

Word and Life: Confronting Racism Series

Lifting the Mask of Racism: Dueling Consciousness and Power

By Maura Conlon-McIvor / Special to VOICE

“AMERICANS HAVE LONG BEEN TRAINED TO SEE THE DEFICIENCIES OF PEOPLE RATHER THAN POLICY. It’s a pretty easy mistake to make: People are in our faces. Policies are distant,” writes Ibram X. Kendi in his *New York Times* bestseller, *How to Be an AntiRacist*. Vashti Tameka Wilson – a presenter at Word and Life’s “Confronting Racism” series – asserts that “knowing what it’s like *to be in the skin* of an African American” is a prerequisite to any intellectual discussion of racism. She says, “By removing my mask as an African American woman, I hope to give you a glimpse into the dueling consciousness that permeates every facet of my daily life.”



Vashti Tameka Wilson

Wilson, a Diversity and Inclusion Strategist, former Air Force linguistic cryptologist whose language was Russian, and co-founder of the non-profit Madi’s Treasure Box, addressed the historical significance of “dual consciousness,” a term coined by the Black Civil Rights activist, W.E.B. DuBois. He describes this reality as “a peculiar sensation... this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings.”

She evoked Kendi’s book – requisite reading for the Confronting Racism series – where “dual consciousness” is equivocated as a “dueling consciousness.” According to Kendi, “The White body defines the American body. The White body segregates the Black body from the American body. The White body instructs the Black body to assimilate into the American

body. The White body segregates the Black body from the American body. The White body instructs the Black body to assimilate into the American body. The White body rejects the Black body assimilating into the American body.” Mirroring these fraught racial dynamics, Wilson played *The Look* (www.youtube.com/watch?v=aC7lbdD1hq0) told from the point of view of a roving camera that represents the “presence” of an African American man entering public spaces, its lens capturing reactionary faces and armored pauses of surrounding white people, insinuating he doesn’t belong.

Wilson also shared Maya Angelou’s recitation of *We Wear The Mask*, a poem addressing the ameliorative facial expression, “a survival apparatus,” worn by African Americans. “We wear the mask that grins and lies./It shades our cheeks and hides our eyes,” speaks Angelou.

(www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&feature=share&v=_HLol9InMlc.) The mask and the dueling consciousness create a hyper-awareness, such that an individual African American often feels as if they represent all Black people. “People don’t get to see the screaming behind the mask,” Wilson added.

“It’s an enormous weight to carry on a daily basis,” she said, noting “the constant necessity to convince others I belong in the room.” She described implicit bias, how, for example, using a Black or “urban name” when applying for a position will lead to a 50 percent less chance of “moving on to the next round.” Wilson, who holds an MBA and served in Iraq and Afghanistan goes by her name, Vashti, sharing that in not using her [original] name “makes me feel a little part of me had died.”

In denying racism, a white individual may speak about the one African-American person they know, but Wilson asserted, “that is akin to tasting caviar only once in your life and saying you know caviar. How can you truly understand something if you’ve barely experienced it?” She also noted how in literature, a white person is ascribed many hues, “auburn hair, ice blue eyes, pale skin, rosy cheeks,” whereas an African American person is referred to as a “Black man” or a “Black woman.” She also mentioned how prominent African Americans are often described as being “articulate,” as if that’s not the norm, a term rarely ascribed a white person.

Wilson, who points to living beyond the mask, evokes a hopeful future. She cites her eight-year-old daughter who, while watching a movie asked, “They don’t have any brown people—do they not like brown people?” With Wilson’s guidance, her daughter launched Madi’s Treasure Box, disseminating to schools newly designed, multi-colored crayons reflecting a range of 16 skin colors. The non-profit has been featured on *Cuomo Prime Time*, *NBC Evening News*, *The Today Show*, *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, and other media.

Wilson added, we all can speak up when witnessing racism by saying: “‘That behavior is not okay.’ That’s all that’s required.” “What convinces people are your actions.”

Word and Life's "Confronting Racism," series runs January 14th through March 18th, Thursdays, 10 to 11:30am. Podcasts of completed presentations are online at www.wordandlife.us.