

# Rethinking the Concept of Double Consciousness in Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903)

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### Summary

In an essay titled "Of our spiritual strivings", W.E.B. Du Bois coined and elaborated the concept of "double consciousness" to refer to the ambiguity of being black and American. The ambivalence and unstable identities suggested by the term imply living a life characterised by seemingly irreconcilable dualities. On the one hand, blacks are entitled to *become* Americans because the slave labour they were forced to provide created the material and economic basis of modern America. On the other hand, the black people who created the wealth of the American nation find themselves marginalised or occupying low-paying jobs, leading to the condition of double consciousness being seen as a hindrance to the progress of the black race. In the American South, before the emancipation of slaves, black people were raped, racially segregated, lynched, and denied equal opportunities. Du Bois explains the ruthless experiences that the Negroes endured because of double consciousness as he asserts that the feeling of both belonging and not belonging to America often sent black people to court; thus, false gods invoking false means of salvation. At times blacks felt ashamed of themselves. Du Bois perceives the evil experiences endured by black people as concretised in the musical form of the Negro Spirituals. An analysis of selected songs suggests that these songs are the most beautiful expression of human experience because the songs manifest an awareness of the self that is more than the two-ness implied in the concept of double consciousness. The paradox indicated above confirms double consciousness as on one level a source of evil experiences of the Negroes, and on another, positive level, the condition that enabled them to fashion new discourses of resistances in order to express their desire to escape slavery. This article uses Gilroy's notion of the ambiguity of modernity in fashioning identities of the Black Atlantic in order to rethink the idea of double consciousness, and at the same time amplify the multiple ways in which black people experienced slavery in America.

### Opsomming

In 'n essay getiteld "Of our spiritual Strivings" het W.E.B. Du Bois die konsep van "dubbele bewussyn" geskep en uitgebou om te verwys na die dubbelsinnigheid daarvan om swart en Amerikaans te wees. Die teenstrydigheid en onstabiele identiteite wat deur die term gesuggereer word, impliseer dat 'n lewe gelei word wat deur oënskynlik onversoenbare dualiteite gekenmerk word. Aan die een kant is swartmense daarop geregtig om Amerikaners te word omdat die slawe-arbeid wat hulle

gedwing is om te verrig, die materiële en ekonomiese basis van die hedendaagse Amerika gevorm het. Aan die ander kant is die einste swartmense wat die welvaart van die Amerikaanse nasie geskep het, gemarginaliseer of in laagbesoldigde poste geplaas, en dit veroorsaak dat die toestand van dubbele bewussyn beskou word as 'n struikelblok in die vooruitgang van die swart ras. In die Amerikaanse Suide, voor die emansipasie van slawe, is swartmense ontvoer, geskei op grond van ras, gelych, en gelyke geleenthede ontnem. Du Bois verduidelik die wrede ervarings wat die Negers verduur het as gevolg van dubbele bewussyn, wanneer hy aanvoer dat die gevoel van beide tot Amerika behoort en nie behoort nie, dikwels swartmense hof toe gestuur het; valse gode wat valse vorme van redding oproep. Swartes het hulle met tye geskaam. Du Bois bemerk die bese ervarings wat deur swartmense verduur word as gekonkretiseer in die musikale vorm van die Neger-geestelikes. 'n Ontleding van uitgesoekte liedere toon dat hierdie liedere die heel mooiste vorm van menslike uitdrukking is, omdat die liedere 'n bewussyn van die self openbaar wat meer is as die "twee-heid" wat in die konsep van dubbele bewussyn geïmpliseer word. Die paradoks wat hier bo aangedui word, bevestig dubbele bewussyn as, op een veld, 'n bron van bese ervarings van die Negers, en op 'n ander, positiewe vlak, die toestand wat hulle in staat gestel het om nuwe diskoerse van weerstand te vorm om sodoende uitdrukking te gee aan hul begeerte om van slawerny te ontsnap. Hierdie artikel gebruik Gilroy se idee van die dubbelsinnigheid van moderniteit in die vorming van identiteite van die Swart Atlantiese as heroorweging van die idee van dubbele bewussyn, en terselfdertyd versterking van die veelvuldige maniere waarop swartmense slawerny in Amerika ervaar het.

## **Introduction: The Condition of Double Consciousness**

The origin of the concept of double consciousness can be traced to the emergence of racial capitalism that was founded on the enslavement of black people in America and the new world (Williams 1944). Within this context of inequalities, the idea of double consciousness appears to have been born in an attempt to stereotype black lives. Edward Said has pointed out that slavery evolved as an economic institution based on primitive accumulation. To facilitate the process of exploiting black people, the slave owners made statements about what it meant to be black, and this was done to dominate and restructure power relations between the slave and the slave owner (1979: 3). European scholars such as Hegel believed that black people were devoid of feeling and thought that slavery could humanise black people (Hegel quoted in Gilroy 1993: 41). Where it was conceded that blacks could become human through the whip, slave owners ascribed emotions, and feelings to blacks while white people were ascribed both feelings, emotions and reasoning.

Thus, the idea that humans could be either "non" human or human was carried into the social relations to justify slavery and the maltreatment of black people. In this matrix of the power to name reality, blacks were dispossessed of their labour power and the tentacles of slavery extended to the control of the way blacks thought, and the spiritual world was re-signified with images that celebrated whiteness and condemned blackness. Commenting on the phenomenon of double consciousness in the colonial context, in the preface

to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963)), Jean Paul Sartre points out that the condition of the negro under colonial slavery is a nervous condition sometimes facilitated by some of the black people themselves (Sartre in Preface to Fanon, 1963). Sartre's conceptualisation of double consciousness suggests that black people were forced into certain relations of production that benefitted slave owners. However, there is also a sense in which Sartre implies that some black people were complicit in their enslavement, from Africa to the Americas.

The view that double consciousness describes an alienating experience is also underscored by Paul Gilroy in his book, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). What is new in this book is the way in which Gilroy reformulates and describes double consciousness beyond as a human condition beyond merely expressing schizophrenia. He suggests that slavery was itself, and ironically, a condition through which black people came to grips with their marginalisation in a land that they had given so much by way of wealth creation but for the benefit of a few slave owners. For Gilroy, double consciousness suggests a paradox in which blacks were forced to live a life of "dependency and antagonism" (ibid., p. 48) to their circumstances. In other words, double consciousness also implies modes of black consciousness of their humanity that had been shaped by capitalism. The two-ness that Du Bois saw as opposing each other through the body of black people was one response of black people amongst several other responses. Gilroy notes further that for blacks, slavery was hell whereas for white people the same institution of slavery was progress and represented modernity through which black people could be humanised by applying systematic violence on black bodies.

Since different meanings can be attached to the concept of double consciousness, one scholar, Zygmunt Bauman viewed double consciousness as not necessarily a negative experience but a counterculture to European modernity (Bauman in Gilroy 1993: 36). This means that these different forms of experiences could be used by black people as cultural sieves with which to understand and negotiate their identities in a complex world. In other words, it seems that there is no one form of consciousness which human beings can use to respond to their social circumstances. Although the condition of double consciousness could generate cultures of resistances by black people against the system of slavery, in other situations, some blacks were lured by the language of modernity that was popularised under gruelling slavery. Thus, the history of the term "double consciousness" and the ways it was lived also showed that the "intellectual and cultural achievements of black Atlantic populations exist[ed] partly inside and [were] not always against the grand narrative of enlightenment and its operational principles" (ibid., p. 48). In this way of rethinking double consciousness, Gilroy does not celebrate the brutalisation of black people. Instead, his work alerts us to the important view that, although certain negative meanings have been attached to double

consciousness as a condition of alienation, and marginality, it is also true that in these spaces, black people could inflect new and positive meanings to the term. One area where African Americans have demonstrated their ingenuity and creativity is through the cultural form of negro spirituals.

## Theorising Negro Spirituals in America

As already said above, Du Bois is credited with popularising the term double consciousness but the cultural form of the Negro spirituals through which he sought to demonstrate his concept showed him that black people's music had the potential to expand the range of meanings of the slave world the songs were used to signify. Cedric J. Robinson in his book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), appears to have over-emphasised the role of black intellectuals as the natural leaders of the ordinary blacks. However, a close analysis of some of the songs that Du Bois sampled in *The Souls of Black Folks* reveal that Du Bois belonged to the black radical traditions of thinkers who understood that the creations of ordinary people can manifest the aspirations of a community immersed into slavery. Khan agrees when she argues that in the Negro Spirituals as well as Hip Hop music in Africa, there are "simply not any two thoughts among African Americans, but several, not any two souls, but multiplied ones" (2012: 3). This means that in the actual analysis of Negro Spirituals, critics must rid themselves of the view that conceive African Americans as a single undifferentiated social continuum. Slavery was driven by white males or patriarchal system welded to an emerging ragged capitalism that exploited the labour of black men and women. At the same time, at the plantation some black men also oppressed most women. This means that we should not be surprised that there are male-created Negro Spirituals that can be embedded with female voices that challenged white racism, capitalism and black bigotry.

Du Bois understood the dynamics of Negro Spirituals as a source of moral campus with which black people made sense of their difficult social circumstances. Black slaves in America found consolation in Negro Spirituals as these songs enabled the slaves to endure as well as indirectly challenge the evil nature of slavery. W.E.B. Du Bois was humble when he argued that he "... little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase, but I know something of men, and knowing them, I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world" (Du Bois 1989: 207). Du Bois suggests that he knows the meanings and what these songs are articulating. As an educated man Du Bois also understood that the realities that Negro Songs were complex. This complexity refers to the themes that featured in the songs, and the stylistic devices used to render the themes visible. Dixon has shown in his book, *Ride out the Wilderness* (1987), that Black people created Negro Spirituals. This form of musical language appropriates its imagery

from the wilderness, “journeys, conquered spaces in the songs as places of death and spiritual resurrection imagined havens and places of refuge” (2). The critic adds that mountain tops, the spiritual world and valleys that are conjured in the Negro Spirituals are mnemonic places and spaces of death and spiritual deliverance.

On the surface level, it is possible to understand Du Bois as arguing that these songs are enunciating only the sorrow, dejection, pain and evil experiences that the slaves withstood in their everyday lives. In affirming this assertion, Du Bois further upholds that “And so by fateful chance the Negro folksong – the rhythmic cry of the slave stands today not simply as the sole American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas” (Du Bois 1989: 205). Moreover, Haskins (1993) adds, “They were often called sorrow songs, because they expressed the deep suffering the slaves endured and their yearnings for the peaceful kingdom of heaven” (Haskins 1993: 6). Haskins specifies that the Negro spirituals are not only expressing the plight of the slaves, but also emphasising the slaves’ longing for freedom. Concerning the evil experiences of the slaves such as whipping, rape, lynching, and many more, which made the slaves yearn for freedom, Frederick Douglass shared one of the poignant sights he observed when he says:

I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood clotted cowskin (Douglass 1845: 24).

The mind-twisting ruthlessness that Douglass talks about mirrors not only the experiences of black people in slavery, but also the hard-heartedness of most white people during the period of black slavery. For example, most white slave masters could whip black women until the slave-masters were overcome by fatigue. This explains the extraordinary malevolence of the system of slavery and the extent of hatred that the white people had for black people. In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, one white slave driver called Mr Plummer enjoyed humiliating black people, especially, black women (Douglass 1845: 23). However, Douglass’s master, Captain Anthony, is depicted as a man hardened by a long life of slaveholding. Captain Anthony’s cruelty is demonstrated in the narrative when he whips Aunt Hester. It is that of him that, “where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest”. Such atrocities perpetrated on blacks by white enslavers and their field managers testify to the cruelty of the system that impoverished blacks while accruing wealth for white people. Black people sang songs in order to cope with the

hardships of the labour at the white people's plantations. Most Negro Spirituals articulate experiences such as the one that Douglass is recounting.

However, in so doing, singing about their plight, the spirituals articulated something akin to "Double Consciousness" in the songs. Double consciousness suggests duality or binary in one individual. Du Bois further elaborates on the import of double consciousness when he observed and stated in America, most black people felt their "twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 1989: 5). Du Bois maintains that being both an American and a Negro appeared a problem for Americans of African origin because blacks were marginalised and only accommodated at the plantation as minions.

Du Bois also puts forward that it is this duality that makes African Americans to be perceived as inferior, subhuman, and vulnerable to slavery. Du Bois adds that "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, 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" (Du Bois 1989: 5). Du Bois calls this plight of African Americans a "peculiar sensation" to expose the abnormality of how slave masters and all of whom happened to be white people subjected Negroes to ruthlessness and racial discrimination. The Negro Spirituals express the unpleasant experiences of the Negroes, However, in my discussion of double consciousness, I will expose not only the brutality that black people endured, but also show how the Negro Spirituals were used to articulate the quest for freedom. This is the essence of Negro Spirituals as constituting the legacy of black people.

### **Experiences of Double/Multiple Temporalities in Negro Spirituals**

The Negro Spirituals analysed in this article are found and quoted from Du Bois' book, *The Souls of Black Folk*. For example, the title of a Negro Spiritual "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" is self-explanatory as it recounts the dilemma that black slaves often endure under slavery. When talking about this song in relation to the plight of black people, Du Bois says "When, struck with sudden poverty, the United States refused to fulfil its promises of land to the freedmen, a brigadier-general went down to the Sea Islands to carry the news. An old woman on the outskirts of the throng began singing this song; all the mass joined with her, swaying. And the soldier wept" (Du Bois: 208).

Du Bois asserts that each chapter of his book is prefaced with a Negro Spiritual and "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen" precedes the first chapter. This assertion makes sense for the first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* titled "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" which is a song that expresses the sufferings of black people in America. It is also in this chapter that Du Bois

coins the concept of double consciousness that he perceives as the reason black people are subjected to slavery and discrimination. Du Bois argues that since black people arrived in America, they never tasted happiness and peace “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife ...” (ibid., p. 5).

The Negro Spirituals express what Du Bois calls “the strife of black people.” In view of the latter, “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen” candidly asserts the evils through which black people are made to suffer and “[...] tell in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward unseen power and sigh for rest in the End” (ibid., p. 210). Because of the evil nature of slavery, it is not surprising that some people found themselves unable to control their tears. Concerning the latter, Johnson (1960) relates his experiences when he said that “Anyone who without shedding tears can listen to Negroes sing “Nobody knows de trouble I see, Nobody knows but Jesus” must indeed have a heart of stone” (Johnson 1960: 181).

“Swing low, sweet chariot” is another well-known Negro Spiritual that is perceived as a source of hope. It disparages death, hardships and eliminate fears. In affirming this assertion, Christa Dixon (1976) summarily argues the song “helps transform our fears of death into an expectant hope born of faith” (Dixon 1976: 19). Dixon stresses the significance of hope which is a source hope in Christian religion. This hope is the one of eternal life and heavenly bliss that only God can provide.

In relation to hope, Du Bois shares his observation of the slaves after singing the Negro Spirituals when he says: “Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters, perhaps – who knows?” (ibid., p. 212). This view is supported by Lovell, Jr. (1939) who concurs and states that “[...] the spiritual was exclusively a method of escape from a troublesome world to a land of dreams, before or after death” (Lovell, Jr. 1939: 639). However, the trans-formative nature of the Negro Spirituals that both Dixon and Lovell talk about failed to depict or emphasise the portrayal of transformed slaves into warriors that would rebel and fight slavery. Showing no fear of death and other evils of slavery often shook the pride of slave masters and subverted the economic basis of the institution of slavery.

This song, “Swing low, sweet chariot” speaks louder about the predicament of the slaves. Du Bois sees this song as “[...] the cradle-song of death which all men know, – ‘Swing low, sweet chariot’ – whose bars begin the life story of ‘Alexander Crummell’” (Du Bois 1989: 208). Du Bois brilliantly uses this song at the beginning of the story of Alexander Crummell whose spirit and dignity are torn into pieces by racial discrimination in the church. “Swing low, sweet chariot” fits well in the story as a song of support that can uplift one’s spirit in times of mourning, anger, and wretchedness. Haskins (1993) concurs and further asserts that “Mostly, the slaves used music to make their burdens lighter, to restore their spirits when they were drained of courage, and

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to enjoy the little free time they had” (Haskins 1993: 7). What Haskins is recounting is evident in the last stanza of this song:

I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down,  
Coming for to carry me home,  
But still my soul feels heavenly bound,  
Coming for to carry me home.

(Dixon 1976: 19)

The first line “I’m sometimes up, I’m sometimes down” suggests that although there is no good day in the lives of the slaves, there are vilest days. The second line, which is sung in chorus swiftly brings hope to the broken-hearted as “home” represents heaven. Dixon concurs with the latter as he further asserts that “[...] the second line of the couplet in ‘Swing Low’ helps the believer who has a ‘low’ to swing out of it and up; his soul still feels ‘heavenly bound’, oriented toward God despite the ups and downs of life’s journey” (ibid., p. 21). The third line does not only assure the victim of a place in heaven, but also disparages the challenges associated with slavery, including death. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s words in Washington (1992) appropriately relates to what the latter suggests when arguing that “History has proven over and over again that unmerited suffering is redemptive” (Washington 1992: 116). Dr King Jr. in this affirmation implies that seasons come to pass, or nothing lasts forever. What Dr King Jr. is saying is relevantly illustrated in the second stanza of this song as follows:

I looked over Jordan, what did I see  
Coming for to carry me home  
A band of angels coming after me  
Coming for to carry me home

(Etta James)

The first line of this stanza consists of two phrases, one recounting and the other asking. The phrase “I looked over Jordan” suggests the closeness of Jordan to God and heaven for there are so many biblical events that happened in Jordan. Consequently, Jordan is regarded as the land of God or more associated with God and Jesus as the Bible says, John in the Jordan River in Mark 1 verse 9 baptised Jesus. The third phrase “A band of angels coming after me” confirms the latter assertion. There is a sense that slaves perceive death as passage to heaven. In the case of the Negro slaves, the inference to Jordan and angels has more to do with freedom. Since the slaves have little hope about the abolishing of slavery, heaven has become the most powerful source of hope. It appears that the slaves are very certain about attaining heavenly freedom. The following stanza affirms this inevitability:



*JLS/TLW*

If you get there before I do  
Coming for to carry me home  
Tell all my friends I'm coming too  
Coming for to carry me home

(Etta James)

The phrase “If you get there before I do” suggests that everyone is going to heaven and that people will arrive in heaven in different times. While the above stanza suggests that no one knows when he or she is going to die, it also tells that death is inevitable or a road that cannot be avoided. Moreover and relevant to death, Du Bois in the earlier paragraphs is quoted as perceiving “Swing low, sweet chariot” as a song that begins the life story of Alexander Crummell. Death in this story rescues Crummell from victimhood (of racial discrimination). This story is a practical example of how racism frustrates and negatively impacts the lives of black people as it also reveals the fierce and ubiquitous nature of American racism. Through the story of Crummell, Du Bois depicts how double consciousness can destroy, despair, and subsequently kill the victim. In cognisance of the latter assertion, Du Bois delineates how Crummell met his death because of racial discrimination whose existence can be attributed to double consciousness (being black and American) “[...] He smiled and said, ‘The gate is rusty on the hinges.’ That night at star-rise a wind came moaning out of the west to blow the gate ajar” (Du Bois: 185).

Once again, Du Bois represents death as liberator of the damned souls such as that of Crummell. The phrase “He smiled and said” shows that Crummell knew his time had come and that he would be free from the frustrations and evils of racial discrimination that had torn his heart and spirit asunder. The latter is further affirmed in phrases “A band of angels coming after me” and “Coming for to carry me home” in “Swing low, sweet chariot” as Crummell seems to be certain that his departure is heavenly bound. The latter relates to change in the life of a victim for it signals the coming of happiness and freedom from bondage. Cornel West (2009) emphasises the significance of change and hope in the song “When Sam Cooke Sang ‘A Change Gonna Come’”. West expressed the centuries-held hope of black folks trapped in a country that considered them subhuman (West 2009: 30). About hope, Du Bois summarises it when he asserts that “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things” (Du Bois 1989: 213).

## **Engendering the Self through Negro Songs**

It is common in the performance of Negro Spirituals that the gender or cultural identity of the singer can inflect new meanings and revise the sentiments what an African patriarchal system might imagine as male. This happens when

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women singers who are described by Dixon as “women-of-words” engaged in verbal performance in narratives that help authors produce performance of narratives. The song below, “I’ve been in the storm so long” re-centres the role of women as mothers who are the repositories of experiences as black and as women. In the song, the imagery of “mother” is juxtaposed with the mention of Jesus. Both are viewed as people who have sacrificed their own lives to ensure social and community redemption. The imaginary flight to “heaven” by the persona indicates not only that salvation is with God and the righteous but that the very performance of the flight to heaven enables the singer to demonstrate the impossibility of the slavers to patrol and control all the mental and spiritual faculties of the slaves. “Crown” is an emblem of authority and it is implied that the enslaved black person commands higher moral authority than the cruel enslavers. In other words, slaves have a different cultural grid or standard by which they evaluate their morality in comparison to the values of the slave owners.

Oh let me tell my mother, how I  
Come along,  
Oh give me little time to pray,  
And a cast my crown at Jesus feet,  
Oh give me little time to pray.

I’ll go into heaven, and take my seat,  
Oh give me little time to pray,  
And a cast my crown at Jesus feet,  
Oh give me little time to pray.

In the song below, “Hard trials”, the life of a slave is compared with and found to be much less than that of a fox, bird and other animals because these at least have hiding places. There is a sad sense that slaves are monitored by their masters in the fields and in the house. These are the sources of the “hard trials” referred to in the song below.

The fourth song “Hard trials”

De fox have hole in de ground;  
An’ de bird have nest in the air,  
An’ ev’rything have a hiding place,  
But we poor sinners have none.  
Now ain’t that hard trials,  
tribulations?  
Ain’t that hard trials tribulations  
I’m bound to leave this world.  
You may go this- a way,  
You may go that- a way,  
You may go from do’ to do’  
But if you haven’t got the grace of

*JLS/TLW*

God in your heart.  
De debil will get you sho.'  
Now ain't that hard trials tribulations  
I'm bound to leave this world.

The sense of outright dejection is counterbalanced by the fact that the slave knows that she has her power to fight the system. The “trials” and “tribulations” mark the violence that slaves endure on earth but it is also out of these trials that a strong sense of moral fortitude is gained. Hence the voice of the persona in the above song re-assures the reader/audience that the condition of bondage is not permanent as the slave shall “leave this world”. This phrase is referring to the physical world where slaves are tormented on the plantations. At the same time the act of leaving an ugly world is a sign that those who are daily humiliated by the system cannot wait for the system of oppression to liberate them. While the word “bound” implies that the slave has an obligation to free herself/himself, the constant reference to prayer might also suggest that in order to defeat evil one has to adopt a different or alternative strategy. The conviction that freedom is inevitable is supported by reference to past deeds recorded in authoritative texts such as the Bible where the Lord who is an authority full of mercy was able to deliver Daniel from the most hostile circumstances where he could have been eaten by wild animals such as the lion. The song “Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel”, goes:

He deliver'd Daniel from the lion's den  
Jonah from the belly of the whale,  
And the Hebrew children from the  
fiery furnace  
and why not a every man

I set my foot on the Gospel ship  
And the ship it began to sail,  
It landed me on Canaan's shore  
And I will never come back any more

There is historical and scriptural precedence that humanity can be freed from potential danger. “Jonah” was freed from the belly of the “whale” while the “Hebrew children” were freed from the “fiery furnace”. The imagery conjured by a “fiery furnace” is one of unending fire that burns like hell. The journey motifs to freedom are indicated in the reference to “Gospel ship” that begins to “sail” in order to land “on Canaan's shore”. When people or slaves, who have suffered from atrocities, map out how they will free themselves from perdition, it is appropriate to think of the Negro Spirituals as having the power to re-order the social/spiritual environments of the oppressed. This process of engendering human experience is underscored by the desire to fight in different ways and to leave degrading lifestyles imposed on slaves. When the voice of the persona in the song says that he/she will “never come back again

any more”, what is emphasised is movement to other spaces beyond the control of the evil hand of slavery. What the songs have affirmed is not resignation in the face of trials and tribulations. These assertions of a better life are welcomed but there is always a lingering possibility that, if the oppressed people do not cut the ropes that tie them to undignified lives, the oppressed might be sucked back into the violent vortex of the institution of slavery. In short, while the songs appear to give a sense of the intractable challenges posed by enslavers, the same songs also express a sense of optimism. Thus, double consciousness must mean the awareness of alternative spaces where freedom can be performed. As Dixon puts it, Negro songs embody the capacity to “ultimately defeat the inertia of place and identity” (1987: 14). Thus, in Negro songs as in some discourses of popular songs that emphasise changeability of human conditions (Vambe & Rwafa 2009), moral geographies are imagined and “seized upon opportunities to invest that state of being with enough mutability so that changes in the vernacular landscape – hillsides, valleys, swamp land, level ground – become references for the slaves’ feelings and desire for freedom” (Dixon: 19).

## Conclusion

This article staked the claim that there is need to rethink the concept of double consciousness so that it is not reduced to confusion, alienation and resignation from imagining alternative livelihoods. Some critics such as Gilroy have expanded the meaning potential of the double consciousness in the context of Negro Spirituals as tools with which the oppressed can reshape new aspirations in life. Arguments have been presented and authenticated with evidence that indeed, as this article confirms, there is double consciousness in Negro spirituals. This article has demonstrated that the Negro spirituals are expressing the experiences of black people in America during and after slavery. These experiences of African Americans include lash, rape, racism, murdering, and lynching of slaves and Negroes in the America society. Du Bois is also quoted as arguing that the evil experiences that the African-Americans had to endure happened because of the racial ideologies used to justify exploitation of black people in America. The intensity of the violence meted on black men and women created an atmosphere in which, although black people in America are now American citizens, in real life the black people feel unwanted and marginalised in nearly all spheres of life. In the process, one detected that the concept of double consciousness and experiences of black people during and after slavery are interrelated in the sense that both are fractured by the rude experiences that ascribe black people a lower position in life. This is evident in the Negro Spirituals expressing painful experiences lived by the Negroes under slavery. On one hand, Du Bois explains and perceives double consciousness as the source of evil treatment to which black people are subjected.

On another hand, double consciousness enables black people to possess a wider cultural sieve with which to make sense of a violent world. In other words, double consciousness is the condition that enabled blacks to use their songs to reflect of their past, present and future in America. Thus, the hidden messages of hope in the Negro Spirituals are coded and engendered through a concept whose potency some critics have tended to underestimate. In short, it has been argued in this article that in some way it is the multiplicity of alternatives that enabled the black slaves to survive the institution of slavery. Therefore, although the Negro spirituals are a commentary on the evil of slavery, black slaves could twist the meanings of some songs in ways that allowed the songs to manifest more than one meaning. This means that for black slaves, and indeed, for most people living under oppressive conditions, the identities embedded in double consciousness can be oppressive as well as liberating. In short, double consciousness appears to be the condition of possibility that enable humanity to command multiple identities that can be deployed as and when it is necessary. An act of rethinking the range of meanings that can exfoliate from the concept of double consciousness brings us to a closer understanding of the essence, elasticity of Negro Spirituals as popular culture through which “subtle messages about what is ‘appropriate’ and ‘inappropriate’, ‘desirable’ and ‘undesirable’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ (Sellnow 2010: 2) are sifted and engendered in the multiple responses by the oppressed against those who seek to diminish the dignity of African American people in America, their home”.

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