

Double Consciousness, Mirrors, and the Children Within Them: A Conceptual Reading of W. E. B. Du Bois's "As the Crow Flies"

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Abstract

This research essay argues that W. E. B. Du Bois's Crow from his magazine column "As the Crow Flies" is a figurative device for double consciousness and examines how aspects of double consciousness are present in the frequent motifs of dialectic doubleness in the column. Drawing from scholar Rudine Sims Bishop, this essay explores how the Crow functions as a mirror that children can use to realize their own double consciousness and thus see themselves. This insight into Du Bois's news column provides a further understanding of the significance of accessible, multicultural children's literature.

W. E. B. Du Bois served as an editor for *The Brownies' Book* magazine from 1920–1921; however, it is his contribution as a writer for his column "As the Crow Flies" that captures the integral notion of his most well-known work, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). That is, "As the Crow Flies" captures his notion of double consciousness, a term first introduced in *Souls* that describes the internal twoness experienced by African Americans. The column features a Crow who provides a racialized perspective to the "Crowlets" or "Crowlings" reading the magazine. In this essay, I argue that Du Bois's Crow is a figurative device for his conception of double consciousness; aspects of double consciousness are present in the frequent motifs of dialectic doubleness in the column. As such, the Crow functions as a mirror, as described by scholar Rudine Sims Bishop, a mirror that children can use to realize their own double consciousness and thus see themselves.

In *Souls*, Du Bois presents double consciousness as a socio-cultural construct, i.e., it is the result of the way the white American psyche is embedded within the minds and lives of Black Americans. Double

consciousness is described by Du Bois as “a peculiar sensation ... 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” (5). That is to say, the consciousness of Black people, according to Du Bois, is fractured and lacks unity due to the competing “thoughts” and “strivings” they experience (5). Double consciousness has a certain dialectic doubleness rooted in it; there are the negative effects of it, which include no “true self-consciousness,” self-doubt, etc., all of which complicate agency (Du Bois 5). However, these negative effects are countered with a positive one: Double consciousness enables a “second-sight,” that is, Black Americans are afforded something inaccessible to White Americans (Du Bois 5). Black Americans can understand both the White American psyche and the Black American psyche, which grants them a unique perspective. These two sides function dialectically, as they contradict each other but strive for unification and a potential merging.

Semantically, Du Bois’s double consciousness and Rudine Sims Bishop’s concept of children’s literature as a mirror are alike. Bishop’s mirror is a part of her germinal essay “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” which stresses the importance of multicultural children’s literature. Just as double consciousness is a double-edged sword, so are Bishop’s mirrors. Bishop states that “when the images [children] see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued” (1). Conversely, when the mirrors are accurate and positive, they allow larger experiences to be seen (Bishop 1). Bishop’s mirror is representative of the same dialectic doubleness featured in Du Bois’s work; Bishop’s mirrors are doubles that negate and influence each other; they can be both positive and negative, two opposites striving for unity. However, Bishop’s double differentiates itself from Du Bois’s double; Du Bois’s double consciousness is the effect of the White psyche on Black people, whereas Bishop’s mirror can be devoid of the White psyche; it is dependent on who is looking in the mirror. By uniting the concepts of Bishop and Du Bois, it becomes possible to see how Du Bois helped Black children navigate their own double consciousness. The inaugural edition of

The Brownies' Book magazine features the first volume of “As the Crow Flies,” which depicts the anthropomorphized Crow. The beginning of the installment reads:

The Crow is black and O so beautiful, shining with dark blues and purples, with little hints of gold in his mighty wings. He flies far above the Earth, looking downward with his sharp eyes. What a lot of things he must see and hear and if he could only talk – and lo! THE BROWNIES' BOOK has made him talk to you. (23; vol. 1)

In the opening line, the Crow is introduced with positive visual descriptors; these descriptors are inextricably connected to his Black identity. As scholar Brigitte Fielder has argued, “the Crow becomes not a Black person in Du Bois’s representation, but he also comes to represent Blackness itself” i.e., the Crow’s Blackness and his beauty are inseparable from one another (415). While Du Bois opens the column by emphasizing the importance of the Crow’s physical state, i.e., his Blackness, it is the Crow’s nonphysical state, that is, his consciousness that takes precedence in the rest of the installment. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the Crow’s Blackness is foundational and arguably why Blackness is established first as it shapes his consciousness. The relationship between the Crow’s physical and nonphysical states is the first instance of a dialectic double within the column as they contradict and influence each other. The Crow is removed from Earth and must watch society from the sidelines, “He flies far above the Earth, looking downward with his sharp eyes” (Du Bois “As the Crow” 23; vol. 1). One possible reading of this line would suggest that the Crow’s eyes have gotten sharp because of his practice of seeing the world as an outsider and seeing the world through a lens that is specific to him. This reading is starkly reminiscent of Du Bois’s writing in *Souls*: “Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?” (5). To be the Crow is to be above the earth and separated from it. To be the Crow is to be separated from “mine own house,” and thus to be alienated from oneself and society.

In addition to the Crow's eyes, there is a focus on the accessibility of the Crow's voice, a voice that is only made accessible to readers via *The Brownies Book*; it is the magazine that has made him "talk to the readers," i.e., it is Du Bois. In *Souls*, Du Bois emphasizes the responsibility that adults have to the youth and states that one cannot sit idle while "the inevitable seeds are sown for a harvest of disaster to our children, black and white" (29). The Crow carries the responsibility of assisting Black children in realizing their double consciousness by acting as a mirror. The mirror acts as a dialectic double: it holds the negative internalization of the oppressive white psyche and the positive remnants of the Black psyche. The combination of these psyches complicates agency for Black Americans by fostering feelings of doubt and self-loathing. The Crow is responsible for remedying the harms of this dialectic double, as Fielder states, "[The Crow] connects African American child readers to a larger world in which Black people figure not only as oppressed but as active participants" (414). The responsibility that the Crow bears is not only the responsibility of being a mirror but also of being one that chooses to show children a more positive light where they are active participants. The gap between oppressed and active is closed through a new possession of agency, an agency that is provided in the assured voice of the Crow that has made himself available to his Crowlets.

To build on the theme of repossession of agency, the second volume of "As the Crow Flies" shifts to full first-person perspective, further cementing the importance of the Crow's voice: "High in the limpid air I sail" (Du Bois "As the Crow" 63, vol. 2). The transition to a first-person perspective enables the Crow's readers to establish a more intimate connection with the Crow emphasizing the disparities between Du Bois's and Bishop's dialectic doubles. Rather than feeling estranged from their consciousness, they have a mirror that may mimic their own voice in a truer way; as Bishop writes, "Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back at us" (1). The first-person perspective is a narrative decision that is consistent for the rest of the volumes in the magazine.

The Crow offers itself as a figurative device and vessel for Du Bois's own political beliefs. The Crow's coverage of the news is never merely a recording of events; rather, the Crow's coverage is critical in its understanding. The news that the Crow covers does not shy away from difficult topics; it contains information on World War I, anti-lynching conferences, the division of Africa, racism in Europe, women and the right to vote, the race riots, the Ku Klux Klan, etc. As Fielder has argued, the Crow "offers an array of anti-imperialist critiques," critiques that center the effects of imperialism on children along with "the fact that oppressed people are often 'brown' or 'colored'" (423). The Crow offers the news, then, with the sense of solidarity that Du Bois creates in *Souls*, meaning the Crow does not have the ability to distance himself from the events in either America or worldwide due to the responsibility he holds via his Blackness. Subsequently, this inability to distance himself from such events leads many of the news reports to be linked back to Blackness. For example, at the end of the first issue, the Crow states, "Nor may we forget the thousand black boys dead for France" (Du Bois "As the Crow" 25, vol. 1). It is this connection to Blackness that transcends geographical boundaries, and as Phillips has written, "internationally there is enormous responsibility in being a black child in America," and the Crow mirrors this enormous responsibility (604).

In addition to being tied to his Blackness, the Crow is tied to America; he has a responsibility to both. When these two aspects of the Crow are combined, the very notion of double consciousness is formed: "One ever feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (*Souls*, 5). The Crow is still bound to America, as an interlude in the news report in the second installment of the column depicts: "All this I, the Crow, saw, as I flew across the waters and over land and sea; but, of course, I belong at home; and now I shall settle lazily on the branch of the big black tree and tell you what's happening here." (Du Bois "As the Crow" 63, vol. 2) Just as the Crow is physically and psychologically bound to his Blackness, he is physically and psychologically bound to America; he

belongs “at home,” and he must return to his home to observe and report on it. The Crow then represents this twoness as discussed by Du Bois; just as Du Bois insinuates that the double consciousness entails both burden and freedom, so does the Crow. The Crow “belongs at home” and must return, but there is also a sense that the Crow fosters the belonging in a positive light: “[N]ow I shall settle lazily on the branch of the big black tree” (Du Bois “As the Crow” 63, vol. 2) While the Crow expresses struggles with his Blackness, his Americanness, and the world in which he experiences the intersection of those identities, he also expresses how he embraces his double consciousness through his ability to settle on the branch (Fielder 422). The Crow offers himself once again as a mirror to children readers, reflecting both the bad and good consequences of his double consciousness, the bad being the internal conflict and the good the unique perspective that the internal conflict inflicts upon him.

The Crow’s news coverage gives children the vocabulary and knowledge they need to better understand and develop their perception of the world and their place in it. This idea of education as a tool is important to Du Bois, “for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution” (*Souls*, 18). The purpose of the Crow’s news coverage is then similar to Bishop’s idea of the mirror, as the mirror may either negatively impact children if what they see is discriminatory or it may positively impact them if it is an accurate depiction of their experience. The Crow allows for these two options to work dialectically, just like double consciousness acts dialectically. Children can then use the Crow as a mirror to connect to the positive side of their double consciousness. In *Souls*, Du Bois states that through the process of reflection, one begins to “have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another” (7). But to be himself he must be able to come to terms with his double consciousness. Children may begin to find their place in the world earlier in life by using the Crow as a vessel for realization, realization that may affirm their unvoiced and unrepresented “peculiar sensations” (Du Bois *Souls*, 5). The column then, through its ability to reflect children’s unvoiced and unrepresented

thoughts, becomes what Bishop argues is “a means of self-affirmation” (1). This means of “self-affirmation” becomes a radical tool to be used by the readers of *The Brownies’ Book* magazine. As Webster argues, “‘transfiguring the soul in childhood’ was not only a concept of racial empowerment. It was also a vision and political activism that saw children as capable and powerful beings,” it is this power that the Crow inflicts on children (347). Ergo, the value of children discovering their own double consciousness in the mirror of the Crow leads them to become radicals as well.

To conclude, the Crow is used as a figurative device for Du Bois’s double consciousness. Through the Crow’s perspective, the multitudinous, complex nature of the double consciousness is made clear; the dialectic doubleness between the Crow’s physical and nonphysical states, domestic and international news, and more specifically the tension between being American and Black. The combination of dialectic doubleness is reflected in the column for children to read—the Crow becomes a mirror for children to affirm their experience. The other “As the Crow Flies” installments can be better understood through this conceptual reading; scholars’ work on the racialization of the Crow and Du Bois’s activism may also be applied to examine the ways in which his other quintessential concept in *Souls*, the veil, is present within the column, for example, “He flies far above the Earth, looking downward with his sharp eyes” can be read as the veil, the barrier or separation between White and Black people (*Souls* 23). By pairing the conceptual work of Du Bois with the scholars’ work, we can see how interconnected the idea of childhood is to the double consciousness and how “As the Crow Flies” can inspire children to understand themselves and the world around them so they, too, can experience the freedom of flight.

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