

When W. E. B. Du Bois writes, “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self,” explain what he means. Du Bois’ quote closely parallels in meaning Paul Laurence Dunbar’s message in his poem “We Wear the Mask.”

It’s impossible for me to consider Du Bois’ quote outside of my own Blackness. Within any minority population whose members cannot assimilate into mainstream society because of the color of their skin there exists an acute awareness of one’s difference or Otherness. It’s the “self-conscious manhood” (Du Bois 689) Du Bois refers to. In the face of that awareness, we are presented with only two options; we can try to straddle the two disparate cultures and histories to which we belong, or we can create two versions of ourselves—one that allows us to maintain our inherent identities and another that grants us the ability to adapt to, navigate through, and succeed in mainstream society. Blacks in America are both Black and American. It’s a duality that comes with a set of struggles all its own and requires a form of duplicity upon which our survival depends. While the two-ness Du Bois references affords us a better chance to get ahead, it’s also something that can leave us a bit lost, grappling with who we are and who we claim to be.

Where Du Bois’ quote and Dunbar’s poem splinter is the former’s contention that Black Americans can merge their two halves into a “better and truer” (689) version of themselves. Du Bois develops the notion of Black American duality one step further than Dunbar. While the attempt to somehow bridge the two identities may come with struggle and strife, it can yield a decidedly positive result. The American half and the Black half of Black Americans often conflict, but they are still two halves of a whole. Merging both can only yield a more authentic, complete version of the Black self.

It’s important to point out that the merge Du Bois writes of is an internal transformation for the exclusive benefit of the Black American. I don’t know that Black Americans’ two-ness can ever become one in the eyes of the dominant culture. Just by virtue of their brown skin, coiled hair, wide nose, big lips, locution, mannerisms, customs, etc., Blacks will almost always be viewed as somehow different, somehow separate. No amount of code-switching or acquiescence on the part of Black Americans will erase the color line or remove the “veil,” but so long as Black Americans’ difference is free from pretense and rooted in authenticity, their double-self is not a burden but an asset.

Works Cited

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folks*. *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. 3rd ed. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie A. Smith. Vol 1. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2014. 687-760. Print.