To Wield a Double Consciousness

Clifton Sorrell III

**Intro**

To wield a double consciousness of social duality is to be one person of dual social faces--to exist and find the equilibrium between yielding to the forces of social hegemony yet while preserving the autonomy of one’s social cultural roots. This is the coping balance between social resistance, social adaptation and social navigation. I am an African American male who must navigate American society between the boundaries of being within and outside of my cultural community, forcing me to wield a social duality which is utilized part of my double consciousness

Double Consciousness is a concept that was developed by W.E.B DuBois. It conveys that as African Americans we must wear a veil of identity, which must conceal our cultural identity to operate and navigate a space in which we are marginalized as a minority that is subjugated by the hegemony of the white majority. Since the preeminence of white social, political and economic structures and institutions dominate U.S. society, I must wield a consciousness that conforms to the majority that allows me to participate and gain access to opportunities and resources. This affects the social formation of my literacies that I utilize because my socializations then become bound within the constraints of resisting, adapting to and navigating white society. I must establish a strong sense of social duality through engaging in a strong proficiency in literacies that are identifiable and accepted by white society so that I am not socially incapacitated.

**My Communities-My Cultural Literacies**

I was born in North Minneapolis Minnesota and spent my adolescence raised in Richmond California. Both places being predominantly black neighborhoods, I was brought up within the boundaries of my ethnic communities. It was in these spaces that I cultivated my cultural literacies that took the form commonly known as African American Vernacular and or Ebonics. Up until the age of 7 upon moving to California, my early socializations and discursive foundations were cultivated around my family members back home in Minneapolis. People be thinking that ma’tongue be broken and dat’I be speakin that broken English of us illiterate folk but to keep it a-hunnid, im finna demonstrate the functionality of m’a-tounge. I ain’t illiterate-n’so be my peoples-n-family. Watch how m’a “th” be-convertin to a “D” or how m’a ending consonants become invisible. D’is-is more than just what yall be callin slang cuz slang is nothing but the sensationalized tongue of black vernacular. When I be seein my sistas-n-brothas on the regular, in our spaces d’is-be our inter-comprehensible form of language; this is my form of cultural literacy that defines me.

I began to interact and engage in socializations outside of the boundaries of my cultural spaces upon entering my adolescence. Outside of my ethnic space, I became a minority that was subject to the domineering social hegemony of the majority. In order to navigate society outside of the spaces of my community I had to conform to the norms set by the white majority. This helped finalize my sense of social duality as I was immersed in spaces that no longer abided by the predominance of my cultural literacies (black vernacular/Ebonics). I first recognized this when I participated in the Boy Scouts as the only black boy in a Troop that was majority white. Others would habitually criticize my speech, lost and confused, unable to understand anything I was saying. Rather than being able to respect or acknowledge the independence of black vernacular as a particular and legitimate language of a people, they ridicule it as a form of illiteracy. As there are so many different adaptations and unique dialectic forms of spoken English, (like that of the Irish, Scottish, New Zealanders.) African Americans have also, a distinct established cultural dialect which is as legitimate as any other diverse form of English language. How I be speakin’n-talkin be a distinct form of language spoken by those of my ethnic background, not a form of illiteracy. Sadly, because U.S society is not structured to appeal and or accept its diversity of identities, minorities are forced to consent to the hegemony of the majority in order to fully participate in society. In school bein told I’aint-be speakin right, they thought they were making a young illiterate boy literate, yet all they were doing was attempting to extirpate the autonomy of a cultural dialect. I’ve been bombarded by this throughout the entirety of my adolescence up till the point of understanding and recognizing the meaning of having to have to wield a social duality reminiscent of my double consciousness. I learned that as I move forward, I must embrace and obtain a proficient competency of the hegemonic literacies used by the white majority as a tool while still maintaining my cultural roots in my cultural literacies.

**Hegemonic Literacies**

 Second to my cultural literacies, I have what I call my hegemonic literacies. This is my ability to understand and be competent in the socializations and dialect standards of the white majority. As I hope to obtain my PhD and become a tenured professor at a university and gain access to job opportunities at major institutions in the future, I must abide by the already established norms in these spaces. As much as being a self-defined individual is important, I have to struggle with being accepted into these spaces through normalizing myself by the terms of the majority. I cain’t be speakin like this cuz then I be becomin the “lil illiterate negro.” In becoming a historian, I have to become literate in the shibboleth of historical discourse. In being able to articulate and communicate my thoughts critically and analytically, I must be able to articulate the various historical processes and concepts effectively. Along with being able to understand the concepts of western modernity, global capitalism, colonialism, Marxism, etc., I have to be able to articulate them within the bounds of the hegemonic literacies. I’d be ridiculed and put down if I were to explain the concept of colonialism and its effects on the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in black vernacular or Ebonics. It is not accepted and further will not be understood because my form of English dialect and language isn’t normalized amongst the white majority.

This is where my double consciousness comes to purpose. While still holding onto my cultural roots and upbringings as an aspiring doctoral educator, I have to be able to code switch and utilize my sense of double consciousness in order to effectively interact with others that are of and or abide by the white majority.

Like my academic spaces, while at the workplace I again have to step away from my cultural literacies and conform to the standardized English language established by the majority. Speaking in Black vernacular while in the workplace is not seen as being professional. Currently I am a student part-time membership sales and services associate at a recreation facility. In being professional when working with the members of the facility, I am expected to oblige by the dominant English standard. If I were to explain the policy or talk about membership prices, spoken in black vernacular English, I would be ridiculed being seen as being unprofessional.

Rather than saying “How you be-doin today” it would be “How are you doing today” when greeting someone or even “You will be charged an additional initiation fee” rather “you’s finna be charged an additional initiation fee.” The grammatical arrangement and restructuring of English in black vernacular as illustrated becomes inherently defined as unprofessional or inappropriate. It is not that I am illiterate; it’s rather that I speak differently than you do. In the workplace, the professionality of a literacy is not really based off whether are you literate or not, it's based off being literate in a particular dialect: that being in the dominant form of spoken language defined by the majority. So how’d  I be speakin is not incorrect or an illiteracy in its entirety, rather my cultural literacy is not accepted as the norm in the workplace.

**Conclusion**

I must be a black man with my own tongue, speaking my own language yet learning to operate and literate myself in the dialects and languages of the majority. These white social structures are monolithic and disregard the diversity here in the United States. This consequently results in the formation of a literacy-illiteracy polarized spectrum which defines “to be literate” as being solely literate in the hegemonic literacies. Yet resisting the abdication of my cultural literacies, it is essential for me to abide by the hegemonic literacies. This does not make me less of a black man, rather, it equips me with the necessary tools needed to navigate the society I live in. Component to understanding this is realizing that I must remove myself from the polarized literacy spectrum. In order to preserve my literacies of my cultural roots (specifically black vernacular) while also effectively participating in society, I have to code switch and utilize my sense of double consciousness. I have to be able to switch between literacies, the cultural and the hegemonic, so that I am not disenfranchised from participation, so that I am not kept from opportunity, so that I cannot be held back due to my differences. This is simply the reality I exist in.