

Reconciling Two Warring Ideals: The Cultural Bifurcation of an African American Male Scholar

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It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.¹

The provocative but eloquent words scribed by W. E. B. DuBois in 1903 still represent the struggle for African Americans in the United States today. DuBois' quote bears witness to the struggles of my rites of passage from a boy to a man growing up in the heart of the deep South. During those times, race and discrimination were social constructions, as they remain today. I recall instances in my youth when the socially constructed thoughts and beliefs about African American men preceded me as an individual. Others would develop conclusions about me and my predicament (e.g., social economic status and intellectual ability) before getting to know me as an individual. Thus, making it quite difficult, in some cases, to separate others' beliefs from my own knowledge of self. And for many, the compelling force of the social construction about who we are consumes our thoughts about our individual selves. This is particularly challenging in the deep South (and elsewhere in the country), as the dominant image of African American men is that of our physical nature (e.g., athletes and slaves), and not of our abilities of "the mind."

Accordingly, when developing beliefs about my "life works," in opposition to this deep seeded image, I decided to become a university professor and conduct research on various

¹ Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.; [Cambridge]: University Press John Wilson and Son, Cambridge, U.S.A., 1903; Bartleby.com, 1999.

challenges that prevent African Americans and other people of color from achieving their educational goals. In alignment with the focus of this journal, one of my foci squarely takes aim at the workforce challenges of African American males in the academy. Nonetheless, the historical concepts of “twoness” and “warring ideals” observed by DuBois continue to find compelling evidence as contemporary phenomena. Even within the ivory walls of the academy, where intellectual pursuit and the quest for the truth are to reign supreme, one cannot escape these two conflicting concepts. Therefore, it is only befitting that DuBois, the first African American to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University (1895), spoke of these concepts of twoness and warring ideals. In this brief prefatory, I borrow from my lived experiences in the South and the aforementioned two concepts proffered by DuBois as a point of departure to speak about the academy and its impact on me as researcher.

I find the *Journal of African American Males in Education* to be an appropriate space to wrestle with the inherent dichotomy of learning and working in organizations designed on a value system, that in most cases, stand in opposition of ones cultural background. Further, I use this venue to clarify that rewards, such as promotions, tenure, higher salaries, robust publication records, professional association recognition, and external funding, are not considered when one finds a way to reconcile “warring ideals.” Rather, often times, there are consequences associated with *not* reconciling.

Twoness and its Impact on my Research

It is evident that the implications of these two concepts, twoness and warring ideals, were constantly at polarizing ends in my research pursuits. As I pursued topics that were of scholarly interests, I struggled to maintain my cultural roots while integrating academic knowledge obtained through graduate and professional training. There was a constant struggle with the dichotomy of individual versus collective thought and action. While graduate school preparation may suggest that the “lone scholar” approach is more desirable, my cultural background tended to value the notion of “community,” leading me to work with a collection of scholars. In conjunction, when seeking answers to research questions, instead of accepting “one best truth,” I sometimes saw “multiple truths.” Additionally, in my approach to understanding new knowledge, I may have rejected a prescribed epistemological approach, but gravitated toward the use of multiple epistemologies, thus in some cases promoting the use of non-conventional research methods.

These forms of twoness and warring ideals that people of color, in this case an African American male, must confront as researchers in the academy can be captured by two coping strategies I employed: (1) maintain fidelity to authenticity of self and (2) find synergy between academic knowledge and cultural benefit. These strategies have been useful with blending the bifurcated challenges of the academy into manageable professional and personal lives. In strategy one, I examined my cultural history and life experiences to determine how these non-traditional factors shaped my approach to research. I came to appreciate that these distinctions in my background serve as inspiration for what topics I considered important. Further, I strove for authenticity by employing the traditional values of the academy in my research (e.g., frameworks and methods) in light of my heritage. In strategy two, I attempted to inform both academic scholarship and cultural implications with my research. The contrast in ideologies between the academy and my cultural background would appear to make this an impossible task.

Surprisingly, the weaving of academic knowledge and cultural traditions can result in unique and valuable contributions to both the academy and society.

In conclusion, the message of DuBois and my upbringing in the South resonated in my heart and mind as I sought to reconcile these concepts as an African American male scholar in the academy. Admittedly, these warring ideals are complicated and dogmatic in their resistance to change. However, I offer this brief prefatory not as a panacea, but as inspiration and insight for approaching academic research as an African American male, nested in the challenges for person of color in the academy. As I endeavor toward the next decade of my academic career and consider what impact my work must have on improving the overall conditions for African Americans in higher education, I am charged by the words of Richard Wright, and I encourage the readers of this volume to consider their merits as well. I close with:

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of a great people[.]²

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² Cruse, H. *The crisis of the Negro intellectual*, New York, NY: The New York Review Books, 2005/1967, p. 184.