Metaphoric language and double consciousness with W.E.B Du Bois, Victor Villanueva, bell hooks, and Homi Bhabha.

[make sure you have a strong link between the author’s experiences and Rhetoric]

Metaphor is a powerful rhetorical trope that can be used to discuss encounters with racial and ethnic oppression. This is true in the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois, Victor Villanueva, and bell hooks. The metaphors they employ express the writers’ historical and personal experiences and illustrate their doubly-conscious and complex realities. Du Bois defines *double consciousness* as a state of personal division. It is the knowing of oneself through the eyes of others while at the same time struggling to create a self-identity that is neither split nor conflicted. It is a “second-sight” of sorts in which a person (in his case, the African American) can “see himself through the revelation of the other world” (CITATION). But this reality is not innocent or free of ideology and judgment. I may be wearing a silly hat and understand the glares and comments coming from others, but this is not the same as being judged and scorned for one’s physical and mental identity. For Du Bois it is much deeper than surface-level judgment, it is scorn that goes to the center of a person, his/her soul.

Being doubly-conscious is not simply knowing that one is being mocked but “measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (CITATION). Simply put, it is a state of “twoness,” understanding the self as a divided self—one that is aware of two identities and which strives to live as one person, one identity, that takes from the riches of both, particularly in terms of race and culture. It is a hope that both identities can coexist within one body and be allowed to mesh in the forming of a single, complex and rich existence. For Du Bois these two identities were that of the African and of the American, a conflicted identity to this day, but *double consciousness* can be applied to a number of people and populations in the United States (and worldwide—though my focus here will be on the U.S.).

One such group is Latino Americans, conflicted even in the naming of their identity. Are they Latinos? Latino Americans? Hispanics? Chicanos? Mexicanos? Mexican Americans (or whatever other Central or South American country)? This naming in itself is part of the self consciousness that exists within this population for they are rarely identified by the majority population as simply American—as most European Americans are. Even in self identification these individuals many times must weigh their options and consider the implications of the label. Plus, they must not only consider what that label means to themselves, but to “their” group and, importantly, to the dominant group which in many cases would prefer, in this case, the label Hispanic over Chicano or Mexicano because of its less political tones (though “Hispanic” is understood more politically among some Latinos). They are, as Du Bois states, attempting to see themselves, and at times label themselves, “through the revelation of the other world” (CITATION).

This naming/labeling is highly rhetorical. In a non-political sense, naming allows us to linguistically label “something,” in this case individuals and/or groups. In a more politicized view of rhetoric, one that fits with contemporary scholarship, this naming is caught up in issues of power. We must then ask the questions: Who is doing the labeling and for what purpose? Who has the power to label? and What are the consequences of the labeling? Continuing with the earlier example, a White American may prefer the label of “Hispanic” for a certain population while an individual from the same group may prefer the label of “Mexicano” or “Chicano” because of its political slant. The words/labels hold meaning and power and thus are directly linked to important rhetorical issues of naming, identity, power, and control. Beyond that, labeling can lead to an important aspect of rhetoric and Race Critical Theory, essentializing—which labels a whole group with a single, simple term. A problem with rhetorical essentializing, as stated by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, “is its denial, or flattening, of differences within a particular racially defined group”(136). Thus, rhetorical issues are in many ways central to the double consciousness defined by Du Bois and expressed in the metaphors employed by Du Bois himself, Villanueva, and hooks.

Beyond nomenclature, these individuals live aware of the fact that their culture, skin color and language (in many cases) are being judged by the dominant group—middle and upper class Whites. This brings up issues of socioeconomic class as well, considering many Latino Americans and African Americans live below middle-class status. And while this *double consciousness* may be less obvious in a place like El Paso, it is certainly a much more vivid reality in the lives of those that encounter dominant “norms” throughout their daily lives.

A vivid example of the Latino *double conscious* existence is Victor Villanueva. Villanueva, in *Bootstraps*, writes of his struggles as an American academic of color. He is keenly aware of his status as a racial minority in White-dominated academia. Seeing himself through his own eyes *and* the eyes of the dominant group, he struggles with the knowledge that he may only have succeeded in the academy because of his Latino identity. He is uneasy in his place, knowing that many might see him as a token academic and can never be fully sure and comfortable in how he advanced in his profession. He also focuses on class, which is tied up in race and rhetoric, and discusses how he struggled even after becoming a professor, trying to raise a large family on a modest income even though many tend to see professors as rich and prestigious. Villanueva’s identity is split and conflicted as he readily comes into contact with dominant forces, and this “twoness” makes him question his own worthiness in light of those forces.

Villanueva uses the metaphor of “bootstraps” to discuss his situation. This metaphor is discussed by the author in response to the usual metaphor of “pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps”—progressing with will and determination in the light of social and economic obstacles. What Villanueva attempts to illustrate is that many in society do not even have bootstraps from which to pull themselves up. The poor and oppressed, many times racial minorities, are caught under a current of dominance that makes it much more difficult for them to progress. To incorporate this with notions of double consciousness, we can see how many minorities understand themselves as Americans with the possibility of success and advancement (which is a reality in some cases), but also understand that their position in life will make it much more difficult to succeed. They see some successful minorities but they also see the overwhelming stagnation and poverty among minorities. The “twoness” manifests itself in being aware of one’s position as both American and almost-but-not-fully American. As Homi Bhabha would say, “almost the same, but not quite/white” (CITATION).

The metaphor employed by Du Bois is that of “the veil.” The “veil” of which Du Bois speaks is the veil of Blackness which covered/s the identity of African Americans. Though Du Bois became very well educated the veil of Blackness was draped over his existence, especially in the Southern United States, and he became keenly aware of his identity as both an American *and* an African, both a highly educated man and a (labeled) fool because of his race. What is interesting, and indicative of double consciousness, is that Du Bois understood the realities of the veil yet felt compelled to speak of his ability to rise above it at times. He felt he was able to sit in the realm of Truth, along with Shakespeare, Balzac and Aristotle, above the veil, though the veil of Blackness never truly disappeared, especially when reminded of it in the South. So what this metaphor does is help us see the “twoness” of Du Bois and other oppressed people—seeing the person beneath the veil, but always through its screen. This important metaphor, along with Du Bois’ seeming necessity to express his hopes and frustrations through written discourse, connect Du Bois with the expressive and political natures of rhetoric.

Another illustrative metaphor is that of “the margins,” employed by bell hooks. Widely used in several fields, this metaphor helps show how some groups are at the center of a society and others are merely existing at its margins, attempting at once to not fall off the edge and to move towards the center. hooks praises the power of the margin but must also concede that the margin is a place from which people want to move. The margin may not necessarily be the place where a people want to stay but it does provide an important vantage point to the creation of a more just state. It helps in reversing the “normative gaze” (West) and exists as a place for counter-hegemonic discourse. The “margin” is a strong metaphor for helping us understand the position of many in our world.

hooks stresses that while African Americans, and other oppressed groups, are within the realm of “American” they are at the same time at the margins—conscious of their identities as Americans and quasi-Americans who are not privy to full equality in the eyes of many in the dominant group. They are at once heard and voiceless. Their rhetoric is alive and rich yet it is devalued and marginalized. It is first Black or Brown, *then* American, and in many cases the voice is re-written and re-represented by the dominant group who many times speaks amongst itself about the “others,” co-opting the other voice instead of listening. The rhetoric of the “other” is colonized and oppressed. What hooks hopes for is a new “radical creative space” (CITATION) that will allow for a new location of articulation, a new identity that can begin to merge the center with the margins and, again in the words of Du Bois, allow the marginalized to be “a co-worker in the kingdom of culture” (CITATION). This sentiment seems a perfect description for Du Bois, Villanueva, and hooks.

As these three scholars express in their vivid metaphors, double-consciousness is a complex and rhetorical reality. Cornell West argues in “A Genealogy of Racism” that discourse/rhetoric is central to the creation and perpetuation of racial and racist realities. This rings true in the experiences and metaphors of Du Bois, Villanueva, and hooks. Through their metaphors they illustrate their, and others’, struggle to claim and express a voice while at the same time living in the margins and under the veil and, at times, grasping for bootstraps that aren’t there. Even their language/dialect is deemed inferior at times, a classic rhetorical attack, as non-Standard English is pushed to the margins. Villanueva addresses this when he writes, “English Only legislation can nevertheless be used to further racism, to invade privacy, to constrain free speech, to deny equal treatment under the law” (49). All of these can be perpetuated rhetorically and are important to rhetorical studies.

Ultimately, in a move that is at the heart of modern rhetorical studies, Du Bois, Villanueva, and hooks gave/give voice to millions who experience double consciousness by writing about their own experiences and expressing them in vivid and didactic metaphors. In penning their lives, they de-silence the experience of the marginalized, give voice to underrepresented groups, and add to the rich landscape of rhetorical studies and to the landscape of physical and rhetorical experiences in our world. As Teun A. van Dijk puts it, “discourse is the principal means for the construction and reproduction of sociocognitive framework[s]” (323). These three scholars not only represent this fact, as expressed in their lives and metaphors, but also represent a rhetorical analysis of entrenched racial-social frameworks.