

Triple Consciousness in the Works of Three African American Women

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Abstract

This article examines the concept of triple consciousness in the works of three major African American women writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks. Triple consciousness, an extension of W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness, refers to the overlapping of racial, gendered, and class identities that shape the experiences of Black women. Through an analysis of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Morrison's *Beloved*, and hooks' *Ain't I a Woman?*, we explore how these authors depict the struggles, resistance, and triumphs of Black women in the face of systemic oppression. This article highlights how these works embody Black agency and reaffirm the centrality of women's voices in discourses on race, gender, and class.

Keywords: triple consciousness, double consciousness

Résumé:

Cet article examine le concept de triple conscience dans les œuvres de trois écrivaines afro-américaines majeures : Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison et bell hooks. La triple conscience, une extension du concept de double conscience de W.E.B. Du Bois, désigne la superposition des identités raciale, genrée et de classe qui façonnent l'expérience des femmes noires. À travers une analyse de *Their Eyes Were Watching God* de Hurston, *Beloved* de Morrison et *Ain't I a Woman?* de hooks, nous explorons comment ces auteures décrivent les luttes, les résistances et les triomphes des femmes noires face à l'oppression systémique. Cet article met en lumière la manière dont ces œuvres incarnent l'agence noire et réaffirment la centralité des voix féminines dans les discours sur la race, le genre et la classe.

Mots clés: triple conscience, double conscience

Introduction

Triple consciousness, a concept emerging from the intersection of race, gender, and class, provides a powerful analytical framework for understanding the experiences of African American women. While W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the notion of double consciousness to describe the tension between Black and American identity, Black women must also navigate gendered and class-based oppressions. This article examines how three African American women writers—Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks—have explored this triple consciousness in their works. Through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Beloved*, and *Ain't I a Woman?*, we analyze how these authors portray the struggles, resistance, and triumphs of Black women while reaffirming their agency and humanity.

1. Historical Context

1.1 History of African American Triple Consciousness

The concept of triple consciousness expands on the idea of double consciousness introduced by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). While double consciousness describes the tension between Black and American identity, triple consciousness adds a third dimension: gender or class identity, depending on intersectional contexts. This concept is particularly useful for analyzing the experiences of Black women and individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, who must navigate multiple oppressions.

Origins: W.E.B. Du Bois' Double Consciousness

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was a sociologist, historian, civil rights activist, and one of the most important African American intellectuals of the 20th century. He developed the concept of double consciousness in a context where African Americans, though emancipated from slavery after the Civil War (1865), still faced systemic discrimination, racial violence (such as lynchings), and segregation (Jim Crow laws).

Du Bois was influenced by several intellectual currents:

- **American Pragmatism:** Philosophers like William James, with whom Du Bois studied at Harvard, influenced his thinking on subjectivity and consciousness.
- **German Sociology:** During his studies at the University of Berlin, Du Bois was exposed to the ideas of thinkers like Max Weber, who shaped his understanding of social structures and power relations.
- **Personal Experience:** As a Black man in a deeply racist society, Du Bois lived and observed the tensions between Black and American identity.

Definition of Double Consciousness

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois defines double consciousness as follows: "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. One ever feels his two-ness, 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."

In other words, double consciousness describes the tension experienced by African Americans, who must navigate between two seemingly contradictory identities:

- (i) A Black identity: african cultural heritage, experiences of slavery, and discrimination.
- (ii) An American identity: belonging to a nation that advocates freedom and equality but denies these values to Black people.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes double consciousness as the sensation of "looking at one's self through the eyes of another" in a racist society. This duality creates a tension between Black and American identity, forcing African Americans to perceive themselves as both Black and American, often in conflict. This duality creates a sense of

fragmentation and inner conflict but also a unique ability to see the world through multiple perspectives.

Implications of Double Consciousness

Double consciousness has several implications for African Americans and American society as a whole:

- **Inner Conflict and Alienation:** African Americans are often forced to perceive themselves through the gaze of others, leading to alienation and a loss of self. This tension can also limit their ability to thrive in a society that marginalizes them.
- **Resilience and Creativity:** Despite these challenges, double consciousness can also be a source of strength. It allows African Americans to develop a critical perspective on society and create unique forms of cultural expression (literature, music, art). Du Bois saw in this duality the potential for social transformation, where African Americans could contribute to a more inclusive and equitable America.
- **Critique of Structural Racism:** Double consciousness highlights the contradictions of American democracy, which advocates equality while maintaining racist structures. Du Bois used this concept to critique racial inequalities and call for social reform.

Influence and Legacy

The concept of double consciousness has had a profound impact on African American studies, sociology, and critical race theories. It has inspired generations of thinkers and artists, including:

- **Frantz Fanon:** In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon explores the psychological effects of colonialism and racialization, drawing on Du Bois' ideas.
- **Toni Morrison:** In her novels, Morrison explores themes of identity and fragmentation, inspired by double consciousness.
- **Intersectionality Theory:** Kimberlé Crenshaw and other Black feminists have expanded the concept of double consciousness to include dimensions of gender and class, giving rise to the notion of triple consciousness.

1.2 Evolution Toward Triple Consciousness

Triple consciousness emerges from Black feminist critiques and intersectional theories, which emphasize that the experiences of African Americans cannot be understood solely through the lens of race. Gender, class, and other factors play a crucial role in shaping identity.

a. Contributions of Black Feminists

- **bell hooks:** In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks explores how Black women must navigate racism, sexism, and class inequalities, creating a triple consciousness.

- Patricia Hill Collins: In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins introduces the concept of the "matrix of domination" to explain how multiple oppressions interact and shape the experiences of Black women.

b. Intersectionality

- **Kimberlé Crenshaw:** In her seminal article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991), Crenshaw introduces the term "intersectionality" to describe how oppressions of race, gender, and class intersect and create unique experiences.

3. Theoretical Framework

The concept of triple consciousness draws on several key theories. First, W.E.B. Du Bois' double consciousness, introduced in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), describes the tension between Black and American identity. Second, Black feminist theories, developed by thinkers like Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), highlight the intersections of race, gender, and class. Finally, intersectional approaches, popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex* (1989), provide a framework for understanding how multiple oppressions intersect and reinforce one another.

These theories allow us to analyze how Hurston, Morrison, and hooks describe the experiences of Black women through the lens of triple consciousness. Their works illustrate how Black women negotiate their identity in oppressive contexts while asserting their agency and resistance.

Triple consciousness emerges from Black feminist critiques, which argue that double consciousness alone cannot explain the experiences of Black women and individuals facing multiple oppressions. Theorists like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins added a third dimension, often related to gender or class, to reflect intersectional realities.

- bell hooks: In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), hooks explores how Black women must navigate racism, sexism, and class inequalities, creating a triple consciousness. She emphasizes that Black women are often excluded from dominant feminist discourses (centered on white women) and civil rights movements (centered on Black men).
- Patricia Hill Collins: In *Black Feminist Thought* (1990), Collins introduces the concept of the "matrix of domination" to explain how oppressions of race, gender, and class interact and shape the experiences of Black women. She highlights the importance of understanding these intersections to develop a critical and transformative consciousness.

3. Manifestations of Triple Consciousness in Literature and Culture

Triple consciousness is a recurring theme in African American literature and culture, where authors explore the complexities of Black identity through intersectional perspectives.

- Beyoncé: In her album *Lemonade* (2016), Beyoncé explores themes of Black identity, feminism, and resilience, showcasing a triple consciousness that integrates race, gender, and class.
- Kendrick Lamar: In his album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015), Lamar addresses issues of race, poverty, and systemic violence, highlighting the intersections between these oppressions.

To understand the works of Hurston, Morrison, and hooks, it is essential to situate their writings within the historical context of African American struggles for equality and justice. Zora Neale Hurston wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of Black cultural and artistic revival in the 1920s and 1930s. Toni Morrison emerged in the 1970s, a time marked by civil rights and feminist movements. Finally, bell hooks wrote in the 1980s and 1990s, a period when intersectional theories began to gain prominence.

These historical contexts deeply influence the themes addressed by these authors. Hurston explores oral traditions and Black identities in the rural South, Morrison delves into the traumas of slavery and collective memory, while hooks analyzes the intersections of race, gender, and class in contemporary society. These works reflect the changing realities of Black women while rooting themselves in a shared history of resistance and resilience.

4. Intersectionality and Triple Consciousness

The concept of triple consciousness is closely linked to intersectionality theory, developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her seminal article *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color* (1991). Crenshaw shows that oppressions do not simply add up but interact to create unique experiences. For example, a poor Black woman does not experience racism and sexism separately but a specific form of oppression resulting from the intersection of these identities.

5. Triple Consciousness in the Work of African American Women

Zora Neale Hurston: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston explores the quest for identity and autonomy of Janie Crawford, a Black woman in the rural South. Janie must navigate the gendered expectations of her community, the racial oppressions of white society, and the limitations of class. Through her journey, Janie embodies triple consciousness, seeking to define herself outside imposed frameworks. Hurston uses language and oral traditions to reaffirm Black agency and the centrality of women's voices.

Toni Morrison: *Beloved*

In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison explores the traumas of slavery and their repercussions on Black women. Sethe, the protagonist, must confront the memories of slavery, gendered violence, and the challenges of motherhood in an oppressive context. Through the character of Beloved, Morrison examines how Black women must negotiate their past and present to reclaim their humanity. The work illustrates triple consciousness by showing how race, gender, and class intersect in the experiences of Black women.

bell hooks: *Ain't I a Woman?*

In *Ain't I a Woman?* (1981), hooks analyzes the intersections of race, gender, and class in American society. Drawing on historical and contemporary examples, hooks shows how Black women have been marginalized by both white feminist movements and civil rights movements. She advocates for an intersectional approach that recognizes the triple consciousness of Black women and their capacity to resist and transform their reality.

Conclusion

The works of Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and bell hooks offer profound insights into the triple consciousness of African American women. Through their narratives, these authors depict the struggles and resistance of Black women in the face of racial, gendered, and class-based oppressions. They reaffirm Black agency by showing how Black women negotiate their identity and humanity in oppressive contexts. These works are not only historical testimonies; they are calls to action to recognize and celebrate the complexity of Black women's experiences. By studying these texts, we participate in the rehabilitation of a history too often marginalized and in the celebration of an indomitable humanity.

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