

Reflection on the image of the veil in Souls

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WEB Du Bois uses the image of a veil to convey the difficulties of coming to mutual understanding that white and black Americans face, even when they apparently share day to day activities. Black Americans—Negroes, as Du Bois would have put it—come into the world as if born covered by a veil. This veil allows them to look out on the world, but prevents the external (white) world from ever properly seeing them. In Du Bois' own words:

“the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, 1903, 3)

As we shall see, this imagery of a veil, and differences in what can and can't be seen by those occupying different social positions, captures much that is core to Du Bois' vision of American life.

Indeed, this metaphor of the veil was important to Du Bois, who would often return to the image, sometimes using it in slightly different ways. To give just one instance, later on within *Souls* Du Bois went on to say this when describing changing religious practices among white and black Americans:

“The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment.” (De Bois, 1903, 202)

Here the veil is seen not to cover a particular African American, but rather shrouds an entire world, as Du Bois suggests that black and white Americans lived in entirely different worlds and that the white cannot properly see the black. What then is this veil, separating white from black at the level of both individuals and whole social worlds?

For Du Bois, as a sociologist, one of the most important features for understanding American life at the turn of the 20th century was understanding the peculiar relationship between the black and white occupants of the country. From the oppression of slavery, with only brief and partial respite during phases of reconstruction, African Americans had found themselves placed under the cruel oppression of Jim Crow and often suffering in dire poverty. And compounding all this was the fact that white Americans seemed to routinely believe awful falsehoods about black people, about our intellect, propensity for crime, ability to produce art and culture, and so on. These falsehoods were often in and of themselves insulting, and tended to justify the subordinate position African Americans were placed in. Du Bois set himself the task of trying to correct these falsehoods through presenting clear and accurate sociological research on African Americans' situation.

But it didn't work! He found that his work, despite being obviously more methodologically rigorous and better grounded in actual empirical research, was routinely ignored and dismissed. Good work

was being passed over in favor of work that was evidently of lower quality yet served to uphold the insulting myths he sought to debunk. The imagery of the veil, then, can be seen as relating his peculiar experience to the broader situation of African Americans. For it is intimately tied to the experience of being ignored and unable to find an audience that perceives you as you actually are.

The imbalance of power and access to resources in America, as well as the mores and customs that had built up around that base, had given rise to the following situation. African Americans, to get by in life, had to actually understand white Americans and their social world. White Americans were their employers, the political class was entirely dominated by white people; the law was set and enforced by white people, and their norms were upheld through sanctions against black people that ranged from loss of employment to brutal mob violence. An African American had to be able to understand the white American world - they could see into it, as it were.

White Americans, on the other hand, had no such interest or need to understand black Americans. The very same imbalance of power made it not urgent for them to really understand black Americans. They would never have to travel into the black quarters of town to find work as was frequently done in the opposite direction, and falsehoods about black Americans made it easier to maintain a system of oppression without the stirrings of conscience.

As such, patterns of asymmetric ignorance were formed and engraved in American life. White people felt no need to really see their black compatriots, but black Americans must be watching them and their ways carefully if only to survive. It was as if the latter watched the former through a veil permitting only one way sight, and this was the metaphor Du Bois reached for.

Exploring the ramifications of this social epistemic situation would take up much of Du Bois' research time. What could pierce the veil? How could black Americans avoid having their self-conception become assimilated to white Americans' (often insulting) view of them, given how closely they must watch the latter? What is to be done? As difficult as these questions are, recognizing that the veil exists and prevents mutual understanding is a vital first step to posing and solving them.