

Double Consciousness: Subjectivity and Nationhood in the Antebellum Slave Narrative

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Abstract: There are two sets of systems in terms of slavery in antebellum America, namely, the northern free states and the southern slave states. The plantation systems in the south and the industrial systems of the north might be said to conflict with each other. Slave narratives written by fugitives witness the different systems of miserable life in slave states and their comparatively free life in the north. In this paper, through reading of slave narratives before the Civil War, I want to discuss how the two economic and political systems in the slave states and free states coexist and conflict with each other, and, importantly, how slaves adopted strategies to convert the loopholes of the slavery to win their freedom. By taking the “double consciousness” as a framework and exploring its metaphorical meanings, I analyze a number of psychological, performance and text moments where the authors of slave narratives explore the “two-ness” created by the systems of slavery.

1. Double Consciousness and Slave Narratives in the Antebellum U.S.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W. E. B. Du Bois mentions the double consciousness and “two-ness” of the blacks in the United States:

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 attempt 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. [1]

Du Bois’s remarks on the two selves of blacks offers an insightful perspective to analyze the ramifications of psychological personality that slavery and racism exert upon the African American people. By adopting a Hegelian binary opposition perspective, the “two warring ideals in one dark body” admits the particular dilemma that blacks face. As is written by David W. Blight in his introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois “does search for the spirit of the Age of Emancipation, for the searing ironies in America’s promise, and for the troubled uncertainties of the post-freedom generations of black people” [2]. The concept of “double consciousness” provides an important framework for numerous interpretations regarding the African Americans’ role for the development of American culture. The two-ness of black people, according to Du Bois, however, is a more general cultural unconsciousness of the whole black people in the 19th and 20th America, with its focus more on the period of Jim Crow. My focus here is more specific to the antebellum slave narrative, where the two systems juxtapose with each other and the slaves are themselves a direct victim of the slavery. Slaves’ dividing subjectivities, to some extent, are closely related with two systems, the liberal system and the slavery one. Under the two conflicting systems, African Americana slaves, and even slaveholders, are divided into two subjectivities. People have to act differently and even change themselves to adapt to the differences of systems. To survive, slaves have to use a number of different and even conflicting strategies.

Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" as two-ness could be explored further if we think about the metaphors of two systems in one country. This paper wants to explore a number of "two systems" across the antebellum slave narratives. These systems include geographical ones in north and south, economic ones, psychological ones, political ones, and the book of narratives themselves are also kind of systems, title page, white envelope, black texts; text itself about slavery life (big part) against freedom or liberty.

Using the metaphor of "a house divided" and "double consciousness", I am going to explore any number of systems or networks that could be illustrated in the slave narratives, political free and non-free, but also, the slave narrative itself is a particular kind of system of rhetoric, para-text against text. These systems coexist in the slave narratives, seemingly contradicting with each other, contrast the living conditions of the slaves, and more importantly, divide the personalities and subjectivities of the slaves and even slaveholders and prevent them from being a sound person. Meanwhile, they illustrate various but limited fighting strategies of slaves in their seeking for liberty under slavery. The fugitive slaves try to find the loopholes of the two systems in one country and convert them into advantages. It is worthy to notice that, as a framework, "double consciousness" or "two warring selves" in antebellum slave narratives, is always associated with negative outcomes, especially the psychological division of the slaves and slaveholders. In this sense, the dividing subjectivities and the warring selves in this framework are a disease that needs to be reflected, remembered and treated in future generation.

2. "Two Systems in One" in the Antebellum Slave Narratives

In his "House divided" speech (1858), Abraham Lincoln says, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." His insightful perception into the situation of antebellum America reveals the divided "two-ness" in the antebellum U.S. Three years afterwards, Civil War erupts. A mixture of two set of systems is a looming reality that troubles the United States from the independence of this new country. But the tendency of spread of the slavery into new borders, Lincoln fears, could jeopardize the current situation and put the new country into a divided one. In antebellum slave narratives, one typical version of "house divided" to show this mixture of two systems is in a scene described by Solomon Northup in his *Twelve Years a Slave*, where Northup is kidnapped in a slave pen in Washington,

The building to which the yard was attached, was two stories high, fronting on one of the public streets of Washington. Its outside presented only the appearance of a quiet private residence. A stranger looking at it, would never have dreamed of its execrable uses. Strange as it may seem, within plain sight of this same house, looking down from its commanding height upon it, was the Capitol. The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains, almost commingled. A slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol![3]

The stark contrasts of the slave pen and the Capitol, the voiced patriots and the rattling of slave chains, both in images and sounds, compose an ironic illustration of the existence of the "one country, two systems". The founding fathers of the United States, at the very beginning, allows the co-existence of two systems. The astonishingly true experience of Northup makes the contrasts of sound and image more convincing than fiction.

The series of two systems exert a great influence upon the persons living in them. A free industrial system helps to keep the people relatively healthy-minded, while slavery enable slaveholders to ignore human rights and to harm others without being punished. It provides justifiable excuses for them to be evil. Against this general background, a number of systems of twoness springs up in the slave narratives in terms of their metaphor meanings. As is quoted by William and Ellen Craft from a poem "Epigram to the United States of North America" written by Thomas Campbell,

"I believe such men [judges of the Supreme Court] would, if they had the power, and were it to their temporal interest, sell their country's independence, and barter away every man's birthright for a mess

of pottage. Well may Thomas Campbell say—

United States, your banner wears,
Two emblems, —one of fame;
Alas, the other that it bears
Reminds us of your shame!
The white man's liberty in types
Stands blazoned by your stars;
But what's the meaning of your stripe?
They mean your Negro-scars. [4]

In Campbell's poem, the liberty of the white and the bondage of the slaves constitute a sharp contrast. The image of the stars is likened as the typed letters in the Declaration of Independence, while the stripes is both similar to the shape of the whips and the scars slashed by them. The metaphor of the star stripe banner vividly illustrates the paradox between the free system and the slave system in the United States.

In the slave narratives, among the numerous hardship and sufferings the slaves experienced, dividing subjectivities especially jeopardize their existence as human beings. In a mixture of freedom and liberty social context, they have to sacrifice their integrity in order to adapt to the evil slavery system. Not only the slaves are divided in minds to adapt to the different systems, but also the slave owners, who have been taught the basic human rights and the Bible, are transformed into evil-minded persecuting devils. Therefore, both the slaves or the slave holders are experiencing a pathological or psychological division of selves. Two subjectivities both show their appearances within one body. The two-ness juxtaposes with each other, making up a person's subjectivity "half slave and half free", to borrow a term from Abraham Lincoln's "House Divided" speech in which he uses to call a dividing country. In this part, I will mainly take the examples of Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* to illustrate the dividing subjectivities of the slaves and slave holders alike.

In this article, the "double consciousness" framework is characterized by a series of forms, including but not limited to the binary oppositions of divided selves in one person (or "two-ness" in one, to borrow from Du Bois), "one body, two subjectivities", "one dance, two expressions", "one unit, two actors" in marriage and passing of slaves, etc.

3. Performance of Slaves in Antebellum Slave Narratives

Fugitive slaves transfer their unique sufferings within the contradicts between the two systems into artful ways of expression, performance and rhetoric. These thoughts and acts enlighten their minds and facilitate their running away. In other words, the juxtaposition of the sets of two systems and the different subjectivities within the two systems put the slaves and slaveholders into moral dilemmas and endanger their personalities. Many of the performances or acts of the slaves are themselves miniature version of "double consciousness". They display the two-ness of the slavery system and some slaves even try to find an outlet through their performances. In this part I will explore the different metaphorical patterns of "double consciousness in one".

3.1. One Dance, Two Expressions

In the latter part of the *Twelve Years a Slave*, where the slaves of Epps have to dance after a whole day's labor in the plantation, these "dumb beasts" are forced to have fun to make the masters laugh, just because of "mistress being passionately fond of music":

All of us would be assembled in the large room of the great house, whenever Epps came home in one of his dancing moods. No matter how worn out and tired we were, there must be a general dance. When properly stationed on the floor, I would strike up a tune.

“Dance, you d—d niggers, dance,” Epps would shout.

Usually his whip was in his hand, ready to fall about the ears of the presumptuous thrall, who dared to rest a moment, or even stop to catch his breath... With a slash, and crack, and flourish of the whip, he would shout again, ‘Dance, niggers, dance,’ and away they would go once more, pell-mell, while I, spurred by an occasional sharp touch of the lash, sat in a corner, extracting from my violin marvelous quick-stepping tune.[5]

The forced dance is a mingled fusion of joy and sadness, of the sounds of whips and violin, of comedy and tragedy. On one side is the force labor, the pain and punishment; on the other, is the entertainment, the joy and pleasure. It also links two different physical spaces: plantation and the great house of the slaveholder. This weird combination shows the cruelty of the slavery system in the disguise of the merry scene. Behind the dance scene, there are two forms of slave work. One is the tangible work that could be measured by such products as cotton, sugar, among other; the other intangible labor that are merely for the pleasure of the slaveholders and thus could not be regarded as goods. The former could be exchanged for profits, while the latter are hardly exchangeable. The slavery itself not only exploit the physical products of slaves, but also deprive them of the unexchangeable spiritual pleasure.

Many of the northern writers in their pro-slavery works depict happy scenes of the slaves when in their investigation of the southern slavery. But they hardly know that the happy facial expressions of the slaves are mostly forced by the slave holders like Epps. The only difference is that this dance scene is not intended to show to the outsiders, but merely for the fun of the master and mistress. For the slaves, the performance of the dance after a day’s labor becomes an enforced pleasure against the free will of them. William Wells Brown also tells a similar dance scene when he serves as a slave driver to help his master to sell the slaves. In the sales market,

Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. My business was to see that they were placed in those situations before the arrival of the purchasers, and I have often set them to dancing when their cheeks wet with tears. [6]

Here the public display of the slave’s dancing aims to raise their value as properties and thus transforms the spiritual pleasure into certain amount of cash value. The physical and spiritual value of them are combined in slavery. But both of the scenes mentioned serve the needs of slaveholders and show a mingle of pleasure and misery, of laughter and tears. They use a seemingly opposite composition to show the inhumanity and cruelty of slavery. The above dance scenes of slaves forced by their masters reflect another miniature version of the “double consciousness”, which is “one dance, two expressions”. The latter is based on the divided systems of within one country, where even the inner secret feelings of the slaves are maneuvered in accordance with the slave holders in the name of the pleasure. Dance should be a free form of spontaneous happiness, but now it becomes a tool to evaluate their property value and a dumb beast for their owners to seek pleasure. To some extent, we can say that in the slavery-freedom binary opposition, the pleasure of the slaves is passed, stripped, and transformed into the pleasure of their masters, and this transformation of the natural feelings of pleasure, the pleasure harvesting act, is itself a schizophrenia symptom for of the dividing states of “double consciousness”.

3.2. Passing As “One Unit, Two Actors”

Besides Northup’s experiences, the couple William and Ellen Craft perform a more complex transferring of sexes, races and social status. The transferring, or passing, as an extension of “one country, two systems”, are actually “one unit, two actors”. In other words, it is a miniature projection of the “one country, two systems” unto the individual level, or the black couples. The inter-dependence of the couple serves as a vivid illustration and translation of the metaphor meaning of “one country, two systems”. The two systems could not go without the existence of one country, and besides, from the

very beginning of the independence of the United States, the slavery is conserved. The north and south trade with each other and share the same constitution. It is a custom to say that, the United States, before the civil war, “are”, rather than “is”, democracy [2]. The plural form of the democracy shows that the relationship between the north and the south are independent in terms of their separate systems, while they also constitute a whole unit.

To complete such a performance of running away, the two actors have to depend upon each other, for the lack of any other will result to a failure. Ellen’s role as “a most respectable looking gentleman” (700), needs the existence of the black “servant”, William Craft. William also needs the accompany of a “white” gentleman so that he as a black slave could not be captured, by the slave hunters, and returned to his master:

Knowing that slaveholders have the privilege of taking their slaves to any part of the country they think proper, it occurred to me that, as my wife was nearly white, I might get her to disguise herself as an invalid gentleman, and assume to be my master, while I could attend as his slave, and in that manner we might effect our escape. [7]

This “disguise” proves to be successful in terms of their running away from slave state Georgia. From “we might effect our escape”, it can be seen that the two are bound together and they are determined to escape. This bold and creative form of masquerading ritual is the first and foremost step for their freedom. If it is safe to say that the combination of the two systems, namely the preservation of the free industrial system and the slavery, as a whole entity, helps the United States to earn independence from the British control, then the two actors in one unit also enable the couple to run away from the slavery exploitation.

The couple as a unit proves the mutual trust, love, morality in the black marriage under the presence of “slavocracy” [8], to borrow a term from Dickson D. Bruce. Such heroic act goes beyond the certain period and illustrates the humanity of the slaves and their unyielding spirit for freedom. Passing as a performance is not only a living example of the true love between the couple, but also is a rehearsal from the “two-ness” into one when the nationhood is in great danger of split. If we regard the existence of the North and the South as a couple, then the Civil War could also be seen as a performance for the two to be re-united into one. A divided house could not stand itself, and a divided family unit could not last. Only through the cooperated efforts could the two-ness into one.

4. Conclusion

Under the double consciousness framework, two systems constitute a binary opposition. The double subjectivities and other metaphorical meanings of “double consciousness”, in a word, constitute a striking characteristic of the antebellum slave narratives. Subjectivity and nationhood in the slave narratives thus are closely linked in that special period of the American history. The “double consciousness” framework in the antebellum slave narratives, shows the dilemma of a rising new nation and of a wakening black community. It needs a long period to end this coexistence of the two systems in subjectivity and nationhood. Slave narratives provide valuable historical and literary sources for the future generation to reflect the lessons.

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