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Double Consciousness or Triple Consciousness? Experiences of African Immigrants in the United States

ორმაგი თუ სამმაგი ცნობიერება? აფრიკელი იმიგრანტების გამოცდილება ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატებში

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Abstract

This paper employs W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness to analyze the lived experiences of African immigrants in the United States. It explores what it means to be Black in a predominantly White society and what it means to navigate life as an immigrant in a country where privileges are largely mediated by citizenship and legal status. The paper argues that the experiences of Black immigrants differ markedly from those of White (European) immigrants because of the intersection of race, nationality, and citizenship. It further questions whether Du Bois's (1903) notion of double consciousness adequately captures the realities of African immigrants, or whether a broader conceptual framework - what I term triple consciousness - more effectively explains their multiple, intersecting identities and social locations.

Keywords: African Immigrants, Race and Citizenship, Structural Racism, Cultural Identity, Acculturation, Double Consciousness, Intersectionality, Racialized Legal Status, Assimilation.

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აბსტრაქტი

ნაშრომი იყენებს დიუ ბოისის ორმაგი ცნობიერების კონცეფციას, რათა გააანალიზოს აფრიკელი ემიგრანტების ცხოვრებისეული გამოცდილება ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატებში. კვლევა ეხება, თუ რას ნიშნავს იყო შავკანიანი უპირატესად თეთრკანიან საზოგადოებაში და რას ნიშნავს ცხოვრების ნავიგაცია, როგორც იმიგრანტისა, ქვეყანაში, სადაც პრივილეგიები ძირითადად განპირობებულია მოქალაქეობითა და სამართლებრივი სტატუსით. შავკანიანი იმიგრანტების გამოცდილება მნიშვნელოვნად განსხვავდება თეთრკანიანი (ევროპელი) იმიგრანტების გამოცდილებისგან რასის, ეროვნებისა და მოქალაქეობის გადაკვეთის გამო. ასევე, ადეკვატურად ასახავს თუ არა დიუ ბოისის (1903) ორმაგი ცნობიერების ცნება აფრიკელი

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იმიგრანტების რეალობას, თუ უფრო ფართო კონცეპტუალური ჩარჩო, უფრო ეფექტურად ხსნის მათ მრავალჯერად, გადამკვეთ იდენტობებსა და სოციალურ ლოკაციებს.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: აფრიკელი იმიგრანტები, რასა და მოქალაქეობა, სტრუქტურული რასიზმი, კულტურული იდენტობა, აკულტურაცია, ორმაგი ცნობიერება, ინტერსექციულობა, რასიზებული სამართლებრივი სტატუსი, ასიმილაცია.

ციტატა: ოლუვატიმილეინ აბორისადე. ორმაგი თუ სამმაგი ცნობიერება? აფრიკელი იმიგრანტების გამოცდილება ამერიკის შეერთებულ შტატებში. ჯანდაცვის პოლიტიკა, ეკონომიკა და სოციოლოგია. 2025; 9 (2). https://doi.org/10.52340/healthecosoc.2025.09.02.14

Double Consciousness

Du Bois (1903) described double consciousness as the peculiar sensation of "twoness": "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (p. 16). This captures how African Americans have long perceived themselves through the eyes of a society that denies their full humanity. Although Du Bois wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century, his insight remains relevant in a twenty-first-century America where racial hierarchies persist beneath the language of color-blindness (Alexander, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

For Du Bois, this was not simply a psychological state but a social condition produced through daily encounters with exclusion and inequality. The "veil" symbolized both separation and distorted visibility, a filter through which Black Americans viewed themselves as objects of White perception. It exposed the contradiction of being a citizen of the United States while remaining alienated from full belonging (Meer, 2019).

Later scholars have shown that double consciousness operates as a process of negotiation between self-definition and imposed identity (Bulhan, 2015; Itzigsohn & Brown, 2015). African Americans must constantly reconcile the ideals of equality with the lived reality of racism. African immigrants, by contrast, bring additional layers to this experience. Many arrive with national and cultural identities rooted in their home countries and then encounter American racial categories that compress diverse heritages into the single label "Black" (Arthur, 2000; Awad et al., 2021).

Racialization in the United States forces African immigrants to develop the same kind of divided awareness Du Bois described, recognizing themselves as both African and Black within an American racial order. Yet their experience differs from that of African Americans because it is shaped by migration history, accent, and legal status (Joseph & Golash-Boza, 2021). Scholars have called this a "diasporic double consciousness," in which migrants live between transnational cultural frames and local racial hierarchies (Nunn, 2019).

Symbolic-interactionist theory helps explain how this dual awareness emerges. People form self-concepts through reflected appraisals—the images they believe others hold of them (Cooley, 1902). For Black Americans and immigrants alike, these reflections are often negative because the dominant gaze continues to devalue Blackness (Mead, 1934; Hurst & Cross, 2022). Over time, such stigmatized reflection produces a split sense of self and encourages self-monitoring to navigate racially charged institutions such as schools and workplaces.

Research confirms that structural racism reinforces this inner division. Studies of labor-market discrimination find that equally qualified Black applicants receive fewer callbacks than White candidates (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Similar patterns appear in housing, finance, and policing (Massey & Denton, 1993; Ray et al., 2017). These external inequalities interact with internalized doubts about belonging, deepening the conflict Du Bois described. The constant need to manage stigma can also damage self-esteem and mastery, two coping resources identified in stress-process theory (Pearlin et al., 1981). When individuals internalize racial stereotypes, they may experience what Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) called the

"epidermalization of inferiority," where race becomes inseparable from a feeling of marginalization. Yet Du Bois also saw in double consciousness a kind of "second sight," an ability to perceive social contradictions invisible to those in dominant positions.

In modern contexts, double consciousness interacts with gender, class, and migration. Patricia Hill Collins (2019) shows that intersectionality exposes how racism, sexism, and classism intertwine to shape awareness. African and Caribbean immigrants must also navigate cultural adaptation and uncertain legal status (Awad et al., 2021). These overlapping pressures suggest that Du Bois's idea must be broadened to capture the full complexity of contemporary Black immigrant life.

Double consciousness therefore remains both a lived condition and a framework for understanding how marginalized people make sense of themselves in unequal societies. For African immigrants, the tension between how they see themselves educated professionals, nationals of specific countries, contributors to American society and how they are seen as Black foreigners produces a layered awareness that moves beyond Du Bois's original formulation. This evolving consciousness prepares the ground for the idea of triple consciousness, where race, immigration, and citizenship intersect to define belonging in America.

Triple Consciousness?

The idea of triple consciousness has emerged in contemporary scholarship as an extension of Du Bois's original theory. Whereas double consciousness captures the internal conflict of being both Black and American, triple consciousness speaks to the multiple and intersecting identities of those who are simultaneously Black, immigrant, and navigating citizenship in a society stratified by race and legality (Joseph & Golash-Boza, 2021; Pelt-Willis, 2021). This concept reflects an intersectional understanding of oppression and belonging, where the experience of racialized immigrants cannot be reduced to race alone.

African immigrants in the United States often encounter a unique identity formation process that differs from that of U.S.-born African Americans. They must negotiate not only racial difference but also cultural adaptation and legal incorporation (Awad et al., 2021; Tetteh, 2020). Scholars such as Nunn (2019) and Arthur (2000) note that many African migrants initially identify through nationality or ethnicity Nigerian, Ghanaian, Ethiopian before being absorbed into a broad "Black" category that carries the social meanings of American racial history. This forced re-racialization produces what may be called a third consciousness: an awareness of being an immigrant within Blackness itself.

For immigrants on temporary visas, consciousness operates along two main lines. They see themselves as foreigners with limited rights and as racialized individuals within a White-majority society. Over time, some obtain permanent residence or citizenship, which adds a third dimension: legal belonging that does not erase racial and cultural exclusion. Even naturalized citizens who have sworn allegiance to the United States may find their identities questioned because of accent, name, or perceived foreignness (Ramos & Kasinitz, 2015). This creates a cycle of recognition and disavowal that resembles what Du Bois called the "veil," yet now filtered through the additional layer of immigration status.

The experiences of African immigrants illustrate this triple tension clearly. They are often reminded of their "foreignness" by both White Americans and African Americans. White Americans may express surprise at their English fluency or education, revealing a narrow perception of Africa as backward or undeveloped. At the same time, some African Americans may view African immigrants as competitors for jobs or educational opportunities, or as outsiders unfamiliar with the long struggle for civil rights (Kendi, 2019). These encounters generate a form of consciousness that oscillates between pride in origin, awareness of racial subordination, and efforts to claim Americanness.

At the institutional level, African immigrants experience exclusion in subtle but significant ways. Many programs designed for "minorities" restrict eligibility to U.S. citizens or permanent residents. The American Sociological Association's minority fellowship, for instance, limits awards to citizens or green-card holders, thereby excluding non-citizen Black immigrants who also face racial disadvantage. Such

experiences reinforce a sense that minority status in the United States is recognized only through citizenship first and race second. This exclusion sharpens the awareness of triple consciousness: being Black, being an immigrant, and being positioned outside the boundaries of full belonging (Bloemraad et al., 2022). Culture shock also deepens this layered consciousness. New arrivals often describe confusion over unfamiliar customs, communication styles, and social expectations (Obeng, 2019). The pressure to "sound American" or assimilate linguistically underscores how accent functions as a racialized marker of difference (Ferguson, 2021). Even after years in the country, many African immigrants report feeling that they must constantly prove their competence and legitimacy, which aligns with what Fanon (1952/2008) described as the psychological burden of colonial difference.

Scholars of intersectionality argue that this combination of racial, cultural, and legal subordination reflects the structural entanglement of racism and nationalism (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019). For African immigrants, these overlapping hierarchies produce both constraint and insight. The awareness of triple consciousness not only captures marginalization but also highlights resilience and agency. As Du Bois suggested in The Souls of Black Folk, the gift of "second sight" allows the oppressed to perceive social realities that remain hidden to others. For immigrants, this sight expands into a "third view," a recognition of how global histories of race, colonialism, and migration converge in their everyday lives.

In the twenty-first century, scholars such as Joseph and Golash-Boza (2021) and Awad et al. (2021) argue that examining race through the lens of racialized legal status clarifies why formal citizenship alone cannot guarantee equality. African immigrants may hold U.S. passports yet still confront barriers to full acceptance. The promise of inclusion coexists with the persistent reality of exclusion, creating an ever-shifting awareness of self and society.

Triple consciousness therefore extends Du Bois's insights into the realm of globalization and mobility. It speaks to the complex negotiations that shape how African immigrants see themselves and are seen by others. It is the consciousness of being simultaneously African, Black, and American of living within and across national and racial borders while striving to belong in all.

Discussion

Understanding double and triple consciousness within the context of African immigrant experiences requires close attention to the structural systems that define who belongs in America. Race and citizenship, though often discussed separately, intersect to determine access to rights, resources, and legitimacy (Golash-Boza, 2015; Menjívar & Abrego, 2012). Structural racism operates through a combination of policies, institutions, and cultural narratives that privilege whiteness as the normative standard of national identity while rendering Blackness—particularly foreign Blackness suspect, inferior, or temporary.

This system functions not only through explicit laws but also through the implicit rules that shape social life. Racialized perceptions of competence, morality, and belonging continue to influence who is trusted, hired, or granted the full protections of citizenship (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Fox & Mogul, 2022). African immigrants, despite often arriving with high levels of education and professional experience, encounter barriers to employment, housing, and political participation that mirror those faced by African Americans (Arthur, 2000; Awad et al., 2021). Studies by Tetteh (2020) and Nunn (2019) show that these barriers persist even when immigrants possess advanced degrees or English proficiency, suggesting that their exclusion is not based on skill but on the racialized assumptions that underlie American social structure.

Structural racism also shapes the legal boundaries of citizenship itself. Policies that determine who may enter, work, or remain in the United States are deeply intertwined with racial hierarchies inherited from colonialism and slavery (Ngai, 2004; Golash-Boza, 2015). The expansion of immigration enforcement since the 1990s, especially after 9/11, has produced what Armenta (2017) calls the

"criminalization of migration," where immigrants of color are policed and surveilled as potential threats. For African and Caribbean immigrants, this surveillance intersects with the historical stigmatization of Blackness, creating a double burden of racial and legal precarity (Joseph & Golash-Boza, 2021).

At the everyday level, structural racism manifests in what sociologists describe as racialized belonging, the idea that citizenship is socially graded rather than universally shared (Bloemraad et al., 2019; Fox & Mogul, 2022). Immigrants may possess the formal documentation of membership yet remain excluded from full participation in the nation's symbolic community. Everyday encounters reinforce this exclusion: accents are mocked, names are mispronounced, and African immigrants are often asked where they are "really from." These interactions reveal how national identity remains implicitly coded as White, while Blackness is positioned as permanently foreign.

From the founding of the republic, American citizenship has been racially defined. The Naturalization Act of 1790 limited naturalization to "free White persons," establishing a legal precedent that tied national belonging to whiteness (Ngai, 2004). This racial foundation of citizenship positioned people of African descent as outsiders to the American polity, even as their labor and presence were integral to the nation's growth. Over time, the language of the law changed, but its social meaning endured. Omi and Winant's (2015) racial formation theory explains how racial categories are continuously re-created through political and legal processes, ensuring that whiteness remains the invisible norm of national identity.

Although overt racial barriers to citizenship were dismantled through legislation such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the logic of exclusion persists in more subtle forms. Contemporary immigration policies, visa restrictions, and enforcement priorities reproduce hierarchies of worthiness that privilege some racial and national groups over others (Golash-Boza, 2015; Armenta, 2017). The preference for "high-skilled" migrants from Europe, Asia, and Canada—coupled with the racialized criminalization of migration from the Global South—continues to mark African and Caribbean immigrants as less desirable entrants to the American project of nationhood (Ryo, 2022). Empirical studies show that Black immigrants are disproportionately detained and deported, even when their immigration infractions mirror those of White or non-Black migrants (Golash-Boza, 2015; Armenta, 2017). These disparities illustrate how the notion of the "good immigrant" remains implicitly coded as non-Black, English-speaking, and culturally assimilable (Brown & Bean, 2021).

The ideology of whiteness also shapes public perceptions of citizenship itself. Legal scholars have documented how media narratives, political discourse, and bureaucratic practices continue to equate Americanness with whiteness, depicting Black immigrants and other people of color as perpetual foreigners (Fox & Mogul, 2022; Shulman, 2023). This perception influences everything from hiring decisions to voting rights enforcement, where Black immigrants are sometimes treated with suspicion or excluded from civic participation despite meeting all formal requirements of citizenship. The internalization of such hierarchies reveals the deep entanglement of race, nation, and belonging that underpins the American social order.

African immigrants thus occupy a complex social position shaped by overlapping hierarchies of race, nationality, and legality. On one level, they share with African Americans the collective burden of anti-Black racism; on another, they must navigate a racialized legal order that frames them as temporary guests whose legitimacy depends on documentation and cultural conformity. Even after naturalization, many encounter conditional acceptance: their accents, names, or religious practices often mark them as perpetually foreign (Tetteh, 2020; Ferguson, 2021). This dual exclusion racial and civic forms the structural foundation for triple consciousness, in which the individual simultaneously experiences awareness as Black, as immigrant, and as a conditional citizen.

Belonging in America, as sociologists have long argued, extends far beyond legal status. It is a sociocultural process through which individuals seek recognition, legitimacy, and participation in collective life (Bloemraad et al., 2019; Fox & Mogul, 2022). African immigrants may acquire formal

citizenship yet still find themselves positioned outside the symbolic boundaries of the nation. Everyday interactions in workplaces, classrooms, and neighborhoods often reproduce subtle forms of exclusion: accent policing, assumptions of cultural backwardness, and stereotypes of incompetence. These interactions echo what Du Bois (1903) described as "the veil," the psychological and social barrier that distorts mutual recognition between dominant and subordinate groups. In this context, the African immigrant's struggle for recognition is not simply about legal inclusion but about dismantling a racial order that has long defined who counts as truly American.

The concept of racialized legal status (Joseph & Golash-Boza, 2021) helps clarify this condition. It explains how formal citizenship or immigration status interacts with racial hierarchies to create graded forms of belonging within the nation-state. Possessing a U.S. passport or residency card does not automatically confer full civic inclusion. Instead, social acceptance is mediated through race, accent, religion, and perceived cultural proximity to whiteness. As Menjívar (2021) notes, citizenship in the contemporary United States has become "stratified and conditional," where legality offers only partial protection against exclusion. Some citizens remain symbolically "less American" than others because they are denied cultural recognition and everyday legitimacy. For African immigrants, this tension between legal membership and social exclusion reproduces the paradox that Du Bois articulated more than a century ago the contradiction between national identity and racial subordination.

Racialized legal status is also reproduced through institutional structures that reward assimilation to dominant norms while penalizing visible difference. Sociologists such as Fox and Mogul (2022) describe how immigration and welfare regimes implicitly rank immigrants by perceived "fit" within the racial order. Black immigrants, regardless of class or education, are often positioned at the bottom of this hierarchy. The result is what Golash-Boza (2015) terms a racialized citizenship regime: a system in which race silently determines who is seen as deserving of rights, protection, and inclusion. For many African immigrants, this regime is experienced not only in encounters with the state such as visa processing, airport screening, or police surveillance—but also in daily interactions that question their belonging.

Despite these constraints, African immigrants actively reshape what it means to belong in America. Through churches, mosques, hometown associations, mutual-aid groups, cultural festivals, and professional networks, they build community structures that affirm identity and provide material and emotional support (Bloemraad et al., 2022; Okeke-Ihejirika & Bilge, 2021). These spaces function as counterpublics arenas where marginalized voices articulate alternative visions of citizenship and nationhood (Fraser, 1990). Within these networks, immigrants reinterpret Americanness through an Afro-diasporic lens that emphasizes collective responsibility, spirituality, and transnational solidarity. In doing so, they transform experiences of marginalization into collective resilience, producing what Bourdieu (1986) described as social capital: resources embedded in networks of trust and mutual recognition.

Community institutions also operate as cultural bridges that link African traditions with African-American and other diasporic identities. They foster spaces where immigrants can negotiate the complexities of racialization and citizenship while maintaining pride in heritage (Owusu, 2019; Tetteh, 2020). These organizations encourage cultural exchange African drumming in Black History Month events, Ghanaian and Nigerian food festivals in U.S. cities, and mentorship programs pairing African and African-American youth. Such practices exemplify how immigrants contribute to a redefinition of Blackness that is simultaneously global and local, incorporating histories of slavery, colonialism, and migration. This redefinition unsettles essentialist ideas of race and challenges both White and African-American notions of authenticity.

Examining structural racism alongside identity formation thus extends Du Bois's framework beyond psychology to structure. Consciousness does not reside only within the individual mind; it is shaped by the institutional arrangements that govern opportunity, recognition, and belonging. The experiences of African immigrants demonstrate that race, migration, and citizenship operate together as

interlocking systems that mold the modern self. Their lives show that belonging is not a fixed legal category but an ongoing negotiation one that must be renewed in every interaction and institutional encounter.

In the era of global mobility, triple consciousness represents more than a personal struggle; it exposes the contradictions of democratic ideals in a racialized world. The presence of African immigrants challenges the United States to confront its unfinished project of equality and to recognize the plural voices that constitute its citizenry. As Collins (2019) reminds us, critical consciousness emerges through engagement with systems of power. In this sense, the African immigrant's awareness of being African, Black, and American at once becomes a political insight rather than a private wound. By tracing how structural racism operates through citizenship and belonging, it becomes clear that Du Bois's early insight remains prophetic: the problem of the color line has not disappeared, it has multiplied and now stretches across borders, languages, and continents.

Conclusion

Du Bois's concept of double consciousness continues to illuminate the lived contradictions of racial identity in the United States. More than a historical description of African American life, it provides a sociological framework for understanding how marginalized people construct the self within structures of inequality. The enduring tension between internal identity and external perception remains central to the experience of those who are racialized as Black, even in a formally inclusive society.

For African immigrants, however, this framework only partially explains their realities. Migration introduces additional dimensions of displacement and adaptation. Black immigrants must reconcile three overlapping identities: racial identity within a White-dominated society, national identity rooted in their countries of origin, and civic identity shaped by citizenship or legal status in the United States. The negotiation of these identities generates what may be called triple consciousness; a state of awareness that is racial, cultural, and political at once.

This layered consciousness emerges not only from interpersonal encounters but also from institutional exclusions. Policies that link access to resources and opportunities to citizenship status reproduce a hierarchy of belonging. As Bloemraad et al. (2022) and Joseph and Golash-Boza (2021) demonstrate, the intersection of race and legal status creates a system of racialized citizenship in which immigrants of color remain symbolically foreign even when legally American. The experience of being both inside and outside the nation mirrors the contradictions that Du Bois observed a century ago, but in a transnational and postcolonial context.

At the same time, triple consciousness should not be understood solely as a source of alienation. It also enables a more complex understanding of identity and belonging. The ability to navigate multiple cultural and political systems can foster adaptability, resilience, and what Du Bois called a "second sight," now expanded into a third vision. Through this perspective, African immigrants see the intersections of race, nation, and power from positions that reveal the unfinished project of American democracy.

Future scholarship can build on this idea by examining how triple consciousness operates across gender, class, and generation. Second-generation African immigrants, for example, may internalize a different balance of these identities than first-generation migrants. Comparative studies could also explore how triple consciousness manifests among other racialized immigrant groups who negotiate similar tensions between cultural origin and national belonging.

Du Bois urged readers to confront the "color line" as the central problem of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first, that line intersects with the borders of nations and the boundaries of citizenship. Recognizing triple consciousness allows sociology to extend Du Bois's insight to an era of global mobility, where race, migration, and nationality together define what it means to belong.

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