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Analyzing Zora Neales: How It feels to Be Colored Me

Written by Zora Neale Hurston a critically acclaimed author and anthropologist during the Harlem Renaissance; *How it Feels to be Colored Me* is a short autobiographical story giving the reader a front row view of the thought process of a colored woman transitioning into a 'white world' during the 1900's Through her story, Zora depicts her race and speaks on the differences she discovered amongst her white counterparts. Many of her views have a strong connection to the philosophy of W.E.B DuBois' and his literary works, specifically *Our Spiritual Strivings*. In reading both Zora, DuBois and diving into further research regarding race and double-consciousness, I was able to understand the connection between the thought process of these writers and their personal 'understanding' of how race and identity is defined through what Dubois called double-consciousness. In comparing his philosophy to Zoras' personal story, I was able to conclude, that although Zora was exceptionally aware of her race, she did not allow it to 'define' or 'confine' her, instead (as we'll see) Zora acknowledged her race and constructed an identity she knew was already hers.

In order to understand and analyze in depth the philosophy of Dubois and how his teachings related to Zora in a personal level, I find it necessary to first understand the two most important terms I would be discussing in this essay: double-consciousness and the 'veil' in which American society "forced [Afro-Americans] to live behind what he (DuBois) called a veil" (Dubois, 1903). Double consciousness refers the challenge "persons of African

descents born in America” –as Dubois puts it- attempt to reconcile an African heritage in a European upbringing and society. In simpler terms, African Americans fight to maintain their identity because they are distinctively “looking at [themselves] first through the eyes of white society” (DuBois, 1903). A ‘veil’ then is close to what it sounds like, it is the cloth hiding the identity of African Americans through their pigmentation and their inability to see themselves as complete Americans, as well as what white America has written down for them.

Understanding the depth of these two terms paves a smoother arena to now analyze the work of Zora and comprehend as well as compare her story with the thoughts of Dubois and similar modern day topics. In order to take my research to another level of thought, I chose an article on racism written by Gregory Freeman in the 1990s and a recent article on our very own President Barack Obama’s challenge with W.E.B Dubois essay on double-consciousness. By reading these articles, my perspective shifted, taking haven in the minds of African Americans who lived in different generations, however underwent similar thoughts in their personal fight with being ‘American’ and their identity. It is in Zoras short story that we can see the extension of consciousness to an uprooting of a self-created identity that she was able to bring into existence.

Zora ‘s story gives us a quick view of her life in Alabama. She grew up in “the little Negro town of Eatonville” (Hurstons, 1928) a town where distinction of color was only seen when white tourist or travelers passing to or coming from Orlando. It was in Zoras youth that she didn’t see too much of a difference in white people living in the comfort of a community with peers who were similar to her. She states in her story that although she would entertain some white people as they made their way through the city and many

times they would pay her, she felt she belonged to ‘the colored people.’ “ I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody’s Zora” (Hurstun, 1928). This form of possession becomes significant in the idea of both W.E.B’s thoughts on double consciousness, where he believes African Americans are ‘invisible’ and the veil they hide behind is a lack of clarity to see oneself as a true American. The mere thought of being possessed by ‘colored people’ is a separation which Zora immediately places herself, highlighting already the clear distinction that ‘black’ belongs with ‘black’ and ‘white’ belongs with ‘white’.

Although Zora may not realize it, the connection she made with the whites she would encounter as a child was already constructing an invisible wall between ‘their’ race and her race. At her adolescence she recalls that “white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there”(Hurstun, 1928). She didn’t view them as separate colors until she began putting herself in the possession of her community. Then at the age of thirteen, Zora was sent to school in Jacksonville and in what seemed like no time “was now a little colored girl” (Hurstun, 1928). It is through this point of her story that the philosophy of Dubois begins to take shape. His thoughts on self-identity spring into Zora, when she becomes self-conscious of the color of her skin. This being seen when the color of her skin sticks out such as “when [she] is thrown against a sharp white background” (Hurstun. 1928).

However, in Zora’s *How it Feels to Be Colored Me*, there is no connection to the “racial confinement” that DuBois eagerly debates. Zora’s double-consciousness is seen most clearly when her culture and that of a white mans in a jazz club do not connect. She writes vividly about the wild dancing that takes place in her when she is in a jazz club listening to music

that makes her blood boil and in her mind she is face painted ready to hunt and kill. However, the white man next to her is incapable of feeling the same emotions that stir in her. This scene made me question, perhaps W.E.B's thought of "a society that made [them] invisible" (Dubois, 1903) is at play. But then again, when one thinks about it, there is a cultural distance between these two people sitting next to each other in a jazz club. One is born with a cultural identity that may be in tuned with jazz because of the roots that attach the two, while the other of a paler complexion may feel the same stir when he listens to rock or classical music for example. At that moment Zora underwent a double-consciousness because she didn't connect with the preferences of her counterpart, but her thoughts of her own identity prove otherwise.

"I have no separate feeling about being an American citizen and colored. It merely astonishes me. How can anyone deny themselves the pleasure of my company" (Hurtson, 1928). a line in which a thousand sparks fly with its power. Unlike the philosophy of W.E.B Dubois who states "society made them invisible and forced them to live behind a veil" (Dubois, 1903) Zora explores a mindset that begins to challenge the double consciousness philosophy. Although in respect to DuBois that lived in an era where slavery was barely abolished, Zora shows the mentality of someone braving about from the "looking at oneself through the eyes of society" (Dubois,1903) and travels into a more self-assertive consciousness.

Zora travels through distinction in race, and the moments that many of her peers continuously remind her of her ancestral slavery, however she holds a philosophy that in an interesting enough way fights against DuBois philosophy. She states "No I do not weep at the world—I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife" (Hurstson, 1928). This line makes her

out to be a strong individual that believes the past is in the past and the future should be one that she has control over, even though she is colored.

Gregory Freeman, writes about the expert William Jones, a professor of Afro-American studies, a man who views racism as a virus and believes “it will continue to thrive until we diagnose accurately what it is” (Freeman, 1991). His statement connects to Zora’s change in perspective as when she was a child and finding out she was ‘colored.’ Racism, although in many states is gone, is seen by William Jones as now neo-racism, he says “ we no longer exclude people directly” meaning that although Jim Crow Laws, the KKK and other ‘classical’ racism isn’t as popular, the Afro American population have no control over institutions, and therefor have no say or ownership of anything in America.

Even President Obama has been facing important issues regarding to race and double-consciousness. Jonathan Alter has studied the effect of double consciousness that has affected the decisions of the president himself. Although being the first African-American president in America. Alter examines the many crises Obama met after taking office that left him minimal time to focus on poverty and race. In a society where race is still an important issue at hand, there have been obstacles relating to the philosophy of W.E.B that shines a light on the thought process of not only white America, but also the double-Afro-America and their own beliefs of colored people. Alter states “ other black commentators infuriated him- an example Cornel West- who said he wasn’t black enough” (Alter, 2013). This quote raises many thoughts, opinions and comparisons to Zora’s story.

Firstly, W.E.B states “the way blacks view themselves through the eyes of society” (W.E.B, date) in his *Our Spiritual Strivings*. I find this quote interesting in both the way Zora uses her confident mentality to basically deviate from the “Negroehood who hold that

nature somehow was given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feeling are all hurt about it.”(Hurstons,1928) and the thought process (or better put, nature) that a ‘black’ man is putting upon his own people. It makes me think about the mindset in which each of these individuals are holding against themselves. Leading me to question whether the ‘veil’ is now being held against the face of black America by themselves, or by the America that ‘forced’ them to live behind it so long ago.

It is through Zora’s state of mind that I draw a quite controversial conclusion that tugs at the both sides of the spectrum. Although W.E.B Dubois makes many points about the struggles of the African American descent, and my further references target the racism in modern day time, Zora’s character seems to be only affected at a slight degree by her double-consciousness and this ‘veil’. She does not allow her character and her person to be perturbed by the “[reminder that] I am the granddaughter of slaves” (Hurstons, 1928). In fact, it seems that her consciousness has shifted her perspective into a stronger individual that has realized “the world is to the strong regardless of a little pigmentation more or less” (Hurstons, 1928). So although her double-consciousness makes her aware of her color in the midst of those whiter than her, she doesn’t “wrestle with [her] own individual humanity” (DuBois, 1903) as Dubois states it, rather she accepts her pigmentation and fights to be the person she hopes to be.

The topic on double-consciousness and DuBois philosophy of the veil that has held back the identity of Afro America is one that brings up many debates and discussions. Personally, I believe that for a double consciousness to be retracted one must divide this ‘double’, for one to stop hiding behind the veil, the veil must be destroyed. There are obstacles that DuBois states so clearly, that the “black person had yet to be seen as a person

by white society” or that “by the fact of one being black, one is qualified as a problem” (DuBois, 1903). These statements that have been repeated over and over through the decades have seemed to become a mantra driven into the mentality of the African American population. As we view reality, that these statements- whether they are or are not- true to all must not be seen in a different light. One where Zora Neale Hurston becomes the prime example of a woman, living through the 1900’s as a black woman was able to overcome the double-consciousness, the veil, and the racism.

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