

THE DUALITY OF



BLACKNESS IN AMERICA

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American society praises black culture—music, food, and language—yet too few stand up against the injustices that persist in today’s society. White Americans have appropriated black culture without adequately showing respect to the individual. African Americans are vulnerable to many stereotypes that tend to mold us into something that we are not.

Despite their popularity, numerous aspects of black culture are perceived as *unprofessional*, *ghetto*, or even *hood*. In America, black females who wear large earrings, long acrylic nails, or any type of colorful hairstyle (including braids) are often considered ghetto or unprofessional. Recently, large hoop earrings and long nails have become a big trend among white people. However, rather than being labeled as improper, as a black person would have been, they are often praised for making a *fashion statement*.

In Jacqueline Jones Royster’s essay “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” she recounts the time when she recited a passage from a novel that, she says, “required cultural understanding” (36). While at an academic conference, Royster changed her voice to fit the characters who were from her native continent. When she was done with the excerpt, an audience member and colleague responded: “You sounded ‘natural.’ It

was nice to hear you be yourself” (37). What the audience member failed to understand is that Royster possessed multiple ways of speaking. All her voices, including her academic voice, were real.

While Royster’s experience is just one example, many African Americans are questioned about their voice—whether it’s perceived forced or natural, white or black. When a black person begins to use “white English” and enunciates their words more clearly, they are often perceived as well-spoken, well-educated, and ultimately professional. However, when they fail to do so and use slang, they are perceived as ignorant or unprofessional.

The shapeshifting that many African Americans have to do between their professional and casual selves is a survival mechanism necessary in today’s society. W.E.B. Du Bois explores this concept of a dual identity in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Dual identity revolves around the experience of black Americans and the double consciousness they possess when treading amongst their white counterparts. While none of us literally change our bodies into different forms, it often feels like we do as we attempt to contradict the stereotypes placed on us. We have to keep up more than one identity.

I personally adapted this duality when I transitioned from a predominantly black elementary school to a mostly white high school.

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Attending that school granted me the opportunity to grow beyond my city's poor education system and reach the predominately white, Catholic, all-female, elite private school known as Sacred Heart Academy.

Walking through the halls, I no longer felt comfortable using the common slang spoken in my neighborhood. The use of slang—or any other colloquialisms—resulted in harsh glares that penetrated my soul. These ruthless stares often made me feel like the elephant in the room. I could not pass off the term “was’gud” to my white counterparts without being mocked or jeered at by staff members. I then understood that I had to develop a new mode of communication. This new mode almost always resulted in the question “Why do you sound so white?” when returning back to Hazelwood Estates. When speaking with my white classmates, I often chose to wear a second identity as a mask so that I could feel as if I belonged.

I left behind the attitudes accepted at home and eventually developed an aura of professionalism. Catching the germ-infested public bus to and from the elite private school felt like living a double life. At school, I would find myself adopting certain phrases, such as “pardon” or “likewise,” to fit in with the white majority. This adaptation isolated me from my black peers and caused them to label me as “too white” or “not black enough,” which then led me to revert back to my common slang.

Going into any type of profession, there are always going to be expectations. Yet such expectations tend to shift when applied to black women. Some may imagine the typical professional female as a petite, unshapely white woman, but this unrealistic image dis-

regards black women. A few years ago, controversy arose because of the attire of an African American fourth-grade teacher, Patrice Brown. This young teacher wore a conservative, fitted knee-length dress that led her to become the next trending hashtag on Twitter: #TeacherBae. Because of her curvaceous body, Brown's fitted dress was considered wildly inappropriate—a criticism that would not have surfaced had she been white. Brown was reprimanded for her seemingly unprofessional attire and was required to delete pictures of her classroom from social media.

In her article “Why Is ‘TeacherBae’ Being Shamed for Her Curvy Body?” Zeba Blay provides an image of the original dress Brown ordered. Blay includes a screenshot of the dress on the original website and, of course, there are white women modeling it. The white models, wearing the same dress as Brown, have in no way been ridiculed or questioned for their outfits. If those white models were teachers, they most likely would not receive any harsh criticism. Yet, because of Brown's curves, she was condemned and viewed as inexperienced. After more research on Brown's social media, it became apparent that her regular attire was almost entirely conservative. Her wardrobe was mostly comprised of turtlenecks, long skirts, and dresses with sleeves. Even though Brown cannot control her natural curves, society expects her to hide them and suppress the parts of herself that do not match white expectations.

Despite professionalism being a universal term to describe a person with specified skills, it comes with many implications. White Americans need to better understand the nuances of the black identity and how we are directly impacted by their expecta-



Art by Dylan Rose Rheingold.

tions. Our adoption of a double consciousness has become necessary for surviving the white majority. That is exactly what Du Bois meant by having a dual identity. Although many other black people perceive this as being fake, it is the reality of America. Du Bois emphasized this concept to motivate the black individual to exceed the expectations placed on the “typical” black person. Instead of perpetuating such expectations, white Americans must grant us the space we deserve and recognize dual identity is both problematic and unnecessary for African Americans.

Works Cited

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