



**‘Two Souls, Two Thoughts, and Two Unreconciled Strivings in One Body’:
W.E.B. Du Bois’ Double Consciousness in the Lived Experiences of Black South Africans**

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Abstract

American sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois introduces the phrase double consciousness in his work. According to Du Bois, this phrase describes a dilemma of two consciousnesses that Black Americans face due to what he calls ‘the veil of racism’. While the consciousness that Du Bois speaks of is in the context of Black Americans, this work attempts to answer whether colonisation and racism in South Africa did not also lead to a form of double consciousness to those who experienced it. This work does this by firstly exploring the institutionalised form of colonisation in South Africa known as

apartheid. It shows how this system characterised and made Black people seem as though they were lazy, stupid, and inferior, which in turn led to the second consciousness. This work further shows the experience of double consciousness by Black South Africans through hair and beauty politics. It shows that Black South Africans retaliate and assert their blackness through protest despite the double consciousness. Furthermore, this work uses South African literature to demonstrate how Black people in South Africa are knowledgeable of the consciousness, its effects, and how it operates.

Introduction

Black people in Africa and the diaspora share a similar history of colonisation, racial segregation and its effects, which affect different aspects of their lives. With W.E.B Du Bois being a Pan-Africanist and a scholar whose work had a particular interest in race issues and equality for Black Americans, his writings are then devoted to this. One of his popular writings is on double consciousness; this term is first seen in his work *Strivings of the Negro People* (1897) and then later also seen in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois describes this consciousness as a peculiar sensation, where the American Negro has two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body (Du Bois, 1903: 8). Essentially, here, the negro is torn in between how he views himself as well as how a white racist America views him, hence the second consciousness.

While the consciousness discussed by Du Bois speaks to Black Americans who live in America, this work explores whether or not there is a link between double consciousness, as discussed by Du Bois, and the effects of racism that Black South Africans experienced due to apartheid. Secondly, once the link is established, this work further engages how Black South Africans experience this consciousness and how they react to it. This work begins by introducing the institutionalised system of racial segregation in South Africa, showing how it not only constituted of physical oppression, but how living under it also affected Black people's minds. It made them feel inferior and unwholesome (Biko, 1978; Manganyi, 2019).

Furthermore, once this is done, this work uses hair and beauty politics in South Africa to demonstrate how double consciousness exists and is experienced by Black South Africans. This work shows how, in some instances, they acknowledge it and retaliate through protest. In other instances, they perform tasks that are thought to not be for Black people of a certain nature; this is seen through South African model Zozibini Tunzi winning both the Miss South Africa and Miss Universe pageants in 2019. Lastly, this work also gives two examples of South African literature to show that Black South Africans experience this consciousness; these authors' work demonstrates that the authors are well knowledgeable of the double consciousness in their context and can document it well with its

implications on individuals and society. This further demonstrates that South Africans do experience the double consciousness that Du Bois (1897 and 1903) speaks about in his work.

Who is W.E.B. Du Bois, and what is double consciousness?

Before engaging the idea of double consciousness, both in terms of African Americans and the African context, it is important to give an idea of who W.E.B. Du Bois was, what work he did, and his position in society so as to give context to the reader of the scholar's positionality and how he was able to theorise the situation that Black Americans were in. Du Bois was an African American intellectual who was the first Black person to receive a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) from Harvard (Edward and Alexander, 2018). Upon completing his PhD, Du Bois moved on to embark on a sociological study of Black life in Philadelphia (Edward and Alexander, 2018). Throughout his life, he had a major interest in race issues, dismantling racism, the immediate equality for African Americans, and full civil and economic rights for this group of people (Morris, 2020).

Du Bois identified as a Pan-Africanist and was referred to as 'the father of Pan-Africanism'. It is important to note that this was not because he had founded Pan-Africanism, but because he used his intellect to make contributions to Pan-Africanism that were considered to be valuable. This was due to him being a scholar of racism, an activist, a writer, and an orator; these traits allowed him to be the ideal candidate to spread the ideology of Pan-Africanism (Morris, 2020). As mentioned above, he was highly concerned about Black people, the consequences of racism in their lives, and their emancipation. He strongly believed that 'races were not oppressed based on biological criteria, but human-constructed racial hierarchies established for the purpose of human domination' (Morris, 2020: 98). His thoughts on racism can further be seen through what he termed 'the veil of racism'—here, he believed that white oppressors around the globe constructed a colour line, that pushed Black people into a veil of racism, where they were exploited, disenfranchised, and insulted (Du Bois, 1903). This 'veil of racism' was what led to the double consciousness

that Du Bois spoke about. This is because the double consciousness was a consequence of the racism that Black Americans faced.

Du Bois argued that the racism experienced by Black people was not only a physical act but also something that had a consequence on their minds, self-esteem, and identity. Hence, conversations on decolonisation will sometimes refer to the concept of decolonising the mind, as the way that Black people think about themselves, their capabilities, and the world around them has been affected by racism.

As an intellectual, Du Bois often expressed himself through essays and writings, and he speaks more of his idea of double consciousness in his book, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois argued that African-Americans always looked at themselves through the eyes of others, and specifically through the eyes of white oppressors (Edward and Alexander, 2018). Annie Rawls (2000) argues that the consequence of this double consciousness is that the Black man had two cultural identities within him, each representing a social role. They argue that the two identities were at war with each other because of the difference that the two had in social standing within the American community. Hence, the battle of how they saw themselves and knew themselves vs. how a racist American system viewed them.

Apartheid South Africa: How do Black South Africans fit in?

There is a close association between South African history and that of African-Americans. South Africa lived through a system that categorised people based on an 'us vs. them' basis (Fredrickson, 2002). 'Us' referred to white people and Afrikaners, while 'they' or 'them' referred to Black people. Apartheid, which literally means apartness or separateness in the Afrikaans and Dutch languages, is the name that was given to the institutionalised segregation of people by race in South Africa (Clark and Worger, 2013). Like those in the African-American context that Du Bois speaks of, Black people in South Africa lived through a system that undermined their basic human rights, displaced them from their homes, and subjected them to numerous forms of violence (SA History, 2016). It is further argued that despite apartheid being institutionalised in 1948, segregating people

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based on their skin colour in South Africa dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and paved the way for the ideology and framework through which apartheid would be constructed (Dubow, 1989).

In his work, Biko (1978) argues that living in an unequal apartheid society led to Black people believing that they were inferior, resulting in an 'empty shell'. Biko believed that apartheid and oppression turned the Black man into a shadow of himself, where he doubted himself, drowned in his own misery, and was an ox bearing the yoke of oppression with sheepish timidity. This description of living under apartheid that Biko gives carries some similarity with how Du Bois characterises living with double consciousness and its impact on Black Americans. This work then argues that there is a direct link between the 'veil' discussed by Du Bois and the 'empty shell' identified by Biko. Due to the nature of racial segregation that both groups faced, despite differences in geographical location, the experience of double consciousness discussed by Du Bois could be applicable in the South African context.

Furthermore, during apartheid, the name 'Kaffir' was used to refer to Black people. This derogatory term, 'Kaffir,' refers to being lazy and stupid, which the apartheid government considered Black South Africans to be (De Vos, 2008). This work argues that the use of such terms played into how Black people came to think of themselves. This meant that Black people found themselves in a dilemma between what they

thought of themselves as, versus a ruling government, plus an oppressive community, that thought of them as lazy and stupid. Fanon (1986) in his work argues that the coloniser knowingly instilled a fear and inferiority complex in the colonised. Manganyi (2019) alludes to this, arguing that one of the impacts of colonisation in Africa, in this case apartheid, was that the Black body was projected as 'bad' and thought to be inferior and unwholesome. This representation of Black people affected them not just physically but mentally too. This results in the argument by Biko (1978) that the most powerful weapon at the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed. This is exactly where the similarity between apartheid and double consciousness comes in, as once again, the oppressors put Black people in a battle of who they see themselves as versus this oppressive system.

To understand the above better, this work makes use of what is known as the white gaze. In simple terms, the white gaze refers to how whiteness influences how we think and operate in society (Asare, 2021). Fanon (1986) also writes about how living under the white man's eyes also affects one's experiences of blackness. The white gaze enforces the idea that, despite democracy and increased Black mobility, people have not really escaped white contestation (Canham and Willans, 2017: 28). This is important in understanding Black people's experience of double consciousness—as existing within this white gaze is a constant reminder of how one views themselves, but also how the white gaze (which is dominant and racist) continues to view them. In a country like South Africa, living under the white gaze is a constant in Black people's lives. In the South African context, the white gaze is evident in numerous ways that include, but are not limited to, racialised discourse that is responsible for controlling, interiorising, and negating Blackness—while profiling the Black body as different and defiant (Fiske, 1998; Jungkunz and White, 2013; Nielsen, 2011; Yancy, 2013). This once again emphasises the relevance of double consciousness.

Double consciousness in South African lived experiences: Hair and beauty politics in South Africa

The relationship that Black women have had over the past years with their hair shows the existence of double consciousness in the contemporary South

African context. This work argues that double consciousness has led to a system where Black women use their hair to assert their identity in social settings and the workplace. The conversation around Black people's hair has often come with much debate, with Black people being told that their hair is dirty or ungovernable (Mokoena, 2016). The solution for this dirty and ungovernable hair has often been to relax the hair, which gives it a silkier texture (Jadezweni, 2021) which is more acceptable to whiteness and how it frames acceptable hair. This has led to situations where the more aware Black people have to constantly fight this second consciousness that thinks so negatively about their physical appearance and identity, in this case their hair.

A Clicks hair advert from 2020 described Black women's hair as 'dry and damaged' and 'frizzy and dull' (Young, 2021), while white women's hair was said to be 'normal, flat and fine' (Young, 2020: 1). This advert had been published, which means that it had gone through many channels and had been approved—meaning that those in charge found no fault in this kind of blatant discrimination. This shows the influence of the white gaze in South African advertising and how white people perceive Black people in their own spaces. A protest following this campaign demonstrated that Black South Africans are aware of this double consciousness and, in their case, are able to assert their identity and acknowledge the double consciousness through protest action. They are put in a situation where they are required to perform their Blackness as a manner of responding to the second consciousness. This speaks to what Canham and Williams (2017) elaborate on when they discuss how blackness and whiteness are performative, and the consequence of this is that Black people must negotiate whiteness and face complexities in asserting their blackness.

Another example of the above is Black women embracing their afros and refusing to relax their hair. Double consciousness might have also reflected itself in hair politics and given itself the authority to set beauty standards of what is acceptable or not (Tate, 2007). This generation of Black women has become aware of this and once again has used protest action to fight this second consciousness. The protests that took place at Pretoria Girls High School in 2016 are a good example of this (Pather, 2016). Part of the school's

code of conduct had required Black girls to chemically straighten their hair, which they endured and adhered to for a while. However, protests began to spark due to the frustration of how the school had portrayed their hair. The girls are recorded sparking conversations about how their hair is tied to their roots; hence they are fighting for their identity (Pathen, 2016: 1). This demonstrates that double consciousness does exist, and in this regard, the young women at Pretoria Girls High School are in a situation where they assert their blackness as a response to double consciousness. This shows that though this internal dilemma exists, and they experience it, they also somewhat resist it by asserting their blackness by wearing their natural hair. Furthermore, it is important to note how the perspectives that were formed on hair at the school were based on racist and racialised thoughts about Black people's hair, which is essentially the same as what Du Bois describes as the situation that African-Americans are faced with, where racism was the cause of double consciousness (Edwards, 2008).

South African model Zozibini Tunzi winning both the Miss South Africa and the Miss Universe pageants in 2019 can also be used to further engage the existence of double consciousness in contemporary South Africa. This access to beauty pageants has always been influenced by racism and racial issues. This is due to beauty standards being reinforced by Western culture and used to shape what is considered a beautiful woman (Mckay et al., 2018). These standards include being fair-skinned, thin, able-bodied, with silky hair, and youthful and toned. These beauty standards became a benchmark to exclude Black women from beauty pageants as they did not meet these beauty standards (Carter, 2022). This is why Zozibini winning the two pageants was such a milestone for her and people of colour worldwide. The reality and existence of Black people with racism and the consequences through double consciousness had convinced Black people that a dark-skinned woman with a fade could not win pageants of such stature. Zozibini became the first woman with a fade in history to win pageants of that nature; she even said herself that she did not believe that a woman like her could win the pageant (Cohan, 2020). Her winning demonstrated double consciousness through the following: firstly, a 'common knowledge' that a woman like her could not win the pageant. Secondly, entering the pageant despite knowing she did not fit these conventional

beauty standards. Hence, this act by her is a response to the double consciousness that she was aware of and experienced.

Tate (2007) argues how, throughout history, Black people have had to locate themselves and their performance in a framework of beauty as aesthetic and political (Tate, 2007). This here is a consequence of double consciousness, as Black people are then forced to use aesthetics to reinforce themselves and their identity because they exist within an inward battle of what they know themselves to be in terms of beauty, and what the white man thinks with regards to beauty, skin colour, and hair. It is as though they acknowledge the white gaze and its implications (in this case, double consciousness), and their response to it is to assert their blackness. This can extend to the hashtags used by Black South Africans, Africans generally, and African-Americans on social media when posting pictures of their natural hair or dark-skinned people in general. The use of hashtags like #melaninPoppin, #blackdontcrack, #blackisbeautiful, and #blackgirlmagic, amongst others, is not a coincidence (Hassan, 2018). This is rather an act of asserting their blackness and responding to the double consciousness. This is important, as discussed. They exist in an inward battle of seeing themselves through the perspective of others (Du Bois, 1903). These hashtags act as a response to double consciousness; they are used to affirm blackness by reminding themselves that they are not what the other consciousness or the white gaze has portrayed them and made them believe they are.

Double consciousness in South African literature and media

Work by South African author Kopano Matlwa in her book *Coconut* can be used to demonstrate two things: the existence of double consciousness in South Africa and Black South Africans' knowledge of it. While the work is fiction, it sheds light on what South Africans find themselves going through. In the book, Matlwa uses two girls struggling with class and race post-apartheid to demonstrate the existence of double consciousness in South Africa. Fikile, who is poor, dreams of being white, which she thinks is rich and happy, as opposed to being Black, which she feels is dirty and poor (Gqibitole, 2019). Ofilwe, on the other hand, is described as 'born with a silver spoon in

her mouth'; despite her class privilege and access to money, she still faces racism at school (Matlwa, 2007). Matlwa continues to allude to Ofilwe's strong desire to be white, which is the same as Fikile, who thinks being white would solve her financial state (Matlwa, 2007). This demonstrates double consciousness through the use of whiteness as a theme. In this instance, double consciousness makes Black people aspire to whiteness, as whiteness is associated with excellence, privilege, and resources (Gqibitole, 2019). The closest link to whiteness and its benefits that young Black people have is through the schooling system, which leads to Black parents taking their children to white private schools because of the idea of what proximity to whiteness can do for them. However, their access to whiteness does not exempt them from racism and its consequences, like Ofilwe in the book. Instances of Black students facing racism at school can be seen through protests that have sparked at private schools like Pretoria Girls High School, Herschel Girls School, and St Mary's Diocesan School for Girls over racism (Venter, 2020 and Mokoena, 2016). These students then struggle more with this double consciousness when racism occurs, and they see how this 'better' they aspire for rejects them.

Even the book's title, *Coconut*, symbolises Black people's struggle with the two identities they battle with. Coconut refers to a brown fruit on the outside and white on the inside. This analogy is often used to refer to Black South Africans who are thought to have an identity crisis: people who are Black but thought to behave like white people (February, 2018). This work argues that the idea that one is labelled as a coconut represents the existence of double consciousness. This is because these people acting like 'coconuts' is not by choice but because they view themselves 'through someone else's eyes' (Edwards, 2008: 10)—in other words, through the eyes of a white society. Furthermore, as stated above, it has been shown that whiteness for Black people is linked with a better life, money, and excellence—hence their aspiration towards it. This battle that these individuals face represents what Du Bois speaks of in his work when he writes of 'two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body' (Edwards, 2008: 8). This all exists due to the idea of the veil of racism that was explained above, obviously in South Africa, existing through the apartheid system and segregation.

In addition to the above, South African comedian Lesego Thlabi is an example that double consciousness does indeed exist in contemporary South Africa. Lesego created a character that she portrays through skits on social media; the character is known as Coconut Kelz, who is a white woman trapped in a Black woman's body (Peloo, 2021). Interestingly, Lesego can identify what Du Bois means by looking at one through the eyes of a racist society (Edwards, 2008). Through this, she then creates content that shows life in South Africa from the perspective of a racist white person and tries to engage their thinking. This shows double consciousness as the content is not fictional, which indicates that Lesego is aware of the experiences of Black people and what it means to attempt to navigate life through their identity, as well as the one that has been created for you by the oppressor. Lesego has further used her understanding of the situation to write a book called *Coconut Kelz's Guide to Surviving This Shithole* (2019). An analysis of this book argues that her work demonstrates the existence of a problematic perspective in South African society that views white people as superior (Nkoala, 2021). In essence, Lesego has used her knowledge and experience of double consciousness to bring attention to existing issues of social injustice and racism in South Africa.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this work has demonstrated that the double consciousness faced by Black Americans, as discussed by Du Bois, is also experienced by Black South Africans due to the shared history between the two groups. This work begins by tracing South Africa's history of racial segregation, emphasising its implications on how individuals view themselves as a result. The work is able to draw similarities between the effects of this segregation and that faced by Black Americans. It shows how, in both instances, a result of this racism is the formation of this double consciousness that both groups struggle with. This work further discusses double consciousness in South Africa, looking at the beauty and hair industries and South African literature. With the hair and beauty industry, this work demonstrates that while the people experience double consciousness, they retaliate by asserting their blackness in the form of protest. This not only demonstrates their knowledge

of the double consciousness but demonstrates the toll it has on these individuals, as protest is not an easy task to perform, physically or mentally, but they are left with no choice. Furthermore, the example of Zozibini Tunzi used also demonstrates how, in some instances, despite knowing of double consciousness and what it means, these individuals retaliate by doing what racism and whiteness deem is not possible for these people.

Furthermore, the engagement in literature demonstrates the knowledge of double consciousness in South Africa. However, unlike the first discussion on beauty and hair, this work uses Kopano Matlwa's book to show that a consequence of double consciousness, in this case, is that it makes people aspire to whiteness due to the idea that proximity to whiteness is beneficial. However, the work demonstrates how this does not exempt these individuals from experiencing double consciousness. Both Matlwa and Tlaga's ability to discuss the impacts of double consciousness through the use of various themes in their books demonstrates the existence of this double consciousness in South Africa and that it is experienced by all Black people despite their socio-economic class.

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