

THE GREAT BROWN SEA: Music in *Souls of Black Folk*

“Does it make every one— unhappy when they study and learn lots of things?” asks John’s little sister after he arrived home. This pivotal question addresses both John’s intellectual transformation and his new-found alienation from his community. ‘Unhappiness’ embodies the struggle between becoming cognizant of the systems that oppress you, while simultaneously feeling powerful against them. I argue ‘two-ness’ is best reflected in the Black American’s experience with education, and its subsequent effects on both their psyche and their connection to community. I will be focusing primarily on the short story, “Of the Coming of John,” wherein this struggle with education is represented through symbolism of the sea and John’s everchanging relationship with it. In response to this struggle and consequential alienation, I argue Du Bois remedies this through the use of music as both a method of communicating heritage, but also communicating a pedagogy of music. I’ll begin with a preliminary reading of John and the Sea. Then, draw on Fred Moten’s “Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester’s Scream” to recontextualise the music associated with the Sea.

Prior to the analysis portion, it is vital to define the following key terms. The color-line is a distinction between experiences of brown folk and their lighter racial counterparts. Du Bois writes Double-Consciousness as:

“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.”

The most vital factor of Double-Consciousness’ “two-ness” is its *opposition*— these sides being “warring ideals.” Finally, the Veil is an imagery-based metaphor signifying the mistreatment of Black Americans. Within “Of the Coming of John,” the Veil’s visibility is realised through ‘unhappiness,’ or the ability to see the racism behind both the interpersonal and structural discrimination of Black Folk.¹

John and the Sea

In “Of the Coming of John,” John’s struggles with education and his subsequent alienation to his community are represented by changes of his relationship to the Sea. Du Bois first outlines the sea’s significance through the introductory imagery of John and his hometown, Altamaha. John’s first appearance opens with his coming “to us, from Altamaha... where the sea croons to the sands.”² The sea is the defining reference to describe Altamaha’s geography. Beyond its’ landmark importance, John’s impetus towards the reader— his ‘coming’— is demarcated with the sea. He is “coming” towards “us”, the readers, from Altahama; from the Sea. It is this instance that John is conceived. When the reader pictures John, he is pictured with

¹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 8.

² Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 154.

the Sea. Therefore, the Sea carries a great significance for John's identity— as a reference of where he's from, but also his conception.

Du Bois then illustrates the growing animosity between the Sea and John during the scene when John's sister asks him if he is unhappy after coming home from college. Here, Du Bois utilises mis-en-scene and diction to highlight his feelings of alienation from his community: John and his sister "stood together, peering at the gray unresting water."³ "Peering" meaning to both "look narrowly or closely at something. Also, of a thing: just appearing to be visible."⁴ In both contexts, John and his sister "peering" can either imply a study of the sea (or, where they come from), and a notion of discovery of something that is becoming apparent. The latter definition may be interpreted as the Veil becoming apparent to the pair. But "peering" also implies a distance from the viewer and the object being looked upon. Revisiting the sea as a symbol of identity, John and his sister studying the sea translates as an embodiment of viewing their positionality as Black Americans who can see the discrimination; being 'unhappy' has allowed them to see the Sea wholly. They see where they, Black Americans, stand in America's social stratification. Subsequently, they are physically separate from their community; they are not the sea and they are peering at it. Peering the sea becomes a moment of viewing the emerging Veil.

In John's final moments, the struggle between education and the sea reaches a climax through the use of personification. After John is unjustly persecuted by the Judge, he 'comes' towards the Sea.⁵ While initially facing the sea— once, a signifier of his identity— he decides to turn away from it. He swears that he will "find work, and send for them." His proclamation elicits that while he is leaving, he does so in hopes that he will come back for "them," or, his community. But the alienation between John and those he intends to 'send for' persists nonetheless. In response to his decision, "the great brown sea lay silent." This 'silence' reflects the fading connection between himself and the Sea. The communication between them has broken down; a connection, severed.

This stalemate is further driven by the imagery used to describe both the Sea and John in this scene. The word 'great' evokes a magnitude which is immediately juxtaposed with the subsequent description of John as "only a black man hurrying on with an ache in his heart."⁶ Combining the sea as an object set against "only a black man" implies a vast difference in size. Contextualising this scene in the narrative, John's "ache" comes from his unjust persecution which results in the forced discontinuation of the school he intended on starting. The "ache" arises from the inability to help his community become 'educated,' or aiding them to see the Veil. He is "only a black man," who is unable to yoke the enormous "great brown sea" into seeing the Veil with him.

³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 162.

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, "peering (adj.)," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/8619601863>.

⁵ Du Bois, *Soul of Black Folk*, 165.

⁶ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 165.

This narrative ends with a final severance from the Sea: John's decision to leave. He "rose slowly to his feet, turned his closed eyes to the Sea." Not only is John's severance with the sea enforced by his decision to leave, but he turned his closed eyes to the Sea. Reckoning with his 'failed' attempt at creating an educational space for his community, the diction of "turned his closed eyes," elicits an autonomy that John is deciding to leave. He makes a conscious decision to show his ignorance, "his closed eyes," towards the Sea; once the site of his identity. He decides to go North into the 'world-' a location only made available to him by his educational journey— to escape the "ache" in his heart, the inability to make visible the Veil to the Sea.

An alternative reading of the ending may be that John dies from a lynching. In this moment, the strenuous relationship between the sea and John can be interpreted in a similar way. Despite the oncoming violence of the "hurry and shouting men," John walks towards the sea. But in a moment of need, the "great brown sea lays silent." And within this admission, he acquiesces when he "smiled toward the sea," letting "the strange melody," engulf him as the violent mob comes galloping towards him.

Sorrow Songs: Phonological Pedagogy

But what to make of this music and the sonic qualities at the ending of "Of the Coming of John?" How should one respond to alienation from their community? Moten's phonological framework in "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream" may help further the analysis on music and pedagogy in "The Coming Of John."⁷

Moten first traces the legacy of Black Performance. He cites Saidiya Hartman's pivotal critique of Frederick Douglass' Aunt Hester scene: In which, she argues the graphic portrayals of violence, and their relation to the conception of the slave, reinforce casual utterances of the "terrible spectacle." This "terrible spectacle" becomes a commodity to which the horrors of slavery are communicated.⁸ Reframing the objection of violence in black performance, for Moten, Aunt Hester's scream, and its meaning, moves past words and lyricism,⁹ highlighting more importantly the dialectic meaning in its Freudian primality.¹⁰ Moten argues that in spite of this objection, one must value the aurality of it as a site of pedagogy. That is to say, meaning lies within the phonological sounds that embodies a moment. Aunt Hesters' pain is communicated by her aural capability, or her scream— her emotions transcribed in the 'primal' noise made in response to an experience.

Du Bois' framework of the Sorrow Songs compliment this sentiment, highlighting that while these songs have "travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, [we know] as little as our fathers what its words may mean,* but knowing well the meaning of its music."¹¹ The meaning of the songs do not lie within the words, but the music. For Du Bois, the purpose of the Sorrow Songs is to communicate the emotions of a shared experience. Enslaved or freed, the sorrow of these songs are still felt by those who listen to it; Though, this sorrow has the

⁷ Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," *In the Break* (University of Minnesota Press), 1-24.

⁸ Moten, *In the Break*, 4.

⁹ Moten, *In the Break*, 6.

¹⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, "primal (adj.), sense 2.b," June 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2575119031>.

¹¹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 170.

capability to unite. The very fact that these sorrows have “travelled down to *us*... knowing well the meaning,” is proof of solidarity. Transcribed in this music is an unspoken solidarity; and within it, belonging.

Phonological Reinterpretation of John’s Severance with the Sea

Superficially, the sea can be read as a passive metaphor for John’s heritage, but when applying Moten’s object/commodity aurality framework, the metaphor of the Sea becomes a dialectic entity through the means of Sorrow Songs and music. Through Moten, the Sea is an entity that can not vocalise, but it *is* the experience, embodied and objectified; A symbol not only for John’s identity, but of a history of enslavement and the lessons passed down through music.

The sea represents meaning beyond the characterisation of ‘two-ness’ for John. Du Bois traces a connection between the sea and slavery through uses of simile and metatextual references. In the subsequent chapter, “Sorrow Songs,” he explains an enslaved person’s positionality to be “near to Nature’s heart. The life of a slave is ‘rough and rolling’ like the brown Atlantic of the Sea Islands.”¹² Du Bois’ comparison of an enslaved person’s life and struggles with that of the ‘rough and rolling sea’ of the brown atlantic echoes the turbulent relationship John has with the Sea, or as John calls it, “the great brown sea.”¹³ Therefore, not only does the Sea become a demarcation of John’s identity, but reflects a historical link between an enslaved person and the sea.

Revisiting the end of “Of the Coming of John,” John hears the Sea. He “smiled toward the Sea and whence rose the strange melody.”¹⁴ In both interpretations: his departure or his death, he “smiles” at this strange melody in the face of inevitable and oncoming change. This aurality is described as a “faint sweet melody [that] fluttered like a living thing.” The diction of “faint sweet” elicits a placating, soothing nature. Furthermore, the diction of the sea being “like a living thing” further reinforces the dialectic quality and heritage of the melody. So, when John “turned his closed eyes towards the Sea,” Du Bois highlights John is doing so to connect further to the “faint sweet melody,” by focusing on the sense, the ears, that can best perceive it.

Additionally, not only does he hear the melody, he also sings the “Song of the Bride” to himself in spite of either the oncoming violence, or his decision to move North.¹⁵ While Du Bois displayed the lyrics, they are not in English, but German. Once again, Du Bois is obscuring the meaning to the English reader. Which can be seen as yet another example to which Du Bois is emphasising music over lyricism. And it is only after this melody, does John find the strength to rise “slowly to his feet,” and begin towards his journey.¹⁶ So then, in response to the ‘two-ness,’ John is able to find his strength by listening to the Sea and its music.

Interestingly, the last aurality is not from the Sea, but the world that “whistles in his ears.”¹⁷ But even the ‘World’ is also derived from the ‘Sea.’ The concept of ‘the World’ is

¹² Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 172.

¹³ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 165.

¹⁴ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 166.

¹⁵ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 157.

¹⁶ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 166.

¹⁷ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 166.

introduced when John is reminded of the sea by a crowd of working men on the streets of New York.¹⁸ John, after viewing the quality of their clothing, proclaims “This is the World.”¹⁹ Dissimilar from the “brown Sea,” the world is “bright and dark,” this diction elicits varying differences in shades. The World *is* the Sea, but it is no longer just “brown,” it contains shades.

So then, when “the world whistles in his [John’s] ears,” it does not imply a severance of his identity. Rather, he is wrapped (*rapt*) in this “world.” He closed his eyes to listen to the melody. And the sea does not leave him, it takes on a new meaning. In other words, like him, the Sea evolves into a version that strives for coexistence. He ventures into his new world, whether that be New York or life beyond death, followed by the *whistling* in his ears.

In the moment where John is nearly overcome by the “ache in his heart,” his deepening, jagged ‘two-ness,’ the music and the Sea remain present in his life. Especially, in the climax that elicits an uncertainty. The music communicates to him a strange, reminiscent melody, and in response he sings. A moment of communication and solidarity that transcends words. And in its’ a connection founded on the aural. So finally, when the Sea morphs into the World, it whistles in his ears. He is accompanied by the aurality of his lineage.

Conclusion

For Du Bois, education has the capacity to deepen the ‘two-ness’ of double-consciousness by creating a divide between the individual and their community. This separation constitutes two sides: those who can see the Veil and those who do not. Du Bois utilises the metaphor of the Sea and John’s evolving relationship with it to illustrate this divide. Yet, Du Bois remedies this alienation through both personification of the sea and implementation of black oral tradition. Finally, drawing on Moten, the Sea can be read as an object with a pedagogical quality, as it represents not only John’s personal relationship, but also a corpus of embodied experience passed through generations through means of music.

¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 157.

¹⁹ Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 157.

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