Nonfiction Excerpt 4: Excerpt from The Souls of Black Folk by W.E.B. Du Bois

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the founders of the NAACP and one of the most important African American activists of the early 1900s. His work is considered a forerunner to the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In 1903, his essay collection, The Souls of Black Folk, confronts the issue of race, describing what it was like to be an African American in a segregated society.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world. . . . One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled [opposing] strivings [desires]; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [apart].

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife [conflict],—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. . . .

Away back in the days of bondage [slavery] they thought to see in one divine event the end of all doubt and disappointment; few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies [evils], the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites. In song and exhortation swelled one refrain—Liberty; in his tears and curses the God he implored had Freedom in his right hand. At last it came,—suddenly, fearfully, like a dream. . . .

Years have passed away since then,—ten, twenty, forty; forty years of national life, forty years of renewal and development, and yet the swarthy spectre [ghost] sits in its accustomed [familiar] seat. . . .

The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,—a disappointment all the more bitter because the unattained ideal was unbounded save [except] by the simple ignorance of a lowly people.