

Spiritual striving for American identity

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The question of American identity has historically been both complex and contested. What's more, it often yields mythic notions rooted in exceptionalist dogmas like election, commission, moral regeneracy, sacred land, and innocent past.

Embedded in religious American exceptionalism is the American Dream: if an individual works hard, perseveres, and is a good citizen, there is no limit to how far she can advance. One of this idea's earliest articulations came in the 18th-century writings of [J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur](#), specifically [Letters from an American Farmer and Sketches of Eighteenth-Century America](#).

[W. E. B. Du Bois](#) offered another notion of American identity from his perspective as an African American in Jim Crow America. The "[spiritual striving](#)" of African Americans informed his notion of a dual identity, "both Negro and American," an identity in pursuit of a generous acknowledgment of humanity undergirded by economic, social, political, and educational liberty.

Both Crèvecoeur and Du Bois crafted their notions of American identity as outsiders to the dominant power structures. But Crèvecoeur's notion, while it powerfully contributed to the American imagination, was fleeting. Du Bois's construct was rooted in a spiritual paradigm that generously affirmed the human personhood of black folk, consistent with an ethic rooted in neighbor-love.

Crèvecoeur's *Letters* consists of 11 separate essays written by a fictional character named James to a European interlocutor. *Sketches* contains 12 essays on life in America before and after the Revolution. In his third letter, Crèvecoeur asks his famous question—"What, then, is the American, this new man?" He notes that Americans are not identified by ethnicity, language, or religion as Europeans are. What distinguishes Americans from everyone else—what makes Americans exceptional, he might have said—is the fact that "the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour." He writes, "The American is a new man, who acts upon new principles." Here, all was new. According to Crèvecoeur scholar

A. W. Plumstead, “*Letters* is a very class conscious book,” written to white lower and middle classes to encourage them to settle in America.

What was at the heart of Du Bois’s vision of an American identity for the nine million black men, women, and children of the United States? It was the reality, faced by all African Americans, of the dual identity—what Du Bois referred to as a “two-ness—an American, a Negro: two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings. . . .” But in this two-ness, this dual identity, Du Bois sought to retain both Africa and America at the heart of African American identity. In order to do so, a great spiritual striving was necessary. Du Bois described it as “this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.”

Unlike Crèvecoeur, Du Bois had more than simply a material conception of American identity in mind. Human personhood was the essence of American identity for Du Bois. “Work, culture, liberty—all these we need, not singly, but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood.” American ideals of equality, individual rights, and free access were the context in which African Americans were to experience human flourishing.

American identity has been created in large measure by the American Dream and its promise of material progress and independence. But the dark side of this salient feature of American exceptionalism is that if a person is black and poor, then not only is her American identity questioned but her humanity, too. The Black Lives Matter movement addresses this age-old problem and provides evidence that America still has not come to grips with the profound identity crisis that Crèvecoeur touched on in his writings but for which he had neither the imagination nor the wisdom—nor even the aspiration—to find a resolution.

In contrast, Du Bois’s vision of American identity was rooted in two heritages, one American and one African. To be sure, America would not exist without the material and spiritual contributions offered by Africans and their descendants. But the African American spiritual striving was central to Du Bois’s conception of American identity. Ultimately, Crèvecoeur and Du Bois shared a similar disillusionment with America, and both endured exile. But unlike Crèvecoeur, Du Bois’s life’s work advanced lasting moral and anthropological components of American identity.

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