describes the penalty for teaching enslaved blacks to read. “Most White Southern slaveholders were adamantly opposed to the education of their slaves because they feared an educated slave population would threaten their authority. Williams documents a series of statues that criminalized any person who taught slaves or supported their efforts to teach themselves.”⁶ The legacy of illiteracy still affects

⁵ Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics from the Margins*, (New York, Orbis Books, 2013), p. Preface xi.

⁶ Heather Andrea Williams, *SELF-TAUGHT: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom*, Harvard Educational Review 2005 http://height.org/her-home/issues/Harvard-educational-review-volume-77-issue-3/herbooknote/self-taught_325

the black community in contemporary society. Jean Jacques Rousseau, writing in *Rousseau's The Social Contract*, states that eventually persons confined to a certain condition, will accept his or her condition without attempting to improve upon their circumstances. "Slaves lose everything in their chains, even the desire of escaping from them..."⁷ Arguably, the fractured black family, rates of incarceration, and other pathologies can be traced to the origin of black double consciousness in America, and the prolonged state of deprivation historically imposed upon the race.

Plessy v Ferguson. Separate But Equal. In 1896, the United States Supreme Court ruled that it was legal for public entities in the United States to legally impose segregation laws, thereby restricting *Negroes* access to public facilities. The public segregation of black people and white people, further exasperated the sense of second class citizenry among the Negro population, deepening the double consciousness effect. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., chronicled the effect of segregation and the resulting double consciousness in *Letter From Birmingham City Jail* in 1963, as he articulated the impact of segregation upon his own family. "...Explain to your six-year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park...and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality."⁸ Public facilities that were segregated were never actually equal.

It is a matter of both public and private debate as to the legacy of segregation in the United States. As Dr. King referenced, segregation had a debilitating effect upon the psychology of the

⁷ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract or Principles of Political Right*, 1762 <https://www.bartleby.com>

⁸ James M. Washington, *A Testament of Hope The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1986), p. 292-293.

black community, and no well informed observer would dispute this fact. What is less clear is the legacy that was established as a result of segregation. Some of the most esteemed black institutions emerged out of segregation in America. In 1876 the Meharry Medical College was founded in Nashville, Tennessee. In Oklahoma, *Black Wall Street* witnessed the flourishing of black businesses until 1921 when angry white mobs destroyed the city during riots. During World War II, due to segregation in the United States military, separate units emerged showcasing the prowess of the black military genius such as the *Tuskegee Airmen*. From circa 1866 through 1951 the *Buffalo Soldiers* served with distinction as the 25th Infantry Regiment. In 1867, Howard University was founded as an institution of higher education for the education and training of the *Negro*. In 1861, Morehouse College was founded boasting some of the greatest leaders as its presidents, such as Dr. Benjamin E. Mays. Some scholars make the argument that with integration came what is known as *Brain Drain*, the migration of black intellectualism to white centered institutions.

Nevertheless, the battle to combat the corrosive effects of double consciousness, and to ameliorate the schizophrenia of black life in America, received a decisive victory on May 7, 1954. In that year the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision was handed down by the United States Supreme Court, ruling that segregation in public education was unconstitutional. The *Brown v. Board of Education*, though slow to be fully enforced, was a watershed moment for black people and black history. What is often overshadowed is that the impetus of *Brown v. Board of Education* was the *Black Church*. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, founded by Richard Allen in 1816 in Philadelphia, has an illustrious history in the annals of civil rights for persons of color in the United States. The Reverend Oliver Brown, an African Methodist Episcopal pastor, wanted to

enroll his daughter Linda Brown in the nearest school to their home. Because of segregation the family had to incur a circuitous route to the nearest school for black children. “Brown, an African Methodist Episcopal Church pastor...wanted his daughter to be allowed to enroll in the all-white elementary school-not because the all-white school was superior to the all-black elementary school she attended two miles away-but because it was a matter of principle.”⁹ In December of 1955, only a year after Brown v. Board of Education, another African Methodist Episcopal Church member was involved with a historic moment in American history. Rosa Parks, through quiet dignity and steely grace, would continue the trajectory of momentum initiated by Reverend Oliver Brown. The *Black Church* has been an indispensable catalyst in mitigating the effects of double consciousness in the psychology of the African American community.

III.

Double Consciousness Redux: Ta-Nehisi Coates *Letter to My Son*

Ta-Nehisi Coates, writing in *The Atlantic* in 2015 published an article titled *Letter to My Son*. In this letter, Coates expresses many of the concerns of which Du Bois addressed in his double consciousness, published in *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903 over a century later. “Now, the heirs of slaveholders could never directly acknowledge our beauty or recon with its power. And so the beauty of the black body was never celebrated in the movies, on television shows, or in the textbooks I’d see as a child.”¹⁰ In this literary work Coates challenges the assertion that the *American Dream* will be realized with the passage of time. As a millennial, it is quite troubling in Coates view, that the state of the union for black people in America, is perceived as dire as at any

⁹ DeNeen L. Brown, *The determined father who took Linda Brown by the hand and made history*, The Washington Post March 27, 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

¹⁰ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Letter to My Son*, The Atlantic July 4, 2015 <https://www.atlantic.com>

time in American history. To make his argument, Coates recalls the litany of names of those victims killed by the police; Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Michael Brown and others all killed for their *Black Bodies* as Coates refers to it. “And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body...sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed.”¹¹

IV.

Ecumenical Religious Practices – Nicholas Wolterstorff

How might ecumenism play a role in negating double consciousness and the debilitating effects of double consciousness? Political Theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff emphasizes the role of reconciliation as a move toward the *Beloved Community*. Writing in *Acting Liturgically: Philosophical Reflections On Religious Practice*, Wolterstorff specifies reconciliation in his chapter, *Christ-like friendship in love in the assemblies includes reconciliation*. “Both Jesus and Didache suggests that the reconciliation that is to prevail in the assemblies is to be brought about in advance...there is also opportunity within liturgical enactments for alienated participants to become reconciled by the combination of repentance and forgiveness.”¹²

It is a type of transvaluation that through Christianity, Africans in America were decimated, and America instrumentalized religion to engage a genocide against them; that perhaps through Christianity and ecumenism African Americans and White America may be reconciled.

¹¹ Coates, *Letter to My Son*, <https://www.atlantic.com>

¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Acting Liturgically Philosophical Reflections On Religious Practice*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 260.

