

Doubled Double Consciousness or Troubled Double Consciousness

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Response to essay by Li

I would like to thank Huey-li Li for entering the fray of multicultural education from a position in which attention is paid to such a range of theoretical possibilities and their concomitant quandaries. Postcolonial literature in particular has not had frequent hearing in our midst and I applaud her courage in broaching that territory.¹

My essay is presented in three sections. In the first, I summarize the mandate for multicultural education as Li has articulated it. In effect, we must meet these four conditions if we are to generate multicultural education consistent with the character of doubled double consciousness. In the second section, I ask the question “why double consciousness?” Finally, in the closing section, I contrast Li’s “doubling” metaphor with a “troubling” metaphor. At stake, I suggest, is an alternate postcolonial reading of hybridity, and with it, an alternate account of the desired effects of cultural identity formation.

A MANDATE FOR MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

My reading of Li’s work is influenced by my professional location as a teacher educator and by my philosophical interests in situated knowledges. I imagine my students asking: “What does this mean for teachers?” Consequently, I read Li’s essay as a multicultural education project and, in the four statements below describe what I see as its mandate. Multicultural education conducive to the achievement of social justice and equality must:

1. Represent identity as dialogic, socially constructed and historically/politically located along multiple axes.
2. Account for, and respect, the agency of marginalized people without denying the ongoing effects of a multiply hegemonic society.
3. Utilize an approach to difference that does not totalize the experience of groups of marginalized people. Rather, it must be attentive to the “in-betweenness” of difference. (To this I would add two caveats: it ought not totalize the experiences of groups of privileged people, and these two categories ought not be seen as mutually exclusive.)
4. Incorporate an ongoing form of reflectivity with respect to self-formation that adequately anticipates/takes into account shifts in political, economic, and social fields that potentially threaten to re-colonize, re-inscribe, assimilate, or co-opt the cultural agency of marginalized people.

As I take these conditions to be recurrent themes in Li’s analysis, I do not elucidate them further. In the next section, I return to the concepts that garner the most attention: alterity, double consciousness, and hybridity.

WHY DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS?

“‘But I am an American!’ So exclaims a Chinese American woman confronting racial prejudice against Asians during the Viet Nam war.”

In citing this literary moment, Li conveys the multidimensional aspects of identity formation that confound efforts to generate a critical multicultural education. The character's resistance to racial discrimination is framed, for all her vehemence, by a hegemonic racism; her agency is undermined, assimilated, by her acceptance of the prejudicial terms according to which hegemonic scripts set Asian people aside as "Foreigner," "Other."

Li seems to read this character as an iconic representation of Frantz Fanon's wretched colonial subject. She is the "Black Face in a White Mask," divided against herself by the social organization of a hegemony rooted in alterity.² Here, too, is the deformed character that Charles Taylor urges subjugated peoples to cast aside. Yet Li's literary example surely reveals the absurdity of a dialogic "politics of recognition" that calls upon subjugated people to see themselves as wholly human, even as it completely fails to see the hegemonic social organization that bids them identify with a humanity they are *de facto* denied.

Beyond Taylor, Li examines a number of positions from which to theorize an effective agency whilst acknowledging the constraints of marginalization. She turns to W.E.B. DuBois's account of double consciousness, and emphasizes DuBois's naming of the "twoness" of being "American" and "Negro." She appropriates the "fragmented psychic space" from which marginalized people "are able to conduct intellectual tasks to resist and appropriate hegemonic apparatuses," and argues that despite being subject to "the gaze of the surrounding others, ... the dyadic consciousness can always strive for true self-understanding."

Aided by Paul Gilroy's account of "diasporic racial identity" and Stuart Hall's discussion of cultural identity as positioning, Li composes an account of double consciousness that is anti-essentialist, historically situated and attentive to political asymmetry. In a final step that she calls "doubled double consciousness," she introduces a kind of self-reflectivity that attunes the agency of double consciousness to the shifting, in-between, terrain of hegemonic economic and political fields.

Hybridity figures as a significant step in Li's path toward doubled double consciousness. According to Li, hybridity appears in postcolonial discourse as a device through which colonial subjects recover agency. She represents hybridity as a kind of double consciousness that enables marginalized people to assume a measure of epistemic privilege. Attracted to its anti-essentialism, Li, nonetheless, rejects postcolonial hybridity. Her rationale lies in a discussion of in-betweenness: accounts of hybridity, she argues, bear the potential to totalize the (oppressed) colonial subject. Li writes:

Thus it is uncertain whether all marginalized people are able to assume unqualified epistemic privileges in critiquing dominant groups' extensive hegemonic forces that interpellate diverse subaltern groups in varied ways. ... It is unclear how cultural hybridization can entail a radical departure from cultural assimilation in the colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Li's move from away postcolonial accounts of hybridity underscores her demand that agency be theorized in such a way as to invoke political vigilance. She utilizes a set of readings of Asian and Asian American identity manifest in contexts of globalization and American racialization to illustrate the means by which

hegemonic forces assimilate hybridity. Her alternative, doubled double consciousness, becomes an overtly politicized strategy for reasserting the connection between “twoness” and the conditions of political subordination.

I worry that Li’s account of doubled double consciousness returns to a modernist frame according to which the task of multicultural education is one of getting the subject position “right.” My reading stems in part from Li’s repeated reference to the volitional reflectivity of double consciousness which, she claims, is capable of yielding a true knowledge of the self even amidst shifting political conditions. I realize that, in significant ways, Li, herself, refuses the notion of a sovereign self, but because I see sovereignty as potentially re-inscribed in the search for a true self, I look for an alternative to the “doubled double consciousness” frame. In the final section of the essay, then, I present a brief alternative account of postcolonial hybridity and recast Li’s metaphor as “troubled double consciousness.” My aim is to proliferate the models of political vigilance that might usefully inform multicultural education.

TRouBLING DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS.

Li’s rejection of postmodern accounts of hybridity appears to be premised on their availability for assimilation within hegemonic discourses of globalization and racialization. If hybridity could be read not as a subject position (not-presence), it might not be so easily scripted as “model minority.” Homi K. Bhabha offers just such an account. In an interview essay titled “The Third Space,” Bhabha writes:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “third space” which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.³

Bhabha continues his discussion by differentiating between identity and identification:

I felt that the possibility of producing a culture which both articulates difference and lives with it could only be established on the basis of a non-sovereign notion of self...It is only by losing the sovereignty of the self that you can gain the freedom of a politics that is open to the non-assimilationist claims of cultural difference. The crucial feature of this new awareness is that it doesn’t need to totalise in order to legitimate political action or cultural practice.⁴

Clearly, in this short response I do not have sufficient space to expand fully on what an account of “troubled” double consciousness might entail, however, Bhabha’s notion of a non-sovereign self is a starting place. In an essay on Fanon, Bhabha, himself, likens the doubling of hybridity to a process of subjectivity according to which a subject is twinned with a shadow, Fanon’s “White Mask.”⁵ He invokes a sketch that is “not present,” a phantom double that conjures the third space utilized to assert identity as a process of contestation. The third space subject bears traces to prior moments without addressing them as originary. My interest here is to point to a way of addressing double consciousness that avoids reifying either the subject positions from which hybridity emerges or the resultant subject. Bhabha writes:

I use these postcolonial portraits because they seize on the vanishing point of two familiar traditions in the discourse of identity: the philosophical tradition of identity as the process

of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture. In the postcolonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image—missing person, invisible eye, Oriental stereotype—is confronted with its difference, its Other.”⁶

I have cited Bhabha at length here because I think the task of separating subjectivity from modernist re-presentation is crucial and complex. As I read hybridity, it is a performative discursive space, rather than a subject presence. Such an account of hybridity troubles the performance of identity in ways that serves the political vigilance Li considers paramount. The attention to be paid to hegemonic political forces, here, is local, akin to an analysis of strategy rather than an analysis of sovereignty (legitimacy). Such an account would place less confidence in the capacity of double consciousness to claim epistemic privilege and more in its capacity to claim epistemic proliferation.

1. I would like to acknowledge the assistance I received from Sherene Razack, Megan Boler, and Barbara Applebaum. Errors of commission or omission are, of course, mine but the reading that I provide here has been enriched by their understanding.

2. See Homi K. Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative,” in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 40-65.

3. Homi K. Bhabha, “The Third Space,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), 211.

4. *Ibid.*, 212-13.

5. Bhabha, “Interrogating Identity,” 43-44.

6. *Ibid.*, 46.