Toward an Authentically Anti-Racist Curriculum

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"Toward an Authentically Anti-Racist Curriculum"

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English

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Black Americana Studies
Part One

Toward an Authentically Anti-Racist Pedagogy
Introduction

The field of education, or pedagogy, takes its place among what are sometimes called the “soft sciences.” Like all theoretical realms it is interdisciplinary, drawing on a host of disciplines to fashion its theory and rhetoric: cognitive psychology, sociology, anthropology, economic theory, child psychology, literary theory, cultural studies, management theory, linguistics, and, as much as we try to occlude them, philosophy, political ideology and theology.

Amid all the pressure to tool educational structures more and more toward places for “professional development,” places free from any inculcation of values, morals or faith, brave teachers will continue to tackle the toughest social, political, and spiritual issues within the walls of their classrooms. Regardless of legislation, state curricula, or national standards, these educators refuse to sterilize education, because, as any cognitive psychologist will tell you, the cognitive and affective realms of the human mind are hopelessly intertwined; “education can only take place when we go beyond the limits of pure utilitarian knowledge” (Freire, Letters 99). Once we realize this, it becomes impossible to teach Mark Twain’s Huckleberry Finn, (what Ernest Hemingway called the fountainhead of all American literature,) without discussing the fact that it contains the word nigger 215 times.

Among the controversial topics which refuse to be corralled out of public and private classrooms are “race,” ethnicity, and the dynamics of the various social groups which make up the United States. In an attempt to handle these issues in the classroom, with goals of racial harmony and social justice in mind, educators have fashioned new approaches to pedagogy which fall under the label multiculturalism.

The term is perhaps as amorphous and overused as any in the lexicon of media and educational buzzwords. In this study I use the word multiculturalism to refer a general trend current in educational thought; however, I also use it to refer to the political/sociological ideology which undergirds this educational trend and various political and academic trends. (Also note: I use the term multicultural literature to refer not to the literature of various cultures, but the pedagogical discourse and theory, in journals and other sources, about multiculturalism). Having narrowed our usage to education, we still need to sift through several ideological trends. Today, the education and mainstream media attach the term to various pedagogical trends and ideas between which we must delineate to obtain a fuller understanding of the term multiculturalism and a better idea of just what kind of movement is taking place in education.

Multiculturalism largely came into fruition in the late seventies in the wake of the civil rights movement and increased support of ethnic studies at colleges and universities, such as the work of Maulana Karenga and others in black studies. By the nineteen-eighties the intellectual work of these ethnic studies departments, along with the growth of identity politics, the mass emmigration of Latinos to the southwestern states, and the increasing number of scholars, like Geneva Smitherman, addressing the sometimes devastating cultural gap between African American students and their classrooms began to have a major impact on teacher education programs. Many theorist began writing to tell teachers how to teach students of different “races” than themselves or how to teach in classrooms consisting of two or more ethnicities. Of particular note is James King, who ksdalkjsdalk wrote over 33 books on how to
teach black children. In a research study of extant multicultural literature in educational journals and books in 1987, Sleeter and Grant found 89 articles and 38 books containing the words *multiculturalism, multiethnic, or bicultural* (pg). They divided the literature that they analyzed into several categories representing distinct educational philosophies.

They termed the first “Teaching the Culturally Different.” Pedagogically, this included literature which looked at children of color as foreigners and “conceptualized multiculturalism as something one does with children who are of color” (423), in other words, education with the goal of acculturating black and non-European Americans to mainstream cultural norms. The second category, labeled a “Human Relations” approach, included all literature which looked at education as a way to “help students of different backgrounds communicate and get along better with each other, and feel good about themselves” (425). Literature focusing on the study of only one ethnic group, “Single Group Studies,” constituted the smallest body of literature. Among this literature was King’s article “Ethnic Studies and the Classroom,” which presents as the goal of ethnic studies: development of “acceptance, appreciation, and empathy for the rich cultural and linguistic diversity in America”(17). From this same category, Richard Banks sights as his goal helping “students develop the ability to make reflective decisions. . .in order to solve personal problems, and. . .influence public policy”(73). Sleeter and Grant summarized as the collective goal of all such literature: “to sensitize students to a group’s victimization as well as its accomplishments” (pg). Another category they labeled simply “Multicultural Education,” which emphasized “the strength and value of cultural diversity. . .human rights. . .alternative life choices . . .social justice. . .and Equity distribution of power among all ethnic groups”(pg).

In large part “Teaching the Culturally Different” has gone out the pedagogical window. There are some remnants of this strand of multiculturalism, which Peter McLaren calls “conservative multiculturalism,” that view ethnic groups as “add-ons” to dominant WASP culture. However, the predominant schools of multicultural thought today borrow much more from the remaining three categories established by Sleeter and Grant and are based primarily on radical, left, and center theorizing. The “Multicultural Education” strand has drawn from the “Human Relations” category the emphasis on self-esteem and cultural identity and has drawn on the work of the “Single Group Studies” category to form a pedagogy which emphasizes the centrality of race and/or ethnicity to healthy identity formation.

On the whole Sleeter and Grant criticized most approaches to multiculturalism for being too politically conservative and ignoring issues of social stratification. Using the same keywords in 1996, I found over ten times the amount of literature as Sleeter and Grant. So it is safe to say not only that multiculturalism has swept over the field of education in the past ten years, but also that it has evolved considerably in that time. Since their study a host of Marxist multiculturalist educators, including as Bill Bigelow and Linda Christenson, have answered their call, creating literature and curricula which weave Marxist social theory and multiculturalism. Whether or not this new strand of multiculturalism is an improvement is debatable. Sleeter and Grant also criticized “the tendency to ignore multiple forms of human

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2 McLaren’s critique overuses colonialism as a model for understanding US culture, and it is extremely careless in parts. For example, he attempts to debunk Schlesinger’s book (which he wrongly labels as conservative) with the simple argument that it “appeal[s] to national unity and a harmonious citizenry” and “[a]ccording to Stanley Fish. . .[i]t can readily be traced to earlier currents of Christianity” (49), two obvious indications of racism!
diversity," sighting that most of the literature in their study “dealt only with racism” (pg). I would contend that not only multiculturalism’s failure to recognize forms of diversity other than race, but also its narrow and essentialistic conception of race continue to be two egregious problems with multicultural thought. In the ten years since the study these problems have been exacerbated by a rise in the popularity of race/ethnicity-based identity politics in addition to the proliferation of work by Afrocentric scholars. At least at an academic level, the growth of essentialism has in some ways been countered by poststructural criticism; this school of thought, however, has its own problems. Thus, below I will address the failure of racial essentialist multiculturalism’s approach toward combating racism, the confining and backward logic upon which identity politics multiculturalism is founded, the excesses of poststructuralist multiculturalism, and finally, in an attempt to show these theories in practice, I will move to the classroom and explore the ramifications of these strands of multiculturalism on the teaching of history and English. Part Two of this essay consists of a curriculum designed to address the shortcomings of the pedagogies mentioned above.

Essentialist Multiculturalism

Deconstructing Race

Extant multicultural curricula do not provide the student with a forum to explore the idea of race critically in order to come to the understanding of race as social construction or trope. Though they often work to break down stereotypes about various social groups, they fail to undermine students’ notions of races as objectively defined, either/or biological categories. Much multicultural literature also fails to distinguish between race and ethnicity or culture, and, even as it attempts to educate against stereotyping, indirectly encourages students to pigeonhole people through its repetitive use of a small number of narrowly-defining labels. That is to say, it is insufficient to challenge students notions of the commonalities of the members of a racial group; we must also challenge students conceptions of those people as members of a group per se. Thus, many multiculturalists fail to combat racism on any effective level, because they perpetuate the ideas that races are separate and characterologically different kinds of people.

The deconstructionists Derrida and Foucault have pointed out that language is often (they would say always) a political tool which governs the thinking of its speakers and readers along certain lines and that we would do well to deconstruct many of the linguistic “binary opposites” in our language which create false divisions or systems of categorizing which are not accurate. They hold that all language is procrustean and creates linguistic barriers that limit our thinking in ways which can often be destructive. Though I am not a proponent of all of Derrida’s ideas, who would have us deconstruct such opposites as “male/female” or “true/false,” I do think that Americans must learn to deconstruct the ideas which cause us to reduce “black/white” to a simplistic tandem of diametrical biologies. The notion of races as discrete biological sub-categories of humanity is the foundation of racial essentialism. Most
multiculturalists, however, fail to attack this notion and some seem to accept it. They are, thus, beginning with the presuppositions of the racism which they are trying to fight. That is that racial categories are biological realities which should govern how we think about human relations. The natural outgrowth of this assumption is that racism is something with no beginning and no end, at best its effects can be tapered off with governmental policies which ensure proportional representation and educational programs which encourage tolerance for others. What students need, however, is not this repackaged biological determinism, which is both false and pessimistic, but a historical, world-wide perspective on the creation and promulgation of the idea of “race.”

What is “Race”?

Paul Spickard writes, “In most people’s minds. . .race is the fundamental organizing principle of human affairs. . .races are biologically and characterologically separate from one another, and they are at least potentially in conflict with one another” (12). The contemporary understanding of race in the United States, though vague and not universally defined, seems to incorporate physical appearance (black people have dark skin, nappy hair and wide noses) and cultural values and behaviors (Asian people are very shy, hard-working and studious). *Webster’s New World Dictionary*’s first definition of race reads “any of the varieties or different populations of human beings distinguished by physical traits such as hair, eyes, skin color, body shape...[or] all their [unique] inherited characteristics” and its third definition reads, “loosely, a) any geographical population, b) any population sharing the same activities, habits, ideas, etc.” (italics mine, 1106).

These definitions are extremely loose, as literally any group, aggregate, or population would fit one of these two definitions: surfers, Nebraskans, my nuclear family, the ACLU, Notre Dame’s football team, people with black hair. Though sociologists, politicians, and educators all speak of race in very concrete terms, when it comes to time to categorize people into well-defined racial groups, it gets a bit more sticky. Most people have no problem assenting to the idea that “blacks” or “Hispanics” are a race; however, other ethnicities are not so easily labeled as such. Do Jewish people, for example constitute a race, or a religion with a large number of members who share a common genetic background (namely Abraham and Sarah)? They were certainly a race in the mind of Hitler, but most Americans would have trouble picking the Jew out of a line-up of dark-haired people with big noses. Or Puerto Ricans. Though they are often considered a race of their own in popular American thought, their genetic heritage actually consists of three genetic lines already recognized as races in popular American thought: European, African, and Indigenous. (They often label themselves *mestizos*, the Spanish word for mixed people). Their classification is even more problematic because the distribution of these three gene pools is by no means regular; there are some Puerto Ricans who look “black” some who look “Latino” and thousands at every shade in between. Polynesians, Australian aborigines, West Indians, Aleuts, and New Orleans’ *cafe au laits* are all people who throw monkey wrenches into simplistic racial categorizing. Why is it so difficult to establish good criteria for drawing racial boundaries? As prominent geneticist James C. King puts it, the concept of race is “make-believe,” and “there are no objective boundaries to set off one subspecies from another” (cited in Spickard 15, 16).
“Race” is a concept with a history. That is to say it is a social construction rather than a biological reality, and so there was a time when there were no races. The idea of “race” grew out of European imperialism and Enlightenment thought. Post-Colombian Europe, having explored the rest of the world, saw that the world had few civilizational advancements to offer. Philip Curtin writes, “Europeans could now see their superiority—in factory production, agricultural yields, or the cost of transportation” in addition to “demonstrable superiority in power and knowledge.” (cited in D’Souza\(^3\) 98). Seeking to explain their ostensible superiority over the rest of the world, “they concluded there must be some relationship between physical attributes... and civilizational achievement” (D’Souza 98). As Oscar Handlin puts it, “Racism grew out of truth-seeking explorations into the nature of man and human society” (cited in D’Souza 29). The European propensity for hierarchical ordering of nature based on pseudo-Biblical principles, led scientists to rank groups in terms of their proximity to European civilization. This concept of different biological groupings of people as being lesser than Europeans allowed a convenient rationale for colonialism. Thus, we see the seeds of the idea that humankind can be broken into subcategories with varying ontological value. This was the birth of the idea of “race” and, thus, the birth of racism.\(^4\)

In the eighteenth century, Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus constructed an artificial taxonomic system for categorizing all living things, the one we all learn in ninth grade biology: kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. And in 1859 Charles Darwin published his landmark work *The Origin of the Species: The Survival of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*, which outlines his theory of natural selection. (Note that the subtitle is usually dropped in contemporary references to Darwin’s work). In *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin expanded on his theory of natural selection and his notion of “favored races,” predicting that “higher races” would evolve into a more advanced species and races like “Negroes” would be eliminated (178). Post-Linnaen, post-Darwinian scientists approached anthropology from a paradigm in which humans were an ever-improving species who developed from apes and could be rank ordered in procrustean biological categories. Thus, different races represented different places on the continuum of improvement, with Africans being just above chimpanzees and Caucasians being the closest to evolution’s final and perfect product (King 125-126). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries this trend led scientists such as Madison Grant, Francis A. Walker, Henry F. Osborn, and Charles B. Davenport to “scientifically” divide the human species into subspecies called “races” and further into subracial categories, each with its own distinctive physical and moral characteristics. Their pseudo-scientific program of racism, called eugenics, advocated such things as “racial hygiene” (what is today know as genocide) and influenced, among others, Henry Ford and Adolph Hitler (Torrey 85).

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\(^3\) D’Souza’s work is excellent for understanding the roots of racism and their implications, though it falls short in parts as he overreaches and tries to cover too much ground. He has a penchant for presenting the extreme as the typical, and he fails to properly ascribe the pathologies of African American culture to white racism and slavery. Na’im Akbar’s *Chains and Images of Psychological Slavery*, though inadvertently racist itself at times, is especially good at tracing the roots of these pathologies.

\(^4\) This was by no means the beginning of tribalism, hatred between social groups or the oppression of the less powerful by the more, only the beginning of the scientificized idea of ‘race’ which informs the way we view humans today.
D’Souza’s presentation of the history of race challenges at its core the American assumption that racism is the result of biological reality coupled with fear and ignorance and that, thus, race must *always* remain a primary means of categorizing people. Rather it is a social construction built upon the presuppositions of the faulty science and colonialism of the past. In contrast to Richard Delgado’s law of racial thermodynamics, which says despite change in social institutions and public policy “the net quantum of racism remains exactly the same” (cited in D’Souza 17), racism has not remained “level” since the beginning of mankind, it is not built into human nature. It had a beginning, thus, it can have an end. What are built into human nature are self-interest and a propensity toward evil which manifest themselves variously in different contexts. In the modern cultural context of the United States shaped by Enlightenment philosophy, colonialism, Darwin and eugenicists, its manifestation is often xenophobic racism.

**No Dogs or Irish Allowed**

An authentically anti-racist pedagogy must help students understand that “race” is a social construction, a myth, used to fuel groupist hatred, tribalism, and oppression. One means of doing this is to demonstrate the fluidity of the concept of race, how it has been changed to remain useful in different historical contexts. A glance into the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals that the meaning of the word *race*, like the meanings of all words, has evolved over the past four centuries. Charles Davenport, a eugenicist working at the turn of the century wrote in his research on the “different races of men” in the United States that:

Poles are “independent and self reliant though clannish”; the Italians tending to “crimes of personal violence”; and the Hebrews “intermediate between the slovenly Servians and Greeks and the tidy Swedes, Germans and Bohemians” given to “thieving” (cited in Geobles, 46-7).

What is notable here is that all the “races” Davenport speaks of are, in the social and political climate of today, simply considered “white.” Are Poles, Italians, Swedes, Germans and “Hebrews” different races? They have different physical features (Swedes are blonde and blue-eyed and have long noses) and different cultural values and behaviors (Italians are hot-tempered and eat a lot of pasta). And there are pockets of peoples in the US who have both genetically (phenotypically) and culturally maintained their differences from other groups. So if their differences are enough to adhere to our contemporary understanding of race, why are they now lumped under the single heading “white”? The answer is that in a time of heavy European immigration it served the social and economic interests of “natives” to promulgate stereotypes of various social groups so that they might exploit and subjugate those groups. Between 1880 and 1930 the US attracted over 25 million immigrants who were predominantly eastern and southern European. This massive influx of immigrants, which doubled the size of our major cities, posed a threat to the political institutions and economic security of “natives.” It is far easier to hate other human beings when we ontologize their differences by using concepts like “race.”

In the June 1896 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* Francis A. Walker noted that half of the new immigrants were “Hungarians, Bohemians, Poles, south Italians, and Russian Jews,” whom he described as “ignorant and brutalized peasantry... degraded below our utmost

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5 My inclination is to enclose the word *race* in quotations for the duration of the paper to remind the reader that it is a misleading, socially-constructed concept; however, I realize this would become cumbersome.
conceptions” and having “habits repellent to our native people. They are beaten men from beaten races, representing the worst failures in the struggle for existence” (cited in Torrey 42). Another writer described them as “low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality. . . clearly they belong in skins, in wattled huts at the close of the great Ice Age” (cited in D’Souza 285). Surely, because they were not only cultural but religious outsiders, the Irish Catholics received the worst of this. Cartoonist Thomas Nash caricatured the Irish as drunken simian or Neanderthal creatures, exaggerating their physical features in much the same way the image of African Americans have been. Signs that read “No Irish Need Apply” were not uncommon, and W.E.B. Dubois wrote in his essay “lasd” the racial angle against the Irish papist was more harsh than that against blacks (Writings 563). One writer suggested, “The best remedy for whatever is amiss in America would be if every Irishman should kill a Negro and be hanged for it” (D’Souza 285).

However, the intermarriage and integration of European-American groups has brought us to a point where whether they are Irish and German or Swedish, Italian or French is of little consequence. In the current cultural context all that is important is that they are “white.” Our concept of what constitutes a race has changed. Swedish and German and Serbian are no longer “races.” The important “races” in the US today are “black,” “white,” “Latino” or “Hispanic” (the term “Mexican” is often used to refer to Latino individuals regardless of their genetics), “Asian,” and to a lesser extent “Indian,” (this refers to individuals whose ancestry originates in the pre-Colombian US). Unlike the cultural and ethnic differences which were the basis of past divisions, the criterion for the divisions between these groups is simply skin color and related physical features: black, white, brown, yellow, red. The loose categories of “race” have changed to fit the contemporary needs of those who would use it as a political tool.

**Different Places, Different Races**

Just as “race” changes to fit the context of different times, it changes to fit the context of different places. In 1950 the United States Bureau of the Census had three racial categories: Black, White and Other. In England the categories are White, West Indian, African, Arab, Turkish, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Shri Lankan, and Other. Note that many of these categories are actually nationalities. In Brazil the classifications are (in translation) “black,” “very dark” “dark,” “dark mulatto,” “light mulatto,” “indigenous and white,” “light brown,” “earthy white,” and “white” (Spickard 18). In Nigeria the races are Ibo, Hausa, and Yoruba, all of which would just be “black” to a most US citizens. The point is simply that different sociopolitical landscapes call for different racial categories. However, if, like *species*, races were biological categories, they could be applied universally to all people of the world. A tiger is a tiger in England, Nigeria and the United States.

If this seems obvious to many, it isn’t to many others. Though young children in their sagacious innocence often perceive all humans as being essentially alike, many teenagers and adults view different “races” of people as being intrinsically and ontologically different. The idea of race as a fabrication rather than a hard and fast biological reality is really quite novel to many people. I am reminded of the heated discussions in a mostly-black African American Lit.

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6 Of course Serbian is still a “race” in Croatia.
class at Western Michigan University, where, upon my suggestion that multi-racial people did not always have the terrible identity problems they were stereotyped with, a black Muslim friend of mine responded that such a claim was ridiculous because people “always have to choose [a racial label to identify themselves with].” With the support of many of his classmates, he informed me that the only valid choice for multi-racials was blackness because “black is a dominant gene,” confusing the racist concept of hypodescent, or the one-drop rule, for biological evidence of racial essentialism. When I asserted that black is not a gene at all, and certainly not a dominant one, for if it were, there would be no such thing as light-skinned black people, (or no such thing as “white” people, if we all originate from African ancestry) I was scoffed at by a woman who explained to me that I was foolishly confusing phenotype and genotype. She began to give me a biology lesson showing me how the black gene is carried from one generation to the next. Her black gene was not a metaphor for the social condition of an ethnicity or the inheritance of class position as imposed by hegemons using hypodescent as a means of power, but an actual physical, biological, chromosome-residing gene. The ideas of both my classmates were predicated on the idea of objective biological racial boundaries that provide the basis for ontological categories of human beings.

It is a consciousness so deeply-entrenched in popular American thought that many people need a kind of paradigm shift to return to there child-like perceptions of people as essentially alike. Perhaps I can provide a helpful metaphor to make that shift. The spectrum of light is a perfect blend of color from end to the other. The points at which we choose to draw dividing lines and the subsequent labels that we ascribe to the resulting “colors” are entirely arbitrary. That is to say we could draw new lines in new places and call the new “colors” whatever we like. “Blue” is not a section of the spectrum that is consistent throughout that can be distinguished from “green” because they have nothing in common. Rather “blue” and “green” flow into one another perfectly and can be distinguished only by the implementation of a dividing line. Once we make such a division we can note that there is more variation within the sections we call “blue” and “green” than there is between them. This metaphor’s validity is substantiated by the reality that there is more variation within races than between them (Spickard 16-17).

Imagine then a spectrum of people much like the spectrum of light—a pre-Babelian human family where there are no clear places to demarcate groups by physical characteristics, and children of different “races” are offspring of the same parents (this is genetically possible). Now imagine lines drawn through this spectrum by history, tribalism, geography, and

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7 Hypodescent is the idea that an individual of mixed race must be acknowledged as a member of the most subordinant racial group. It is a product of eugenicist thinking and white fear of the “mongrelization” of the “white race” and, historically, has been used to defend Jim Crowisms and other acts of racism. Ironically, today hypodescent is standard doctrine in groups such as the Nation of Islam and other political minority groups who wish to maintain existing racial boundaries for the sake of preserving the size of their demographic.

8 What disgusted me the most about the incident was that the professor, who spent the semester singing the praises of Henry Lois Gates, Jr., had absolutely nothing corrective to say to the woman. He listened to her argument as if it were an interesting lesson in biology that we could all learn from. Never mind that his hero, Gates, has explicitly outlined that “race” is “nothing more than a trope” and himself always encloses the word in quotation marks because of its mythical nature.

9 There are actually biological constraints which govern which wavelengths of light we consider colors, and people will draw the same lines in the color spectrum across cultures, but you get the point.
language. As these lines isolate breeding groups, these breeding groups establish traits unique to themselves (kinky hair, Asiatic eyes, long noses, pale skin), and biological differences begin to mirror social divisions. The Other is now visible and the cause-effect relationship becomes inverted, biological differences begin to cause social divisions, or least become excuses for them. Thus, we can see that thinking in terms of race is thinking backwards, quite literally. As Ashley Montague asserts, “Terms should be designed to fit the facts, and not the facts forced to fit in a procrustean rack of predetermined categories. . . The term race goes far beyond the facts and only serves to obscure them” (cited in Ford 23).

The Lie That Matters?

So if we now understand that “race” is a kind of social invention, that it serves only to perpetuate hatred, xenophobia, and the exploitation of social groups, and that it is a concept rooted in European imperialistic thought, should we not now work to deconstruct this myth as the basis for repairing the damage it has done? From many multiculturalists, the answer comes a resounding “No.” There are those, such as Cornel West, who fully agree that race is a human fabrication, and yet assert that there are established social and political structures which have assumed the reality and validity of the concept of race, thus the arbitrary has become the important. Truly, it cannot be escaped, as West has so succinctly put it (as the title of a book), race matters. Statistics regarding health issues, infant mortality rates, poverty levels, and unemployment tell us this clearly. However, does this mean that the only viable solution is to institutionalize race as the basis of public and educational policy, that, as it said in debates over affirmative action, “Since race created the problem, it has to be part of the solution”? The logic of this claim, however, is quickly disarmed with a familiar proverb about fire.

So if we understand that race is a lie and that in many and undeniable ways race matters, the question at hand for educators and communities then is do we design educational curricula which perpetuate a system where a lie dictates the distribution of power and create classrooms which encourage tribalism and racial identity as the path self-actualization, classrooms where students are encouraged to see members of other “races” as characterologically different from themselves? Or do we design curricula which attempt to disarm the lie of race and prepare students to change the social structures in which it has been embedded? Do we strive for reconciliation and integration in hopes of attaining the dream of Martin Luther King, Jr.? Or do we resign ourselves to the fact that these are the teams we’ve been on since colonialism, there’s no changing them now? I assert that the promulgation of the idea of race and racism are intrinsically wed. One cannot purport to be a “racialist” and not a racist. The very concept of race is the product of ethnocentrism coupled with bad science. So long as we continue to believe in race as a valid or “real” way of dividing human beings, it will continue to be used for exploitation and divisiveness. Clyde W. Brown urges in his book We Can All Get Along, “Replace the word race in your vocabulary with” more accurate terms “like ethnic group, ethnicity, cultural background, nationality. . . .the term race is loaded with a history of fiction, conflict, violence, and racism. Defuse the racism by discarding the outmoded term” (23). And yet many multicultural educators continue to cling to racial handles for people—not for the purpose of analyzing these categories critically and deconstructing them, but rather for propagating and celebrating them.

In Richard Goebel’s words: “[R]ace is an illusion created through language by those who benefit . . . from the misconceptions and stereotypes of others” (43). This principle should
be thoroughly explored in the classroom and form the foundation for a new multicultural pedagogy in which the historical ramifications of race are explored with an emphasis placed on moving beyond the concept of race. History and intermarriage have made the “racial” mixes of white Americans insignificant: Irish, German, and Anglo are no longer races. As educators we must strive to design a pedagogy which will move us to a point where we can put quotation marks around all people’s racial mixes. We must push to create a cultural context where “black” and “white” and “Latino” are no longer races. Hopefully, the rising number of “multi-racial” and multi-ethnic children in our classrooms will help us move to this point. Simply stated, the tenet which must undergird our new multicultural pedagogy: To eradicate racism, we must eradicate the inaccurate and fictionalized concept of “race.” I am not advocating the melting away of all difference, some Huxlian homogeneity, or the elimination of social groups. However, if as Maria Olid holds, “group differentiation is both an inevitable and desirable aspect of modern social processes” (71-72), don’t we want to eliminate from those processes the “fiction,” “myth,” and “lie” of race? The alternative, to me, seems grim.

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Identity Politics and Multiculturalism

"Nobody who understands the history of justice or of the imagination (largely the same history) wants to be treated as a member of a category."

—Wendell Berry

Race vs. Ethnicity

Maria P.P. Root points out, “The simplicity and irrationality of our basis for conceptualizing race affects how we subsequently think about social identity” (8). We throw people, including ourselves, into narrow racial categories and make assumptions about their person and their experiences. Races are labels used as short-cuts to how we think about people, “where they live, what there level of education is, what there family structure is” (Root 345). Our discussion has been somewhat limited to this point as I have not included the concept of ethnicity, or culture. Unfortunately, the words race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably in contemporary discourse regarding race, racism, and ethnic conflict, or the

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10 Although I was told by a coworker at the time of this writing that she knew I was Irish because “they’re sneaky and they stink.”
word *ethnicity* is thrown in after *race* to counter the problem of race's lack of biological perimeters. Ethnicity, in contrast to race, is a much more accurate and useful way of viewing social groups. Members of an ethnic group are often related by kinship, thus often share physical characteristics; however, geographical proximity, ideological and cultural similarities are much more important common denominators. “Races” can become ethnicities, as biological Otherness causes shared history and acquisition of common cultural and linguistic features, as in the case of many African Americans. Most multiculturalists understand this difference and at least implicitly delineate between race and ethnicity in their theory. However, in the classroom, students are often left to the resources of their own frameworks for sociological categorizing, frameworks which are often convoluted, misinformed, or and overly simplistic. Even though the term *ethnicity* or *culture* often replaces the less accurate *race*, the students' conceptions of ethnicity and culture are not explored critically.

Objective criteria for ethnicities, of course, are as hard to come by as those for “races.” And, as in the case of race, even after some set of criteria has been agreed upon, differences between “two individuals belonging to the same culture may often be as great, or greater than, differences between two individuals belonging to different cultures” (Caws 375). The diversity of the African American “community” provides us with rich examples. Spike Lee’s most recent film, *Get On the Bus*, explores, among other things, the diverse, dynamic nature of the African American male identity. His characters include a gay, black, Republican; a bi-racial, South Central cop raised by his white mother; and an ex-gangbanger turned devout orthodox Muslim. Lee’s film attests to the complexity and the multi-layered nature of identity, demonstrating that race is only one factor in a matrix of others including geography, familial ties, class, political, religious, and ideological affiliations, age, education, occupation, and personal experiences. Thus, even when we have made the distinction between “black” the ethnicity and “black” the race, essentialism and claims of racial unity, or quintessential ethnic “Experiences,” are problematic because of what Michael Eric Dyson so astutely describes as “broadened horizons of racial experience and more sophisticated conceptions of racial identity.” He urges us to “transcend the gaze of race and look to a more ecumenical constellation of forces. . .that crisscross the landscape of cultural identity and that affect the shape of life” (221). As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. puts it: “There are 35 million black Americans—that’s 35 million ways to be black” (television interview).

**Ethnicity as Identity**

Yet, many multiculturalists approach ethnic essentialism by encouraging children again and again to view each other as members of characterologically different ethnic groups and to find their own identity within a given group, as evinced in Enid Lee’s imploration to educators to seek out “materials that give back to people all the ideas they have developed. . .all those things which have been stolen from them and attributed to other folks. Jazz and rap are two examples which come to mind” (22). I am by no means opposed to making sure that credit is given where credit is due (but who is trying to give white people credit for rap and jazz?!); however, what is implicit in Lee’s argument is that jazz and rap belong to black people and have been stolen by white people, that black children need to be told about this robbery so that

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11 Though Dyson argues against racial essentialism, he does not altogether avoid identity politics even as he avoids their most racist extremes.
they can regain pride in themselves as members of a group that has made important cultural contributions. Essentialism lies behind this logic, which says we are no more or less than what other people who look like us have contributed to society; our ethnic history is our self-worth. The pedagogy which accepts this will damage self-esteem or wrongly inflate it (i.e., damage it in the long-run), whether that pedagogy is Eurocentric, Afrocentric or multicultural.

Kathleen M. Bartlett pats herself on the back, writing, “Imagine my student Ramiro’s surprise when he discovered the Puerto Rican writers listed on the syllabus for our American Literature course; in his eleven years of schooling he had never encountered a voice which described the experiences which he and his family have shared” (40). What Bartlett must mean is the story of the Puerto Rican immigrant, since most students go through school without reading a story about their family. Thus, Bartlett draws the conclusion (for Ramiro) that stories by non-Puerto Rican authors with non-Puerto Rican characters cannot give voice to Ramiro’s experiences. Linda Christensen recounts hearing a Puerto Rican/Haitian-American woman say, “I went through school wondering if anyone like me had done anything worthwhile or important. . .I remember thinking, ‘Don’t we have anyone?’” (143). Too often the multiculturalist’s response to this is to fill the curriculum with history and literature by and about people who fit the student’s definition of who is “like” her, people who the student understands as part of her “we,” rather than challenge the student’s narrow conception of commonality and the limits of her tribalistic identity.

When asked how one teaches multiculturally without making white children feel guilty, Lee responds, “there have always been white people who have fought against racism and social injustice. White children can proudly identify with these people” (21). Again, the implicit logic behind this statement is that white people can only identify with white people and black people with black people, that we should continue to see ourselves as like people with the same color skin and unlike people with different colors of skin. Black children have Jesse Owens and Harriet Tubman to be proud of; Latino children have Caesar Chavez and Luis J. Rodriguez; white children have George Washington and Larry Bird. As an Irish American whose ancestors came to Canada during the potato famine and didn’t arrive in America until the late 1800’s my only significant tie to traditional American heroes like Washington and Jefferson is that they framed the government of the United States, people of any color have that same tie. As a writer, I draw on the influence of Chinua Achebe, Langston Hughes, Philip Levine, Todd Gitlin. Even though these blacks and Jews are not “like” me, their writings give voice to my experiences. I would hope Fyodor Dostoevsky could do the same for a black person. As a human being identify with Martin Luther King, Jr. because he was a Christian who fought against racism and social injustice, yet according to Lee it would be more appropriate and more psychologically healthy for me to seek out white role models. Black/Jewish writer David Bernstien scoffs at this logic: “What we ought to teach kids is to celebrate their individuality and their accomplishments, not take phony pride in what their ancestors did. So what if a black man invented the traffic light? Do I really shine in his reflected glory? If so, then I really do have self-esteem problems” (67).

Though the conservative cry for individualism is often grounded in ignorance of the social reality of minorities and is too easily made by a white parent with a white student in a school with a “Eurocentric” curriculum, Berstein’s indictment of “phony pride” is one anti-racist educators must take to heart. In statements like Lee’s, which attempt at once to celebrate group pride and avoid group guilt, the faulty logic of racial and ethnic essentialism
become apparent. As a Christian I believe in humanistic essentialism, that, as Blake writes, I have “reason to lament what man has made of man.” I mourn human tragedies and celebrate human victories regardless of color. I am ashamed of the Trail of Tears because I am human, not because I am white. This does not mean that I ignore the ways in which privilege influences my life as a “white” person, it means that my responsibility to those who are underprivileged grows out of my humanity and my faith, not my ethnicity, i.e., if my great-great-great-grandfather did in fact own slaves, this does not inculpate me of anything; however, if he did not, this does not get me off the hook either. As a human being, I am at once utterly ashamed of the evil that was slavery and ineffably proud of the survival and struggle for justice that arose from that holocaust. This is the “essentialism” which must undergird a truly anti-racist pedagogy.

Who Am I?

The question at hand of course when educators talk about self-esteem and group pride is identity, how students conceive of themselves in relation to the world. Many multiculturalists speak of non-European students being forced to acculturate to European-American norms in order to succeed in school. They argue that this acculturation or assimilation amounts to what Herbert Kohl calls “a major loss of self” (134) and what Asa Hilliard calls a loss of “cultural identity” (find). Kohl contends that “the only alternative” for a student when a learning environment “challenges [his] identity” is a tactic he labels not-learning, willful refusal to learn or be successful in school. Peter Caws questions the multiculturalist’s claim that a culture of one’s own (one not imposed from without) is a condition of healthy identity formation. He points out that one’s “‘native’ culture... is ‘imposed from without’... it is not something one has freely chosen or worked to acquire, which would make it ‘one’s own.’ Consequently, the identity that depends on it cannot be one’s own... either” (371). The culture into which and parents to whom one is born are not things she chooses, and yet, in the case of Afrocentric schools, for example, it is not considered oppressive when black children are inculcated with an African culture to which they have only nominal connection rather than the American culture to which they are exposed daily and within which they must succeed. Of course, taken too far this logic could be used to defend, for example, the actions of BIA boarding schools that cut the hair of young native americans and punished them for speaking their native languages; however, the point remains. The idea that the culture one is born into is somehow his and, thus, inviolable due its intimate connection with his self, is tenuous at best.

We see this one-to-one equation of ethnicity as identity that is implicit in much multicultural theory in the writing of pop culture critic Armond White, who writes of the video for Michael Jackson’s “Bad,” “[the screenwriter] doesn’t root Darryl’s moral dilemma in terms of his racial identity, and this throws the whole film slightly off. [he] pulls back from the complexities of the real tragedy, substituting Michael’s own particular paranoid preoccupations with masculinity, home, and Blackness” (77). White’s critique of the media which often try to de-racialize public figures is understandable; however, his claim that the character’s central moral dilemma must be his racial identity because he is black is shallow and essentialist. His call to replace Michael Jackson, the particular human being, with Michael Jackson, the black type, is the real tragedy, for it results in characaturization and tokenism.
Multicultural educators who encourage students to do the same with their own identities and perceptions of others will only yield the similar results.

The fruits of an authentically anti-racist multiculturalism are children’s ability to escape hermetic monocultural identities (of course, it is a free country, as they say, and anyone is welcome to remain reliant on a group for the whole of his identity) and enrich themselves “through acquaintance with and cultivation of what is found to be the most rewarding in all the human products and practices with which one comes into contact” (Caws 372). Classrooms that encourage students again and again to view one another as primarily as “Puerto Rican,” “Black” or “Native American” and to find their own identities within the narrow confines of these categories impede the dialogical process of the development of an authentic identity. Caws holds that this process requires the transcendence of one’s culture or origin. “That one might settle back into an identity association uniquely with that very culture is not ruled out a priori, but it is not to be expected—and certainly not to be insisted upon, especially not by others having an interest in the maintenance or strengthening of the culture in question” (372).

Rather than pointing children to their “heritages” as sources of pride and models for identity formation, educators should concentrate on teaching students a body of knowledge from mathematics, physics, languages, politics, sociology, etc. Despite its shallowness, the “back to basics” chant is right in this sense. For, if identity is the relation of myself to myself, this is necessarily a mediated relationship: “I relate to myself through my interaction with others and with the world” (Caws 378). Therefore, as students struggle to understand who they are, one of the things they urgently need is as much knowledge about the world as they can acquire. This is the point at which poststructural multiculturalists step in to point out how all knowledge is “local” or “culturally marked,” that we are back in the domain of oppression, for one man’s knowledge is designed to keep another man down. This will be explored further in the next section. This criticism should be taken more seriously than it is in some circles (and less seriously than it is in others); however, it is inescapable that there is a vast and ramified body of teachable knowledge, “the mastery of which can do far more for the initiates sense of identity, for his or her self-relation mediated by an enduring object domain, than can any rediscovered ancestral roots” (Caws 379). As acerbic as it is, Bernstein’s traffic light example makes sense. And indeed, though sensationalized by conservatives, there must be at least some validity to the claims that too much focus on ancestry and heritage, what Schlesinger calls “the cult of ethnicity,” “exaggerates differences, intensifies resentments and antagonisms, and drives ever deeper the awful wedges between races and nationalities” (102).

Unfortunately, the turn in public sphere, and subsequently in education, has been away from this kind of thinking and toward more and more fragmented identity politics. One groups of scholars who have catalyzed this process are the Afrocentrists.

It’s a Black Thing, You Wouldn’t Understand

Afrocentric curricula encourage black students to identify primarily with Africa and to see it as the source of their cultural inheritance by such methods as teaching them math in Swahili, keeping them informed on current events in Africa, and presenting an illustrious picture of the African past. Kimberly Harris, 7th grade teacher at Detroit’s Malcolm X Academy explains, “When students are in an Africa-centered school, they see that we’ve been

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12 Afrocentric scholars, though actually monoculturalists, influence many multicultural writers and educators.
around since the beginning of time...and we've been kings and queens” (quoted in Viadero 28). This essentialist pedagogy attempts to counter a racist one which points young African Americans to the Underground Railroad as the pinnacle of their history; however, it is ultimately a damaging one, as it seeks to replace a white-washed curriculum with a black-washed one. Some Afrocentrists have gone so far as to construct elaborate pseudo-scientific explanations of how melanin is the ontological courier of essence. Frances Cress Welsing, professor of social work at Howard, holds that melanin is the “superior absorber of all energy” and that “the color black is essential to being in touch with the God force.” In her view, Caucasians are “genetic defectives” that are the product of “the albino mutant offspring of black-skinned mother and fathers in Africa” (cited in D’Souza 423). Drawing on melanin theory, Marimba Ani claims that “the pattern of European behavior toward others cannot change because of the nature of the European himself” (find). This rhetoric mirrors that of the racist eugenicists who influenced Hitler, like Henry F. Osborn, who concluded of the lowly non-Anglo races that it was no more possible for them to change their nature “than for a leopard to change his spots” because environment could not “fundamentally alter inborn racial differences” (cited in Torrey 43).

Afrocentricity may seem ludicrous to some, a strawman for the sake of my argument; Schlesinger calls “self-Africanization” “playacting” (88). The influence of Afrocentrism, however, is no joke. Atlanta, Cleveland, Detroit, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Oakland, Washington and several other cities have public schools that are avowedly Afrocentrist, in addition to the many private academies. The Portland School District’s Baseline Essays, which were written to infuse Afrocentrism into that district’s curriculum, make several claims about African and African American history which (black and white) scholars have found to be inaccurate, but they continue to inform the curriculum. In the debate over “ebonics”? made the argument that the linguistic patterns and grammatical structures of BEV were genetically hard-wired (find). Afrocentrism has trickled into popular thought as well. As a recurring theme in hardcore rap, a shibboleth for authenticity (whether or not you are “down”), it has made its way into millions of teenage heads, nappy and straight. The liner notes for Ice Cube’s Predator album inform the reader: “I am not an African American. I am an African. I will become an American when this country pays for the crimes it has committed against my people.” The chorus of one Arrested Development song rings, “Africa’s inside me, taking back her child/She’s giving me my pride and setting me free...my soul’s a boilin’And sooner or later Africa’s glory and toil/Will teach an old dog new tricks.” Rage Against the Machine’s “People of the Sun,” a title which intimates to melanin theory13, enchants “Neva forget that tha whip snapped ya back... that vulta came ta try an steal ya name/But now ya found a gun: Your history.” The Wu-Tang Clan fills their lyrics with references and numerology from the Nation of Islam splinter group, the Five Percent Nation. Groups such as Public Enemy, Big Daddy Kane, Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul, and the Roots, all employ lyrics which point black listeners back to Africa for pride and identity.

13 If this is a reference to melanin theory, it is a problematic one since the band contains two white members and two half-white members.
Of course, one can argue that the issue is not genes but culture; however, even the idea of a living cultural thread linking African Americans more closely to Africa than the United States is highly problematic. In their authoritative history text, *From Slavery to Freedom*, Franklin and Moss write that statements about the survival of African culture in present day African American culture must be considered “tentative,” citing that in “social organizations and in various aesthetic manifestations there are *some* evidences of African culture” (25, 26, italics mine). Some would argue that one source is seen in the language of African Americans. Black English Vernacular, which bears some marks of African languages, like the words “yam” and “banjo,” and is something quite different from standard English, continues to thrive in the US as a viable and culturally important language system. However, African influences on BEV are minor at best, and, obviously, a native BEV-speaker would have a much easier time communicating with another, non-BEV-speaking American than with a “fellow” African. Black essayist/editor Stanley Crouch concludes that there are no sources of “Negro14 identity” “of any significance from Africa” (*Skin Game* 47). Tragic as it may be, one result of the horror of slavery was a severing from African culture that was, for all practical purposes, complete. Thus, as black columnist William Raspberry observes, “The need is not to reach back for some culture we never knew but to lay full claim to the culture in which we exist” (cited in Schlesinger 87).

Afrocentrism and other strands of pro-minority ethnic essentialism serve only to “flip the script,” rather than undermine the ideological roots of racism and its use as a tool of oppression. Multicultural pedagogies which encourage students to find pride in their heritages and to view history in terms of “us” and “them” (when “we” were kings, when “we” invented the vaccine for Polio, when “they” were huddled in huts) serve only to straight-jacket the identities of the very students they seek to liberate and further disenfranchise the underprivileged by encouraging them to organize along racial/ethnic lines and view people of other ethnicities as members of other teams.

**Out of the Melting Pot, Into the Fire**

Some of the most misguided multiculturalists are those informed by the theoreticians of the hard left who promulgate an oppositional criticism that points its finger at the real or imagined racism, “phallocentrism,” “anthropocentrism,” and homophobia that it finds in every cultural nook and cranny, carelessly tossing around words like *holocaust*, *neocolonialism* and *genocide*. In attempts to encourage students to celebrate their respective ethnic and cultural heritages, multiculturalists have denounced the American myth of the melting pot as racist and Eurocentric. They argue that “integration” really means complete assimilation to mainstream American culture, which they view as “white,” “WASP,” “Anglo-,” or “Euro-American”: “Before you can be ‘added on’ to the dominant United States culture you must first adopt a consensual view of culture and learn to accept the essentially Euro-American patriarchal norms of the ‘host’ country... a prerequisite to ‘joining the club’ is to become denuded, deracinated and culturally stripped” (McLaren 49). Instead of the melting pot they offer the salad bowl as a symbol of ideal cultural relations, a dish in which each ingredient remains distinctly its own, yet adds to a delicious and diverse whole. Another alternate symbol is the

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14 His word, not mine.
15 McLaren’s use of the word *patriarchal* in reference to “Euro-American culture” poses the question of what non-Euro-American cultures he sees as feminist (or matriarchal) and standing in opposition to that culture.
mosaic, an art form in which each piece maintains its distinct color, yet together the multitude of pieces creates a multi-colored work of art. These metaphors are tempting in their beauty; yet, as Thomas Pettigrew points out

the new myth of complete pluralism does justice to neither the complexity nor the subtlety of intergroup relations in the United States. Assimilation is not the opposite of but a part of the same social processes as cultural pluralism. The two conceptually separate phenomena are, in reality, inseparable parts of the same ball of wax called American society. In such a society, claims of complete pluralism are even more absurd than the melting-pot metaphor.

Thus, the salad bowl trope becomes for us problematic, because it is only someone outside of the salad who could go unaffected by its diversity. In real life, however, we are all in the mix and we are all eating; thus, it is virtually impossible to maintain cultural purity, and it is certainly impossible to do it while upholding an appreciation for diversity. The tomato who is busy protecting the pureness of his tomaticity knows nothing of the flavor of lettuce, onions, or carrots. Gates takes the same approach to dismantling the mosaic metaphor, noting that if it means that individual cultures are “fixed in place” and “separated by walls of grout,” it is particularly impoverished. Yet many multiculturalists define Anglo-American culture as “central” and non-Anglo culture as “marginal,” because a “belief in monoculturalism suggests that the world is manageable, that students, curricula and classrooms can be developed— and divided— along clear cultural lines” (Fishman 75). Indeed, real culture is never static, always dynamic, refusing to be confined by the categories and labels of critics and politicians. It is more like an enormous dialogue in which ideas, customs, values, styles, and tastes are exchanged, melded, and honed. I do not mean to paint too pretty of a picture, to forget that the conversation has not always been open to everyone or that there are still ways in which some voices are sometimes occluded. But the hard left’s “center-periphery models (even those which might account for multiple centers and peripheries)” prove inadequate in our increasingly complex and cosmopolitan United States (Appadurai, cited in Gates Columbus 214). Such models oversimplify the reality of our culture and in the process encourage members of minority groups to view themselves as alienated from and opposed to American culture at large, as destined for failure because they are on the “outside.”

This endictment of a mythical central Anglo culture and the resulting fear of “common culture” and “national unity” grow out of a history of Anglo-Americans failing to recognize themselves as ethnics and passing off their regional culture as our national standard. However, talk of diversity and ethnic solidarity can easily take a wrong turn into the ideological equivalent of the Plessy v. Ferguson, “separate-but-equal” decision. The success of encouraging salad-bowl “diversity” and multiculturalism is evinced on college campuses, where multiculturalism’s tenets dominate academic thought and policy. Alan Kors, professor at University of Pennsylvania, comments that university campuses have “the cultural diversity of Beirut. There are separate armed camps” that do not mix with one another on social or ideological levels (cited in Schlesinger 8). Gitlin writes that university culture encourages “rivalry for the crown of thorns” (124). “At the contemporary university, students are exhorted to ‘celebrate diversity’ by people who practice just the opposite,” cries David Bernstein. “There is nothing ‘diverse’ about segregated housing, tribalized curricula, or any of the numerous other pathological policies enlightened administrators foist on students in the name of tolerance” (66). My own experience at college corroborates Kors’, Gitlin’s and
Bernstein’s opinions. I came from an ethnically/culturally mixed inner-city high school in Lansing, where groups of friends were typically racially mixed and inter-racial dating was so common that it did not raise eyebrows, to Western Michigan University, where inter-racial dating was seen as some kind of political statement and, as a Black Americana Studies minor, I made few black friends.

Ain’t that America?

The utility of a common tradition

Realizing that identity politics often degenerate into what Gitlin describes as “a grim and hermetic bravado celebrating victimization and stylized marginality” (in Boynton 66), many of the most influencial black intellectuals are moving away from race reasoning and stressing the commonalities of US citizens. In Race Matters, Cornel West calls for a “frank acknowledgment of the basic humanness and Americanness of each of us” (pg). Gates smiles at his essentialist approach to his undergraduate studies, where he analyzed African American literature in terms of what he “thought it was saying to me about the nature of my experiences as a black person living in a historically racist Western culture . . .[as if I had] embarked on a mission for all black people” (cited in Boynton 62). Robert S. Boynton warns those black thinkers who are “reluctant” to move beyond their racial identity that they are better suited to be artists “than . . .wide-ranging public intellectual[s]” (62). And Bernstein laments “as long as it is easy to make a living as a professional race man, the best and brightest blacks will be siphoned off into the least productive field of our service economy” (68). “By pointing out the pitfalls of rigid identity politics, [black intellectuals] have sought to distance themselves from the notion of victimization that so dominated race- and ethnicity-specific rhetoric, whether formulated by blacks or by whites” (Boynton 60). Thus, we must teach our children that the melting pot is a reality (both biologically and in the sense that all cultural groups within the US have made and continue to make contributions to a broader culture. This is evinced in our language which contains words, colloquialisms and names from BEV, Native American languages, Spanish, and most European languages. It is also evinced in our art, jazz being perhaps the most profound example. Jazz, originally African American, is wholly and uniquely American, and has spread to the entire world. Indeed, every form of American popular music owes its birth to jazz. We must teach our children of the inter-racial dialogue that produced this [blossoming nw] We must teach them that the poetry of Langston Hughes is in dialogue not only with the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, but also with the poems of Walt Whitman. This is not to say that all individuals are equally shaped by some benevolent American Culture that has been constituted by representational parts from all of the cultural traditions present in the US citizenry. Simply that dklflsdkfljsdkj. The salad bowl myth and identity politics, which result in the aggrandizement of difference and the tribalization of curricula, work against this trend by deny that the cultural contributions of all US citizens are in a constant and dynamic dialogue: borrowing, exchanging, assimilating, re-interpreting, and integrating.16 As Gitlin affirms, “Serious multiculturalism . . .is reintegration into superior syntheses” (145). True multiculturalists will argue for a cosmopolitan American identity, not a heap of contesting,

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16 I am reminded of the Philly cheese steak, egg rolls, and Coca-Cola that I ordered (in Spanish) recently at a Mexican restaurant in a Puerto Rican barrio in Philadelphia.
separatist-minded monocultural identities. Truly anti-racist educators will answer Gates' challenge to shape "a truly common public culture" (Columbus 205) and teach their students that American culture is George Washington and Nat Turner, Thomas Jefferson and W.E.B. DuBois, Gwendolyn Brookes and Robert Frost, tacos and corn bread, Charley Parker and Hank Williams, Frederick Douglass and Anne Bradstreet, Henry Ossawa Tanner and Georgia O'Keefe, and that, regardless of the color of her skin, each student has access to all of this because of the grand experiment in pluralism that America is. Commonalities are certainly not contained within ethnic and class lines. And, as Anglo culture becomes unmasked as ethnic, and long-silenced cultures of color take larger and larger spaces in the conversation, we are moving toward a ethnically representative public culture.

[a pervasive homogenizing effect on its citizens, simply that if we understand culture as the totality of customs, dress, art, values and ideas that influence us, then the things which we hold in common are certainly not minimal and]

where?--[Andrea R. Fishman notes that "no matter how much sorting, categorizing, or labeling publishers, politicians, and educators attempt, individuals do not belong to single clearly identifiable cultures. . .We know from our own experience that there is no such thing as monoculturalism" (75).]

Unfortunately, however, many educational multiculturalists have failed to make such a move. Their rhetoric is saturated with the racial labels "black," "Latino," "Asian," "Native American" and "white." That the multiculturalist's racial lens is so narrow (many people fall into several of these categories, or none of them), is almost as troubling as the fact that (with exception of gender) this is the only lens through which multiculturalists view students. They seem less interested in their students as particular human beings than as occupants of socio-political categories. The result, as Crouch laments, is that "rather than address the possibilities that come both of ethnic cultural identity and of accepting the international wonder of human heritage per se. People are expected to view the world only through race and the most stifling conceptions of group heritage" (Judge 233). If race, as Gates asserts, "is only a sociopolitical category [and] nothing more," (cited in Boynton 89) perhaps the ubiquity of these categories in multicultural theory is evidence of its limitations. This is not to say we should ignore the relationship between "race" and problems of economic/power maldistribution in our country, but balkanized curricula full of disdain toward integration and superficial talk about the celebration of diversity will do nothing to help these problems. "To recognize diversity, more than diversity is needed. The commons is needed" (Gitlin 236). The commons must be more than an agreement to disagree.

I am not suggesting that, as US citizens, our identity should come from jingoistic nationalism (for nations are social inventions just as races are) or that educators should encourage students to take a blindly pro-American posture, only that educators acknowledge that most US citizens are more profoundly shaped by the cultures of their places (their local cultures) and by our national-cum-international pop culture than any individual ethnic culture (which is not to forget those who are not). As black historian Nathan Huggins writes, "An Afro-American and the grandson of a Polish immigrant will be able to take more for granted between themselves than the former could with a Nigerian or the latter could with a Warsaw worker" (cited in Slesinger 87). And Gitlin notes that "leaving beside tastes in food and music,
many if not most second- and especially third-generation Hispanics are indistinguishable from the grandchildren of Italian, Irish or Polish immigrants (115). Indeed, it is the culture of place, its ruralness, urbanness, or suburbanness, the local industries, land and climate, along with our national "culture" (Cap'n Crunch, CD-ROM, espresso, the Million Man March, Lollapalooza, safe sex, MTV, the Religious Right, Michael Jackson, CNN, Windows 95, the NBA, crack, USA Today, Sega Genesis, Oklahoma City, ATM cards, etc.) which shape the lives of our students.

It seems to me that the true multiculturalist would work at encouraging students to find more and more value in the local culture of place (this different from but sometimes connected to ethnic culture) and less and less value in the near-global culture of consumerism. This is the dangerous "central" culture in the US which threatens diversity and freedom. It is not the tradition which canonized Huckleberry Finn and the Bible, but the the tradition which canonized television and the Internet. It is not whiteness that is the danger of this impending monoculture, but its relentless commercialization and commodification of every aspect of human life. Caws gets it half right when he writes that this "mass culture, including sports, popular music, best-sellers and the like, that is very generally diffused by the media...is on the whole nonoppressive (indeed, it was multicultural before the fact)" (375). I assume by his parenthetical reference to multiculturalism that Caws is referring to racial/cultural power dynamics when he writes "nonoppressive." He is correct that pop culture is largely nonoppressive in terms of race. (Of course individual examples of films or novels can be shown to be racist or sexist, and I am sure there exists somewhere an essay about how Michael Jordan's success is simply another example of the black-man-as-clown myth; however, the idea of a conspiratorial monolithic white hegemony pulling the strings of US pop culture to perpetuate racial inequality is ludicrous.) Pop culture is "phat" and "gnarly," Do the Right Thing and The Breakfast Club, Shaft and Steve McQueen, Public Enemy and R.E.M., "Good Times" and "Family Ties," chit'lin's and hot dogs, Scotty Pippen and Troy Aikmen. This is not to discount racial analysis, only to point out that it is, or should be, peripheral in our treatment of popular culture. However, as authentic anti-racists, our criticism of pop culture cannot stop there.

One trend over the past few years is to celebrate the radicalness and mutliculturalism of pop culture. Something we find Caws guilty of. This trend comes in part from cultural critics' attempts to avoid distinctions between "high" and "low" art, to be more egalitarian and less snobbish in their criticism, and in part from the proliferation since the 60's in mass culture that they see as iconoclastic or anti-Establishment and therefore, useful for the revolution (e.g., the Beats, [more examples], Public Enemy, Rage Against the Machine, etc.) The result is that figures such as Tupac, Madonna, and Dennis Rodman are hailed as revolutionaries, "deconstructing gender and race" (Frank 153). Their celebrants constrast them to the stogy, repressive, racist culture of the 50's--the same culture that is supposed to be central in our country--highlighting their sexual liberation, their multiculturalness, and most of all their rebellion. And yet, it is exactly their images as liberators and their attacks on middle-class mores which make these self-(or corporately-?)styled rebels such a hot commodity. For this "Ozzie and Harriet" Anglo-culture no longer exists. (If it does, it is certainly not central.) It is

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17 Gitlin also notes the problematic, largely inaccurate nature of the label "Hispanic."

18 Those on its "periphery" are there by choice, as a matter of disciplined resistance.
as much a myth when it is villified by the hard left as it is when it is idealized by the hard right. This should be evident enough by the media’s omnipresent mockery of the too-happy, one-dog, two-kid, Valium-induced mom, suburbanite family. The rhetoric which connects corporate industrialism’s oppression with the whiteness, conformity, and order of “Father Knows Best” is obsolete, for the new venues of corporate consumerism are multiculturalism, rebellion, and chaos. Sony, Disney, Time-Warner, Pepsico, and Dow do not care what color you are so long as you consume, and they will be more than happy to sponsor your rebellion against the racist, oppressive establishment and your self-styled expression of your ethnicity, as it will no doubt be expressed through the consumption of gangsta rap Cds, “Chicano and Proud” T-shirts, baggy jeans, and various socially-conscious bumper-stickers, all of which they produce.

Therefore as authentically anti-racist educators it is our job to teach our students not to buy into the racial and ethnic labels and the shallow depictions of ethnic expression being sold to them by corporate consumerism. Each lie Madison Avenue dupes them into believing brings our students one step further away from the influence of the values and traditions of their families, places, religions and ethnic groups and one step closer to the influence of monoculture of consumerism whose values are greed, selfish individualism, instant gratification, sexual promiscuity, materialism which they produce and Rebellion of The venues of mass media and mass production are available to anyone with a product to sell; and they are everywhere syphoning the resources and undermining the values of communities, regardless of color. Thus, again multiculturalists undermine the goal of empowerment by predicting their ideas on the same faulty presuppositions as the bigots they are trying to fight. In this case, the idea of a central, dominant, 50’s-television, Anglo-American culture to which the oppressors belong and the oppressed stand in opposition. This Anglo-American culture

Indeed, it is not the color of industrial culture that is so damaging, but the size, the speed, and the rootlessness. safe sex inner-city ghettos

To complicate the issue this industrial culture has picked up the rhetoric and image of the current superficial multicultural conversation, making seem innocuous toward diversity or perhaps even a vehicle toward greater diversity. It has integrated its television shows, commercials and movieslies. lies. lies.

What About the Children?

If there is any phenomenon that will save us from the backward trend of identity politics, it is the increasing number of multiracial people in the US. Berstien opines, “The argument over whether America is like cheese dip or the multiculturalist ‘tossed salad’ (Are you getting hungry yet?) will be made moot by the increasing incidence of mixed marriages and the growing class of mutts like me who have more ethnicities than the former Yugoslavia” (59). And Root notes that “the presence of racially mixed persons defies the social order

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predicated upon race, . . . generally accepted proscriptions and prescriptions regarding intragroup relations,” and “long-held notions about the biological, moral, and social meaning of race” (3). The visibly multi-racial person is a living challenge to rigid identity politics. “It is confusing to our linear models of identity to consider that a multiracial Black-Indian-European person who looks African American self-identifies as multiracial” (3). Though a bit head-spinning in that it is broader than bipolar models of race, Roots example is still dimensionally limited in that it is not multigenerational. Consider instead a person who has three Anglo great-great-grandparents, a Native American one, an African American one, two Italian ones, and eight Irish ones. (This example of course does not bring into play ideas of further subcategorize within these groups or the scores of other non-racial group affiliations that may be more or less important to the individual).

Contrary to the popular belief that racially “mixed” people must choose one racial category or the other and that this dilemma leaves them scarred for life, “the multiracially identified person is liberated from oppressive rules of classification rather than confined by them if they do not fit his or her experience” (Root 7). As living embodiments of anti-racism, they stand in a unique position which provides them with the critical distance necessary to critique our narrowly conceived racial categories. We as educators should strive to liberate all students from the confines of oppressive procrustean classification, rather than encourage that they seek identity and self-esteem there. Gates writes, “I want to . . . experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color” (in Boynton 64). Michael Jackson put it succinctly in his song “Black or White?”(arguable as the source may be): “I’m not gonna spend my life bein’ a color.”

Coloring Outside of the Lines/Allying Outside of the Colors

As I have shown, the idea of culture as something genetically hard-wired is ludicrous. For example, to say that all African Americans share a common cultural tie to “mother Africa” simply because of genes or melanin count is egregiously incorrect and racist. The reality is that an individual’s ethnicity comes from exposure to that culture; thus, we must expand our narrow definitions of ethnicity which limit membership to those who meet the presumed genetic requirements. A black man who “acts white” is not necessarily a “sell-out” or “Uncle Tom,” nor is a Latino woman who “talks black” necessarily a “wannabe.” Each may simply have been shaped by a set of cultural norms different from those we would expect from their appearances or be choosing to acculturate to the norms of social group other than the one with which they share the most physical attributes.

As Sleeter and Grant noted, multiculturalism is preoccupied with race, and its insistence on perpetuating racial categories stymies its ability to see a “range of human diversity” and results in ghettoized curricula. The typical multicultural response to this charge is to expand the list of oppressed individuals (diversity and oppression sometimes blur together in the multicultural lexicon) to include women, the handicapped, the elderly and homosexuals. Although I share the multiculturalists compassion for the historically oppressed, this means of expanding the range of recognized diversity only encourages oppression to be used as what Alan Kors calls “the great status symbol” (cited in Slesinger 8). The solutions is not a more inclusive definition of “oppressed,” but to stop labeling people as simply Oppressed or Oppressor. Gates notes that one of the problems with the multiculturalism of the hard left is that “it subsists on a sharp division between hegemons and hegomonized, center and margin,
oppresor and oppressed, and no bones about which side it’s on” (Columbus 206). In actuality, we are all both in complex and dynamic ways. Who, for example, is the more “privileged” between a wealthy black man who grew up poor and a middle-class lesbian paraplegic living on a trust fund? We need also remember that “the systematic character of oppression implies that an oppressed group need not have a correlate oppressing group” (Ovid 67). This does not mean sidestepping the analysis of social injustice in history or in the present, but approaching these problems without the clumsy shorthand of racial labeling and the backward mentality of groupthink.

An authentically anti-racist educator must recognize an inclusive, common American culture without making the false assertion that all ethnic groups have contributed equally to the larger culture and without encouraging students to view such contributions as the cultural property of that group or as the source of pride and identity. He must recognize that breakdown into racial groups is only one analytic framework for the study of history and sociology. He must recognize that students’ construction of identity is a complex process and that “all of our students are multicultural” (Fishman 79). He must encourage them to seek justice for the whole of the human family and to avoid the blind ethnic loyalty that even separatists such as Malcolm X warned against.

A truly anti-racist curriculum would teach children that because “the individual experience often differs from the social expectations of that experience” (Thorton 324), they must see others and themselves not primarily as members of racial groups, but as individuals who take their identities from a nearly infinite number of factors. I am not advocating “colorblindness,” that we pretend that “people are people” and their color is not a factor in how they perceive of themselves or an influence on their day-to-day experiences, but rather a color-consciousness tempered with the knowledge that color is only one factor in identity construction, that all human beings have individual experiences, and that, ontologically, races are not different kinds of people (read: people are people).

Ownership of one’s cultural identity is certainly important: to accept who he is, where he “comes from,” and to disallow members of other groups to create an image of his that is hateful or prejudicial. However, the next step is to move beyond racial identity, to refuse to be defined by the set of illogical, narrow labels imposed on us from without, as all cultural/ethnic/racial labels necessarily are. Leon Weseltier reminds us that “the American achievement is not the multicultural society but the multicultural individual. And the multicultural individual is what the tribalist and the traditionalist fear. Identity is the promise of singleness, but this is a false promise. Many things are possible in America, but the singleness of identity is not one of them” (cited in Gitlin 207). I turn again to the example that our conspicuously multi-racial brothers and sisters can provide for us: “The accomplishment of complex identities by racially mixed persons gives us hope that if individuals have been able to resolve conflicting values, claim identities, and synthesize multiple heritages. . .it is possible for us eventually to do this as a nation” (Root 347).
Poststructural Excesses and Cultural Relativism as Multiculturalism

The strength that poststructural theory brings to multiculturalism is its ability to reveal the social construction of deceiving concepts such as “race” which, in this instance, allows for a more accurate analysis of the relations between social groups. For poststructuralists highlight “polysemy,” or linguistic indeterminancy, the idea that language cannot capture reality directly. They say that words are not sealed containers carrying the meaning which their speaker (or writer) intends directly to their listener (or reader). Rather words make up cosmologically tainted frameworks or systems of catagorizing, and the meanings of words are dependant upon their mutual relationships with (difference from) other words in the language system. In addition to revealing that the text comes to the reader with a cosmological bias, poststructuralists point out that the reader comes to the text biased as well. As readers, we bring our heurmenetical framework to a text a priori. In Stanley Fish’s words, we have “belief[s] whose prior assumption determines what will be heard as reasonable,” or, in a broader sense, in what manner new texts will be interpreted.

Poststructuralism poses a challenge not only to teachers of language, however, but to the entire epistemology of positivism. For, in the poststructuralist’s view, “there is nothing that is not a text” (Derrida ?), which is to say that we interpret everything in the world in the same fashion in which we interpret a text: cosmology, prejudices, and ideology first, analysis and inference second. In this way, knowledge is “constructed” upon the reader’s existing premises, by each individual reader, who brings to texts an entirely unique set of experiences and perceptions. It is no longer the aquisition of emperical data. Fish’s view exposes as illusion the autonomous and objective self, whose perception of the world exists outside the context of the ideological and linguistic barriers within which he perceives. Thus, it affirms what the apostle Paul told the the people of Corinth nearly two thousand years ago: that all human beings see through a dark glass. This forces us to analyze the cultural/linguistic constraints on our perception and thinking and remember that our perspective can never be entirely unbiased or objective.

However, poststrucuturalists go too far when they adopt a pure anti-foundationalism or constructivism. Anti-foundationalists, such as Fish, claim that “first premises” are not themselves “subject to the test of reasonableness,” nor can they be, for they are the enabling condition of thought, without which “cognitive activity cannot get started” (Why 20). That is to say the foundational truths we hold cannot be established by some procedure of reason or logic, the committment to these truths is made a priori. Thus, we all have our values and beliefs built upon different “truths” which cannot in any way be tested or ratified, so truth becomes relativized. Fish writes, “‘infidelity’ ['error,' ‘apostasy,’ ‘evil’] is simply the name of an opinion, a point of view to which we are to accord the respect due all points of view. It is neither true nor false, good nor evil” (20). Constructivists hold that there is no objective

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19 The philosophical roots of constructivism precede poststructuralism per se, beginning perhaps with Nietzsche and Heidegger.
reality outside of the mind of the individual: "Realities are multiple, they exist in people's minds" (Guba, cited in Hillocks 102). Thus, in this paradigm, there is no longer truth, there are only "truth-effects" or multiple "truths." So, not only concepts such as "race" but concepts such as "value," "worth," "integrity," and "truth," become unveiled as mere tools of oppression. "Individuality, freedom, human character are subject to the dissolving perspective that far from being universal truths they are constructs of a particular culture and time" (Gray 228). Both anti-foundationalism and constructivism are not only intellectually tenuous, but dangerous when translated into classroom practice.

Intellectually, they are problematic because they undercut themselves. Gates quips (ironically taking the voice of the poststructural critic): "If we can't tell you what's true and false. . .we'll at least tell you what's right and what's wrong. What's wrong? Racism, colonialism, oppression, cultural imperialism, patriarchy, epistemic violence," and soberly concludes, "So we lost facts, and we got back ethics---a trade-in, but not necessarily an upgrade" (Columbus 209). Indeed, where do we get ethics without facts? For when we take out the coterpin of absolute or universal truths, on what are our ethics grounded? If "value" and "truth" are mere slight-of-hand used by the oppressive regime to maintain power, by what standard is that we judge them to be oppressive? Or perhaps the more important question is how do we go about arguing that oppression is wrong? As Gates notes, "the only error [poststructuralism] made was to assume that our practices of evaluation should, or could, fall by the wayside [because our theories of value are often ill-founded], which is surely a non sequiter. Indeed, the minute that the word 'judgemental' became pejorative, we should have known that we had made a misstep" (Columbus 206).

And of course, even as poststructuralists charge others who make truth claims with ideological blindness or thinly-veiled power lust, they hold the truths which undergird their philosophy to be self-evident. Gitlin smirks, "they propound what they claim are true, or truish, universals—not the least of which is the insistence across the board that all knowledge. . .is local, limited to the territory where [its] standpoint prevails" (202). If all thinking is self-interested and fatally circumscribed by history, how is it that Focoult and his disciples have escaped their ideological and cultural chains to proclaim the poststructural gospel?

Richard John Neuhaus points out the error in Fish's anti-foundationalism: "The person who wants to make the point that nobody can stand outside his belief system and compare it to another belief system [or scrutinize his own] has to stand outside belief systems and compare them to one another" (31). Dick Keyes asserts of the many-paths-up-a-mountain metaphor, that the individual who says we cannot see the paths of others from within the perspective of our own path, and that, therefore, we have no right to evaluate other paths, has assumed the position of one above the mountain viewing all the paths, and, thus, undercut his own assertion in making it (audio tape).

Constructivism which denies the existence of an objective reality is perhaps the hardest to swallow. Hillocks notes that we can tell reality exists outside of our minds by our inability to reverse events which have already occured. He also points out that we all assume to have a firm enough grip on reality that we make decisions based on our interpretations of it, regardless of other interpretations. From where I'm standing the car may look green, and from where your standing the car may look blue, but if either on of us is standing in front of the car when it drives by, he will get hit, so I move out of the way.
So there is a middle road between the positivist’s arrogant denial of heurmenuetics and the constructivists self-defeating denial of an objective and singular reality. The strength of the positivist side is that it offers us an objective reality existing independently of human observation. The constructivists teach us that each new experience one has is interpreted in light of what she already knows, and she can only make sense of that experience by interpolating it into existing paradigms. (There are of course those experience so radically dissonant with existing structures that the individual experiences a “paradigm shift.”) Thus we can see that meaning, does not exist outside of a dialogical process; reality, in contrast, exist outside of any human interface whatsoever. So the epistemological bridge is the view that reality, however tainted by perspective, is “knowable in the sense of argued approximation, and that approximation must be attended to by skepticism that entails continued testing of generalization or claims invoked” (Hillocks 44). Because white male subjectivity has masqueraded as objectivity in the past, does not mean that anyone who claims to be making an objective observation is merely advancing the cause of the oppressive “racist patriarchy;” and it certainly does not mean that their are no absolute truths or that objectivity is not a worthwhile and approachable, if unattainable, goal.

The anti-foundationalism of Fish and others poststructuralists becomes destructive in the classroom when it takes the form of what is sometimes called perspectivism. This view says essentially that “unless the way of life is yours, you have no way of understanding it” (Fish, Why 20). Writer/critic C.S. Lewis illustrated this theory with the example of a beam of light coming through a hole in a dark shed. The man standing beside the beams sees nothing but a spot of dust on the ground, but the man who steps into the beam sees the sun six million miles away. Thus perspectivism helps us to understand that who we are can determine how we see. However, the claim that we are, thus, locked within our own perspective, because “all being [is] local, all thinking self-interested, all understanding fatally circumscribed by history” (Gitlin, paraphrasing Foucault 102) is extremely detrimental to classroom practice.

**You Can’t Walk a Mile in My Moccasins**

These poststructural excesses create problems when applied to practice in the “multicultural” classroom in that they almost entirely preclude the essential educational experiences of inquiry, argument and evaluation. For if we have constructed all of our values on foundational truths which are neither foundational nor truths and cannot be subject to scrutiny, then there is no common ground from which we might dialogue. In Fish’s own words: “behind any dispute that occurs will be a conflict of conviction that cannot be rationally settled because it is also and necessarily a conflict of rationalities, and when there is a conflict of rationalities, your only recourse is, well, to conflict” (23). If one, for example, believes that there is an omnipotent God and another does not, and both are totally arbitrary “first premises,” there is absolutely no way of adjudicating a discourse over whether or not creation should be taught in biology courses.

We see this logic carried out in multicultural classrooms when students attempt to discuss and evaluate cultures from which they do not come. In the fall of my junior year at Western Michigan University, I took Teaching Writing in the Secondary Classroom, a course required of all secondary education English majors. The course was taught by a visiting professor, a Native American woman whose idea of multiculturalism was a course in Native American literature. The class, nearly all white, was assigned a host of Indian Lit. to read and
required copious assignments in response to the reading. Imagine our surprise when we received back our papers with points marked off for “Eurocentric” responses to questions about how we felt about the stories and the characters. I recall one particular discussion about the oral legend (transcribed into book form) Two Old Women, the story of two elderly women who, in the tradition of their tribe, were left behind to fend for themselves when they became too old to contribute to the community. When several students tried to steer the discussion of the tale toward the moral problem of evaluating the tribes actions, they were hushed and decried as chauvinists by the instructor, who scolded them for trying to “judge” the customs of a culture to which they did not belong. Unless they were Indians she asserted, they had no right to comment on the customs and values of Indians. (By this logic Jews have no right to criticize Hitler, because, as members of another culture, they cannot understand the cultural values and constraints which led to his actions.)

As the semester progressed the contradiction became egregious: She wanted us to study the literature and experiences of Native Americans, and yet she continually insisted that because we did not come from that culture we would never understand it, regardless of how many books we read. In her view it was next to impossible for white students to step outside of their Eurocentric paradigm, and yet “Eurocentric” commentary was marked down on papers and scoffed at in discussions. Well, you cannot have your cultural chauvinism and beat it too. In order for cross-cultural understanding to take place, dialogue must occur in a setting in which it is believed that cultural barriers can be surmounted, that a person is more than, and can think beyond, the sum total of her cultural influences. The perspectivists alternative is a paralyzing stranglehold on student thought is intolerable. It renders all cross-cultural explorations to the equivalent of “Boy, that really seems neat, even though I know I can’t really understand it.”20 (Why praise is epistemologically possible within this logic, but criticism is not, I will never understand). So we see that perspectivism undermines the multicultural project and the best it can do in the multicultural classroom is run amok into some kind of junky I’m-ok-you’re-ok cultural relativism. The multiculturalist should strive to overcome ethnocentrism, not relegate children to the belief that they cannot escape cultural chauvinism.

**Projecting Multiculturalism**

However inconsistent it is with perspectivism, advocates of multiculturalism typically endict Western culture as oppressive, racist, and exploitative (all of which are true), and praise the alternative value systems of other cultures. However, those who search with an open mind will find that many of the beliefs, practices, and institutions of other cultures are contrary to multiculturalists’ ideals of egalitarianism and tolerance. In reality, tribalism and authoritarian social hierarchy are not only typical of Third World countries, but widely considered legitimate. Franklin and Moss note of pre-colonial African governments “extensive military organization,” highly centralized power, and the “not infrequent ruthlessness of various kingdoms” (14). D’Souza points out the caste system of his native India, which has “received the full blessing of Hinduism,” and the practice called sati, in which brides were made to throw themselves upon the burning pyre of their dead husbands (357, 358). We see such misogynistic practices throughout non-Western cultures: in the denial of rights and strict dress

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20 I am reminded of the conservative catch phrase “thought police.”
code of Islamic women to the *machismo* of Latino cultures to the clitorectomies practiced in parts of African.

Thus the multiculturalist must project Western ideological concerns onto non-Western communities (this is ethnocentrism) and obscure or misrepresent the practices of other peoples (this is lying) in order to preserve the ostensible integrity and qualitative equality of all cultures. The result that multiculturalism becomes an obstruction to true cultural understanding. Once again, its faulty presuppositions undermine its own project.

What students need is not an ice-cream flavor mentality about different cultures, but a critical comparison of the offerings of different cultures in an attempt to glean "the best which has been thought and said in the world," so that cultures and individuals might truly learn from one another rather than just peacefully co-existing in ignorance of each other. An authentically anti-racist multicultural pedagogy would not languish in cultural relativism. If the uncritical glorification of one culture has lead to 500 years of racism, oppression, and exploitation, what will the uncritical glorification of *all* cultures result in? Just as I hope members of other cultures would look at the United States and criticize racism, consumerism, and the sacrifice of community for the sake of individuality, I can look to their cultures and see sexism, zero-sum economics, and the sacrifice of individuality for the sake of community.

**New Lies For Teacher to Tell**

Advocates of multiculturalism call for history curricula which “include the lives of all those in our society,” arguing that “[i]mplicit in many traditional accounts of history is the notion that children should disregard the lives of women, working people, and especially people of color—they’re led to view history and current events from the standpoint of dominant groups” (Bigelow, et al 4). In response, many schools have expanded their history curricula and made them more accurate, adding the stories of historically underrepresented peoples. In 1987 California adopted a new social studies curriculum which focuses on the diversity of world cultures and “recognizes the multiracial character of American society, now and in the past” (7). Indeed a more representative and accurate history is an important step toward a more egalitarian and equitable American society.

Some have retained the basic paradigm of traditional history and taken an out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new approach. Thus figures such as George Washington and Theodore Roosevelt are taken off the pedestal and replaced with the likes of Geronimo and W.E.B. DuBois. These are not unimportant historical figures, but their lives and intellectual work should be viewed with the same academic rigor and critical fervor as any. This approach to revising history fails to see that historical figures should be viewed role models within the realistic context of what they actually thought and did. Though historical figures are useful as

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21 I do not pretend to be a historian; however, issues of history are so intimately tied with those of multiculturalism that they must be addressed by a teacher regardless of his content area.
role models and symbols of cultural unity, hero worship only has malignant affects (Dyson 123). Most multiculturalist would argue against a “history of heroes,” and, thus, seek to tear down apotheosized historical figures (Christopher Columbus and Thomas Jefferson have really gotten it badly) and present instead a history of the common person. Gary Nash’s Red, White and Black: The Peoples of Early America attempts this by “re-examining American history as the interaction of many peoples from a wide range of cultures.” Howard Zinn criticizes traditional texts for approaching history “from the eyes of the important and powerful people, through the Presidents, the Congress, the Supreme Court, the generals, the industrialists” (150). He advocates inclusion of perspectives of the oppressed, more focus on grassroots and social movements, and the use of personal letters, memoirs, poems, and autobiographies. This more egalitarian paradigm of history is indeed more American than an elitist Anglo-centric one and essential to an anti-racist curriculum.

**Pedagogy of Oppression**

However, a more inclusive and accurate history is not the goal of all multiculturalists. The Task Force on Minorities, commissioned by Thomas Sobol, New York State Commissioner of Education, opened their 1990 statement on the state’s history curricula: “African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Puerto Rican/Latinos and Native Americans have all been victims of an intellectual and educational oppression that has characterized the culture and the institutions of the United States and the European American world for centuries.” This inflammatory remark (unfortunately this attitude is so prevalent that it barely strikes us as acerbic) characterizes more radical multiculturalists who seek rather to recast the history of Western civilization as what D’Souza calls “a virtually uninterrupted series of crimes visited on other groups” (357). This History of Oppression paradigm encourages students to view history as a kind of morality play between good and evil crudely reduced to the Oppressed and the Oppressors. Its typical textbook’s chapters would be “Trails of Tears,” “Slavery,” and “Irish in the 1800’s.” It understands stands all human interactions throughout history in terms of will to power.

Certainly educators should present an honest picture of our nation’s past, pointing out what various social groups have done to one another, for it is only through remembering the atrocities of the past that we can hope to preclude their happening in the future. In Molly Fumia’s words: “A moral society is created when victims are remembered and out of those memories silence is broken and truth told” (in calendar). However, a history structured according to the single principle of oppression is not only inaccurate, but it often degenerates into a comparative suffering match, and serves only to perpetrate groupthink. A deconstructive, finger-pointing history that demonizes oppressors does little to help actual social and political problems. Clara Sue Kidwell notes, “We [Native Americans] have tremendous issues to deal with: jobs, health issues, the drop-out crisis. No political agenda comes out of the attack on Columbus. Instead, there’s the assumption that all our problems follow from Columbus” (cited in Gitlin 29). Anybody can teach about racism; it is time to teach against racism.

Poststructural thought has found its way into one of history, and there are those constructivist views of history which deny historicity altogether. Zinn holds, “Objectivity is neither possible nor desirable” (154). Stanley Fish writes, “The truths any of us find compelling will all be partial, which is to say they will all be political” (7-8). That is to say that
what actually happened, “the truth” as it were, can never be recorded or relayed because all
tellings of history are told from a certain perspective. Most multiculturalists would further
argue that for centuries in the United States that perspective has been a Eurocentric one, which
makes the teaching of that history to non-Europeans necessarily oppressive. Thus history by
European Americans is a kind of smoke-and-mirrors to occlude or condone European
domination.

This exculpatory history, some suggest, should be replaced with a compensatory one,
since history at last is only a political tool. Zinn argues, “You need the equivalent of
affirmative action in education... We’re going to pay special attention to this person or this
group of people because they have been left out for so long.” He asserts that a “balanced”
history “leaves people nowhere, with no moral sensibility, no firm convictions, no outrage, no
indignation” (154). Barry Shwartz writes that progressive or “constructionist” historiography
“sees the past as a social construction shaped by the concerns and need of the present” (cited
in Dyson 149). Thus, the most radical multiculturalists would argue that history should be
reshaped to serve the social and political needs of minority groups.

Many also argue that history curricula absent of figures who look like students
contribute to the low self-esteem of students and are necessarily oppressive. This idea that
heroes must look like him is again founded on the presupposition that race is ontological
rather than a social fiction. How much must we have in common with historical figures in
order for their lives to be meaningful to us? Does the traditional Western Civ. curriculum
oppress non-Greek and non-Italian European Americans? Afrocentrists argue that to learn
history from a perspective other than the “African” one is damaging for African American
students because they are forced “to examine their own experiences and history through the
assumptions, paradigms, constructs and language of other people. They lose their cultural
identity” (Hilliard, cited in D’Souza 339).

Afrika’s Inside Me

Afrocentrists, though actually essentialist, have taken advantage of the poststructural
trend in the academy, as evinced in the rhetoric employed by leading Afrocentrist Molefi
Asanti: “Our facts are in our history; use them. Their facts are in their history; and they have
certainly used theirs” (D’Souza 365). The Afrocentric interpretation of history places Africa at
the center of civilization and impugns the traditional Western Civ paradigm by presenting a
technologically advanced Egypt and Nubia juxtaposed to an illiterate, tribalized, war-ridden
Europe. It recognizes northern and southern Africa as a single cultural entity, which espoused
values of community, technology, and egalitarianism. These values are contrasted to Western
values of capitalism, competition, and oppression. Afrocentrism considers Africa to be the
cradle of civilization and the mother of all humankind. The ethos of the Afrocentric tradition is
captured in the Arrested Development lyric which cants, “We all ask, ‘Why can’t we be sisters
and brothers?’ First we got to accept who is our Mother.”

Among other things, Afrocentrist contend that ancient Africans built huge palaces,
temples, cathedrals, water supply systems and reservoirs, that they built an astronomical
observatory in Kenya in 300 BC and calculated the speed of light, that they discover electricity
and used it build electric plains used for expeditions, and that they made such medical advances
as Cesarean sections, the development of vaccines, and cornea transplants. Many of these
claims are made in the absence of any evidence and most are refuted by other scholars, black and white. Although the work of the Afrocentrists has produced important discoveries and put important questions on the table, it seems to be characterized by scholarship which is even sloppier than that of the Eurocentric history which it intends to decenter.

Afrocentrism is also fraught with paradox. For example it at once tries to undermine the values of Western civilization and claims that most of Western philosophy was actually stolen from Africa by the Greeks. It claims that all people come from Africa, yet that it is only those of us with black skin who are intrinsically culturally tied to her. To such criticisms its proponents respond that they are not beholden to the norms of “white reality,” a response which reveal Afrocentrism as hopelessly reactionary and unwilling to engage in meaningful public discourse. As Dyson puts it, “The Afrocentric movement . . . fails to acknowledge the romantic features of its own household” (Malcolm 92).

One of the largest challenges facing Afrocentrists is the question of just how black Egypt and Nubia were. Most Egyptologist would hold that, like all Mediterranean populations, Egypt’s included a range of color from light-skinned Mediterraneans to very dark Nubians. And most scholars agree that the Nubians themselves were a racially mixed people (Viadero 29). Of course, the entire question becomes moot when we realize that modern racial labels are being retroactively ascribed to people from a different social and political context to whom they do not apply. Neither the Greeks nor the Egyptians were “race-conscious in the way that modern societies have become” (Viadero 29) and neither of their slavery systems were racially based. Egyptologist Frank J. Yurco asserts that no importance was attached race in these cultures (386). How could it be when race would not be invented for another 1500 years? This serves as another illustration of the importance of deconstructing students’ existing notions of race and teaching them how race is socially constructed.

It should be noted that Afrocentrists by no means represent mainstream African American intelligencia. Gates, a renowned literary scholar and cultural critic, says of the Afrocentrists’ list of African values, “I don’t see any of those things being peculiar to African-Americans . . . all kinds of cultures and societies have those same kinds of values. . . I am certainly not in the same camp as Molefi Asante and [other Afrocentrists]” (Detroit News, Jan 31, 1991). And yet they have influenced school districts such as Portland’s, whose coordinator for multicultural/multiethnic education, Carolyn Leonard, says that Afrocentrism gives students a sense of their “proper place in the world” and “gives everybody a place to stand” (quoted in Diavola 29). Race has determined people’s “proper” place in the world for too long. And “multicultural” pedagogies which accept existing racial categories as appropriate limitations to students’ identities and personhood serve only to perpetuate such a world.

Anti-Racist “Eurocentrism”

In contrast to the New York State Task Force’s on Minorities opinion, it is not the domination and oppression of others which “characterize” Western culture. These things are by no means unique to or inventions of Western culture. What is unique to Western culture is not the degree of cruelty in its interactions with other cultures, but the scale on which it occurred made possible by the civilizational superiority of the West. Also unique to the Western European and US culture are the ideological foundations which make it possible for us to criticize oppression, racism and imperialism. The language of human rights,
individualism, and ideological and religious freedom were born in the Enlightenment, and the attempt at a society which satisfies those rights first came to fruition, however unevenly, in the United States. In fact, Western culture has produced all of the thinkers which undergird radical politics and multiculturalist ideology: Karl Marx, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Franz Boas, Paulo Friere, all white males (some day they all will be dead, too). One might even argue that Afrocentrists are a kind of black adaptation of the Western cultural tradition, rather than a re-grafted African one. (As displayed when sldkfks told Molefi Asante “We don’t need you coming over here telling us about Africa.”) Unfortunately, Western culture also came equipped with a racism that made it possible to obscure its own violations of human rights. In the words of Spike Lee: “White people made that shit up.”

Many leftists have taken cue from Malcolm X, who criticized US celebration of democracy as hypocritical, saying he respected the honest oppressor more than the one who claims not to oppress. However, it is exactly this celebration of democratic ideals which makes closing the gap between rhetoric and reality possible. Despite its tragic oppression and history of inequality, American ideology has buttressed the abolitionist, women’s suffrage, civil rights and feminist movements. The project of multiculturalists should not be to undercut the US’ political rhetoric or de-center Western thought, but to hold it accountable to its own ideals of democracy, egalitarianism, and human rights. By trashing our founding fathers, labeling everything patriotic or pro-American as “oppressive” or “Eurocentric,” and finding in the “very language of commonality” nothing more than “an ideology to rationalize white male domination,” (Gitlin 100) radical multiculturalists are cutting off their nose to spite their face. For indeed, the claims of various groups in a democracy can be “adjudicated if (and only if) care is taken to preserve the sense of a common interest on which the interests of the various parts must rest” (Gitlin 40).

An authentically anti-racist curriculum must teach children the foundations of the liberal American tradition and the source of modern Western values. In this sense, school curricula need to be “Eurocentric.” This does not mean Eurocentric in the sense that we forge some sort of unified narrative of American history—the history of the European immigrant—for US history is indeed a history of diverse, at times “divergent experiences; but these diverse histories take place in history—a history that speaks to, and for, everyone, and in the name of which Americans contend” (Gitlin 39). In this sense, American history is a “single tale.” Zinn complains that during his undergraduate studies “there was no required course in...Asian or African history, but there was a required course on the history of England” (150). Apparently it never occurred to Zinn that England is the country of which our nation was originally a colony, and thus the parent of much of the ideology upon which our government and culture rest. Knowledge of Africa and Asia and what they have to offer us are important, but useless if we cannot maintain our own republic by teaching our children the history and values of liberal Western democracy. Gitlin reminds us

Whether one likes the status quo or not, history should be, in important part, the record of what power has done. A student who does not know how the powerful acted—indeed, often over the objection of the weak and oppressed—cannot begin to understand why the world has become what it is. Like it or not the decisions that shaped America’s political, legal, and economic institutions were largely made by Europeans and their descendants.
Loose Canons

Often, arguments from both the right and the left about English education reform are predicated on the notion of the canon as something static, a kind of a top ten list that is taught to every student, chiseled in stone and handed down from above. Educational reformers on the left have, thus, resorted to post-structural, “non-essentialist” literary criticism which argues against any kind of cross-cultural (and ultimately interpersonal) communication in literature. (Post-structuralism is explored further in the next section). This renders the work of Shakespeare irrelevant to the African American student as, in this paradigm, there are no essential or universal human experiences, all are relative to specific cultural situations. It calls instead for literature which is culturally specific: black authors for black students, Latino authors for Latino students, women authors for women students. It is this thinking which poses the question Why do we read so many dead white males? and proposes that Eurocentrism in literature curricula results in a loss of minority self-esteem and performance as the content is only applicable to middle-class, white, (and primarily male) students. Mary A. Dilg writes, “Students of color have long been denied the freedom to find themselves and their lives in the works offered by their English departments. . .literature by people of color provides students of color with opportunities for identification with literary characters. . .denied them throughout the history of American schooling” (19).

James Baldwin expresses this idea that art and ideas are intensely culturally specific in his essay “Traveler in the Village?” where he says of the rustic Swiss village people:

The most illiterate among them is related, in a way I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartress says something to them which it cannot say to me. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory--but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive (pg).

Yet Baldwin’s familiarity with the artists to which he refers juxtaposed to the white villagers’ illiteracy proves him wrong. Why does he claim that Dante “says something” to these villagers who cannot listen (read)? How can he claim the cathedral at Chartress says something to the Swiss that it does not say to him when he knows what it says to them? Frederick Douglass’s autobiographical slave narrative seems to counter Baldwin’s point. The central theme throughout the text is literacy as the path to freedom. Douglass writes of abolitionist essays in the Colombian Orator that they “gave tongue to the thoughts of his own soul” (277). If Douglass’s experience were inaccessible to white people how could a white man possibly have touched him so deeply as to speak for him? Indeed, Douglass story is one sense the type of the story of all slaves who made it to freedom, but it is also the particular story of that particular man, as well as a story which speaks to all humankind. Taking cue from her school’s eponym, Mary Margaret Lipsom? disagrees with Baldwin’s racial essentialism as well. Headmaster of the nearly all-black Frederick Douglass Academy, said in response to criticisms of the school’s frequent trips to city museums, “What is the alternative? To tell children that that art doesn’t belong to them?”

Dilg contends that “the distance that separates contemporary discrete cultures within the same country may be more difficult to traverse [than the distance which separates contemporary culture from that of earlier ages and cultures]” (23). This approach to
expanding the canon is an ethical castle built in the air, it argues against humanistic essentialism and replaces it with racial essentialism. It says that Prince Hamlet has something (accessible) to say to a white student, yet nothing accessible, or at least far less, to say to an African American student because Hamlet and the latter have culturally dissimilar experiences, forgetting that the experiences of the black and white high school student are far more similar to each other's than either's is to Prince Hamlet's. The white student's cultural orientation is probably far closer to Ralph Elison's invisible man than to Romeo, as the black student's experience is probably far more similar to Holden Caulfield's than to that of Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo. When multicultural educators use race as the important factor in determining whose story is important to whom, they rob children of valuable experiences with important works of art. Jonathan Howland laments

the new [multicultural] texts are often presented as cultural documents for sociological study; they are packed as ambassadors of difference, windows onto other worlds. . . this rationale for multiculturalism leads to a kind of tokenism: we are tempted to balance the booklist not with the aim toward historical period or thematic coherence. . . but with an eye toward the respective author's race, class, and gender. . . The emphasis on historical circumstance and social category that is so fashionable in the academy these days skirts the particularity of these characters and the artistry of the literature in which they appear. (38)

Ralph Ellison once wrote, "when I was a music student on the South, I was moved to great agonies of empathy by three novels. The first was Wuthering Heights, the second was Jude and the Obscure, and the third was Dostoyevski's Crime and Punishment" (xxi). These three books would never make the multiculturalists cut as books relevant to the black student; however, they were foundational readings for the author of one the African American literature canon's greatest works.

By denying the communicability and universality of human experience, this thinking undermines the teaching of literature altogether. We read literature for the very purpose of hearing the stories of which are dissimilar to our own; we learn from them because our capacity for empathy allows us to recognize the of the universals of human experience and because they if well-crafted, they improve our ability to read the world. When educators sell students the lie that European art is irrelevant to them, it is the student who loses out. There is of course validity to the argument that the closer the author's perspective is to that of the reader (the more they have in common), the more relevant the reader will find his writing. However, this "presumes a student must identify with a character or a book to read it well" (Howland 37). In addition, if we define human commonalities only in terms of culture and race, that means Martin Luther King, Jr. has nothing important to say to Latin Americans, Li-Young Lee nothing to offer Jewish Americans, and Denise Levertov has nothing that men will find important. Indeed the ludicrous notion that people of color have no epistemological access to European art and no claim to the European strain of our nation's heritage is far more damaging to self-esteem. World-renowned novelist Ralph Ellison wrote, "It requires a real poverty of imagination to think that [artistic inspiration] can come to Negroes only through the example of other Negroes" (cited in Slesinger 234).

The Religious Right

The strategy of the rightist educational reformers has been to try to put a freeze hold on the canon by apotheosizing European literary figures (most notable Shakespeare) and
exhaulting their works to the status of gospel. This thinking of course ignores the fact that the concept of a fixed literary canon is a relatively new one fashioned by the British in its design of a curriculum for conquered India (source Allen?) It fails to recognize that the texts which currently enjoy seats in the canon are there not because they have been guarded against oblivion by noble academic standard-bearers, but because generation after generation they reward thoughtful examination with insight into the timeless problems of the human condition. It is also ironic that the very same people attempting to close the canonical doors on M. Scott Momaday, Toni Morrison and Chinua Achebe are those who worked to open them for J.D. Salinger, Franz Kafka, and Sylvia Plath.

The traditional high school classroom has relegated African American literature to a sidebar in American Lit. courses, a mini-unit on the Harlem Renascence. When I was in high school, Gwendolyn Brookes and Langston Hughes were the only African Americans on the reading list. Since then Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Lorraine Hansberry, and in some schools, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have made their way onto the list. The inclusion of the work of black Americans is critical not only because of its artistic value, because these texts reward our thoughtful examination just as Milton and Blake do, but also because in one sense the story of the African American is quintessentially American. As Baldwin wrote, “Whatever else an American is, he is somehow black” ( ).

Thus, an authentically anti-racist curriculum needs to realize the organic nature of canon, that the introduction of Toni Morrison does not have to mean the ousting of Henry David Thoreau. The cream will rise to the top, as it were, as long as English educators commit themselves to teaching good literature which they love, rather than using literature as a political tool to boost the self-esteem of an ethnic group or preserve a European monopoly of the canon. So perhaps the leftist can concede that Shakespeare’s literature can speak to all of humankind (he would certainly argue that Marx’s does), and the traditionalist can agree that Nathaniel Hawthorne will have to take a back seat to Frederick Douglass. The authentically anti-racist teacher does not present literary characters as primarily representatives of racial groups. He encourages discriminating, critical, thoughtful readings of difficult texts. He organizes literature into thematic networks that allow students to connect the pieces of literature to each other and to their own lives. He is not afraid to pair Huckleberry Finn with Beloved or Catcher in the Rye with House on Mango Street or to choose to use all dead white males or all African American authors. He brings together similar voices and themes to reveal similarities that do not depend on “race,” ethnicity and gender and dissimilar voice to reveal dissimilarities among writers of the same “race,” ethnicity or gender (Fishman 78). And above all he demands that students read texts in all their artistic, psychological, philosophical and human complexity, not as simplistic sociology texts.

Educators must guard against the tribalization of literature curricula and textbooks. The tendency of current multicultural curricula is to ghettoize authors, grouping them by ethnicity and teaching them in neatly packaged ethnic units: “Never mind that there are units on Heroism, Rites of Passage, or Twentieth Century Fiction; Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou are black” (Fishman 75). Ethnicity and culture are useful lenses through which to view literature; however, they are not always the most important ones, nor the ones which the author intended to use. Sterling Brown held that “the bonds of literary tradition seem to be stronger than race” (6-7). When the narrow keyhole of ethnicity is the only one which we
encourage our students to view the world through, we do them a grave disservice. As educators striving for anti-racist classrooms we should broaden the perspective from which students view literature rather than limiting it to the same narrow definitions of "race" and ethnicity through which many of them already view humanity.
Part Two:
The Design of an Authentically Anti-Racist Curriculum
American Culture 101: 
Race, Community, Democracy, Media and Technology: 
Understanding the Problems that Make Us American

The following is a curriculum design for an upper-level (junior/senior) high school interdisciplinary humanities course. This course challenges its students to explore and rethink American culture, using four quintessentially “American” problems as thematic hubs: race, community, democracy, and media & technology. Through reading, discussion, writing, and other activities students define these terms, refine their understanding of them, and develop and articulate a conception of the connections between them. The class combines an array of diverse readings from literature, history, sociology, political science, and cultural studies, and also incorporates other media such as paintings, music, film, documentaries, comics and advertisements.

Pedagogical Framework

This curriculum represents an integration of a rich variety of theories including Paulo Freire’s theory of co-orientation, George Hillocks’ theory of inquiry (which is itself a synthesis of Vygotskian learning theory, post-structuralism, and Deweyan constructivism), Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences and “education for understanding,” and my own social commentary and philosophical/methodological criticisms of multiculturalism as outlined in Part One of this essay.

When dealing with subject matter as abstract as the four main topics which I have chosen, the teacher’s greatest challenge is to ensure that his students can personalize the
content, see it as relevant to their own lives. And the constant and ultimate challenge before all teachers is to ensure his students can generalize any newly acquired skills, literacies, or perspectives to newly encountered problems both in and out of the classroom, and do so independently. If these are our goals, we must follow four guidelines:

First, we must ground our curriculum in the experiences of our students. Knowledge that does not grow out of their lives, and, as such, cannot be reapplied to their lives, is inert.

Second, we must ensure that they actually understand the concepts involved. Gardner notes that children come to school with a great number of stereotypes, simplified “scripts,” and pre-operational theories that they have fashioned in young childhood and that, unless these are met head on, we cannot expect that our more accurate or “disciplinary” understandings to supplant these childish ones. Quite to the contrary, research shows that even at the college level students will revert to their pre-scholastic understandings and theories when posed simple (but unfamiliar) problems in math, physics and the humanities. Thus, as we “cannot expect that these biases will dissipate after a single counterexample,” a pedagogy for understanding must address students’ inadequate conceptions and stereotypes “directly and over time” (Gardner 236-237).

Education for understanding also means engaging students in genuine processes of inquiry. Memorizing a definition of “race” will not facilitate a child’s understanding of that concept. Indeed, the child must construct his own definition out of a situation “beginning in doubt and moving in a rational way toward resolution” (Hillocks 30). It is our job as educators then, to create such problems and the means by which students might construct their own solutions, what Freire calls “problem-posing education.” If students have not constructed
and internalized knowledge, their synthesis and analysis of it will most often be only the
teacher’s or the textbook’s and the use of that knowledge and of those skills of synthesis
and analysis will only transfer to newly encountered problems in the most formulaic and
algorithmic ways. As George Bernard Shaw put it, “A great many people think they are
thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.” Because it is our hope not
only that students will construct their own understandings of the four main concepts, but
that they will to use these understandings to create new analyses of the relationships
between them, the course places students in the process of inquiry often.

Lastly, as the final piece of our goal is student independence, I have designed the course so
that it provides appropriate scaffolding that gradually gives way to student autonomy.
Perhaps the most important part of the teachers’ goal is to make himself obsolete.

Course Structure

The units are structured thusly: Each of the four main concepts provides the
overarching theme for a unit. I outline a goal or goals in terms of students constructing an
understanding of that concept, often including specific information I think should be integrated
into student understandings. The unit is broken into sections by objectives designed to help
students reach those goals and I have written a question which encompasses the problem
inherent in each objective. This question provides the students with a point of entry through
which they can engage those problems and also a reminder of the thematic relationship
between the materials and activities in that section. For example, for the objective\footnote{These “objectives” are not the behavioral objectives that are commonly labeled such in educational discourse. They are more accurately goals. I call them objectives to distinguish them from the larger overarching goals of} “Students
will apply the values that they have discovered are necessary for community to considerations of the conflicts within our national, state, or local communities.” I have posed the question, “How Can Our Nation Be More Like a Community?” Throughout the readings and activities of the section students will be asked to keep that question in mind, or, indeed, readings and activities will be designed to engage students in that question. Answers to that question should help students meet the overall goal for the unit:

Students will articulate a list of characteristics and create a working definition of what a true community is. They will investigate the problems of pluralism, integration, and intercultural exchange in our national “community,” using their definition of that concept as a standard. They will generate ideas for strengthening their own communities.

Taking cue from Hillocks, I have constructed a number of what he calls “gateway activities” to be integrated into the sequences of activities which include the more traditional classroom exercises of reading, writing, and discussing. With a nod to Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences I have attempted to incorporate math, science, mechanical, and interpersonal activities, though admittedly the curriculum is centered on the humanities and clearly favors what he calls the linguistic and interpersonal intelligences. Sequences will be described after each objective. Each sequence begins with a writing sample which is used both to assess the students’ level of understanding, stimulate their prior knowledge, and as a comparative sample to a final writing project. The final assignment will ask of students the same knowledge or understandings as the initial writing sample; thus, the two can be compared for the purposes of assessing both writing, higher order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, and argument), and nuanced understanding of the main concepts.

Each unit. Behavioral objectives will be explicitly or implicitly stated in the descriptions of sequences of activities.
Not only are the units designed to be progressive and cohesive in and of themselves, but they are also designed to build on one another. It is quite possible that, with some tinkering, they could be tackled in another order; however, my own sequencing is quite deliberate. I have placed the unit on race first because I believe a de-essentialized understanding of race and an awareness of race ideology must undergird our exploration of subsequent concepts if they are to be authentically anti-racist. The unit on community follows because it is here that I hope students will glean an understanding the network of relationships and the balance of rights and responsibilities necessary for the maintenance of democracy. Democracy is third because students will need both these understandings and the more sophisticated conception of race to diagnose and prognosticate the shortcomings of US democracy. And the unit on technology and the media comes last because in it we analyze how the media shapes our ideas of race and how an increasingly centralized and technological economy dismantles our communities and makes our democracy ever less democratic.

Each unit asks students to reach back to what they have gleaned from previous units and use it in solving new problems and constructing new understandings. For example, The analysis of many contemporary and historical social problems calls for a deep understanding of at least two of the main concepts of the course, so the opportunities for real-life inquiry are rich. Students will practice these analyses on texts and role plays, before being asked to use them on situations of their own choosing.

The course culminates with an essay which asks students to synthesize their various definitions of the major concepts into an analysis of a relationship between them. Thus, all the activities of the course build toward this assignment pedagogically and the assignment provides
the opportunity for independent utilization of the students new understandings and interpretive skills. Because this is a difficult writing assignment, the course devotes substantial time to the procedural knowledge of writing, including the general writing process, more task-specific knowledge, and mechanical/grammatical knowledge. However, as the amount of time and types of lessons necessary will vary according to the specific needs of each class, I mention them in the sequences only in passing. Because research shows that most inexperienced writers’ idea of argument is a series of unsubstantiated claims, the course also devotes a good deal of time to honing students’ ability to create well-formed arguments. Finally, the high level of much of the reading may require comprehension aids for a large portion of the students. However, since my own knowledge of methodology for assisting student reading comprehension is inadequate at the time of this writing, I will only say that any such strategies or aids should not be implemented at the expense of a whole language approach to the readings.

One final note: Because of the similarities between the units in terms of structure and pedagogical framework, the theoretical bases and connections between activities are explicated more thoroughly in the first unit than in subsequent units.
Black and White: The Problem of Race

Goals: Students will de-essentialize their concept of race. Students will come to see the problematic nature of race as biological category, as well as a sociocultural one. Students will place their own ethnicity within the context of the mosaic of US peoples, and emerge with a more systematic analysis of the grounds and value of ethnicity-based identity. Deconstructing the notion of race is both a scientific (biological/sociological), intrapersonal, and interpersonal endeavor. As such, I have structured the sequence to emphasize these proclivities not so much to provide multiple “points of entry” for various intelligences, as to ensure that the process goes beyond an intellectual level.

The Sequence:

1. Initial writing sample. “Write a clear definition of the word race. Your definition should be specific enough so that it is unambiguous to the average reader, i.e., it will probably be substantially longer than a dictionary definition.” The purpose of this writing sample is three fold: 1) It stimulates the students’ prior knowledge of the concept in preparation for subsequent activities. 2) It allows us to build on their existing schemata, or, in Gardner’s terms, to meet their “prejudicial” views “directly” in hopes of supplanting them with more accurate or sophisticated ones. And 3) it will be used as a contrast to the final similar writing assignment for the purpose of assessment, and as such is purposefully done without any scaffolding.

2. Problem-solving groups. Broken into groups of four, students are first asked to “list all the races.” Next, groups are given scenarios to “solve” which challenge typical criteria for race membership. For example:

   Scenario 1: Tina was born to two Italian-American parents but was adopted by Mexican-Americans in infancy. Because of her dark complexion and black hair and her fluent Spanish, she “passes” for Latin. In fact, most of her distant relatives don’t even know she’s adopted. When Tina is a senior in high school her counselor gives her an application for the Caesar Chavez Scholarship for Mexican Americans. Should Tina be eligible? (The question is whether or not Tina is Mexican American, not whether or not it would be ethical for her to apply if she is not).

After resolving their respective scenarios, groups will share them and the processes they went through with the whole class. The list they produce will indirectly reveal students’ criteria for race. The scenarios serve the triple purpose of 1) helping students understand the criteria that they already have for what constitutes a racial group and what constitutes membership in that group, 2) helping students learn general strategies for developing criteria (strategies they will need later to develop their own definitions of race and the other concepts), and 3) problematizing the students conceptions of the races as “essential” categories, in preparation for the subsequent activities aimed at demonstrating race’s socially constructed nature. The teacher will also need to imbed within this activity an mini-lesson on argument construction (the chain made up of a claim, grounds for that claim, articulation of a warrant, and its backing); however, this is best done as the teacher moves from group to group helping them work through their scenarios.
Where Does the Idea of ‘Race’ Come From?

Objective: Students will understand the socially constructed nature of the idea of “race” and its historical roots.

3. *Mini-lesson on the biology of race.* to demonstrate that race is not a biological category and that, in fact, most biologist and anthropologist are in agreement that race is a fiction. (to be written, help from science teacher?)


5. *Mini-lesson on Transatlantic Slave Trade.* Short history to demonstrate how “race” became justification for exploitation and slavery.

6. *View Amistad, (film).* Steven Spielberg’s telling of the story of a Spanish slave ship that was overrun by its human cargo and reached the Long Island Sound after two months of attempting to return to Africa. The film centers around the “courtroom drama” of how the problem was to be resolved and the relationships that Cinque, alleged leader of the rebellion, established with the Americans who worked for his freedom. Students answer and discuss questions about the film. The film provides a dramatic representation of much of what they learn above, outlining the atrocities of the Transatlantic slave trade. In addition, the more accessible film will prepare students for the poem to follow which is more difficult.

7. *Read “Middle Passage” and write internal monologues.* Robert Hayden’s poem employs a collage technique which may make it less accessible to students not skilled in reading poetry. One activity which may help is having the students find the number of “voices” in the poem and label each “voice.” After discussing the poem and its technique, students write an internal monologue (similar to a diary entry) of an African “passenger” aboard La Amistad. Students share their pieces with the class and discuss. In addition to humanizing the experience of slavery for the students, this activity continues to challenge essentialist notions of race and helps students to develop a capacity for writing an empathic narrative, which is considered by many teachers of writing to be one the most important and difficult skills to teach.


9. *Read Things Fall Apart.* Chinua Achebe’s classic novel of 20th century colonial African humanizes for students effects of colonialism and demonstrates the mentality of the oppressors that was fostered by the concept of race. It exposes students to the traditional Ibo culture in the first several chapters and, through a riveting personal story, comments on the destruction of that culture by industrial capitalism and the “white man’s ways.” As such, it also prepares students for the exploration of industrial capitalism and the concept of “technology” in the last unit.

10. *Read “The Sheriff’s Children” and “A Matter of Principle.”* Charles Chestnutt provides students with two stories that critique our criteria for race group membership, one addressing the notion of “passing” the other the idea of hypodescent. Both provide students for rich ground on which to discuss race and examine their criteria for race group membership and for racial boundaries.

12. **Read “Racial Formation.”** The academic level of this piece may require that students do a 3-level reading guide. Discuss as whole class. Students break into their original problem-solving groups to answer this question:

In what ways do Omi & Winant express some of the ideas your group arrived at before in more technical language, i.e., where does your group agree with O & W? Which parts of their essay does your group disagree with? Be specific, use quotes.

For some students “Racial Formation” will most likely give tongue to a number of ideas they have developed but have been unable to articulate thus far. For others it will provide an opportunity to see the ideas they have been able to articulate placed into a systematic theory of race. Still other students may just plain disagree with Omi & Winant. Regardless, most students will need the experiential scaffolding of the problem-solving scenarios and the whole-class discussion to access the essay and subsequently integrate it into their own theory of racial formation.

13. (to be written, some type of hands-on group problem solving which involves the categorizing of a spectrum of manipulatives into arbitrarily defined groups objects of varying sizes, shapes, and colors? sea shells? household items? photographs?)

**Does Race Matter Now? Should it? In what sense?**

Objective: Students will realize the ways in which race still influences our lives in the US. Students will begin to answer for themselves the question of when race should be a factor and when it should not.

13. **Read “Racism and White Backlash.”** In preparation for answering the question Does race matter now?, students must have at least a minimal understanding of how race has mattered in the past. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s essay provides a good summary of the historical uses of race. It should reinforce for students both the notion of race as constructed and the historical perspective on that constructedness that they have received thus far. Thus, “Backlash” builds on what has just been crystallized for the students in “Formation”’s academic prose and prepares them to think about how the life of a contemporary US citizen is influenced by his race by reminding them how it has been a factor in the recent past.

14. **Comparison of “Hurricane” and “The Beast” (songs).** Though Bob Dylan’s “Hurricane” was written over twenty years before The Fugees’ “The Beast,” the two share the theme of abuse of police power. Students listen to each, read along with printed sheets of lyrics and in small groups compare the two songs in terms of that theme:

How is the content of these two songs similar? How is it different? How are the artists’ attitudes toward that content similar? How are they different?

To speak of the racism and oppression that occurred in this country even as recently as the early 1970’s is far from controversial. However, to speak of similar problems continue today can be somewhat more heated. The similarities between these songs demonstrate that many of the problems of racism outlined in the first continue today and that attitudes toward those problems have changed.²

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² Interestingly, since the writing of this essay, Bob Dylan has appeared in a video with Wyclef (of the Fugees).
16. *Race v. Culture/Ethnicity.* (to be written) Students are encouraged to replace the term race with more accurate labels such as ethnicity or cultural background.

17. *Read contemporary multicultural poets.* Philip Levine, “Old Testament”; Louis J. Rodriguez, “Tomatoes”; Audre Lorde, “East Berlin”; Li-Young Lee, “Father”; Dean Young, “One Story.” Options are almost limitless; however, selections should include both works in which the person’s culture does not seem to play a central role in thematic or tonal development and pieces in which culture is explicitly or implicitly central. Students follow up by comparing two poems (perhaps one from each of the categories mentioned above) orally or in writing or with a whole class discussion.

18. *Read “Mixed Like Me.”* David Bernstein’s brings the perspective of the multiracial person to bear on the discussion of race. Poised at the literal borders of the racial debates, multiracial individuals are in a unique position to critique our notions of “race.” Indeed, they are walking examples of how foolish are racial categories are. Bernstein delivers this message in a readable and human piece that is half ethnography/autobiography and half political commentary. His commentary on multiculturalism and intercultural exchange will prepare students for the questions posed about those topics in the next unit.

19. *Multiracial/cultural panel.* Students will prepare two questions to ask one or more members of a multiracial/cultural panel. One of the questions must draw on some text the class has studied. For example, “David Bernstein says...do you agree?” Ideally the panel will consist of people with an array of opinions about how race effects their lives, including multiracial people and one or more persons with an ambiguous racial appearance.

20. *Mini-lesson on argument.* At this point the teacher re-enforces what the students have learned about constructing arguments and adds to that knowledge on how to predict and counter counterarguments, a skill necessary for developing a sophisticated final writing sample.

21. *Final writing project.* Same writing prompt as the initial writing sample. Depending on the class’s experience with the writing process and the task-specific knowledge necessary for writing a “definition” piece, the teacher will need to include a number of writing activities to appropriately scaffold this assignment. At the very least the teacher should do some type of pre-writing activity to help students recall and begin to synthesize the material they have covered thus far, appropriate time in class for writing, and some type of peer or group revision process. Students should compare their finished product to their initial writing sample for purposes of self-assessment.

**Melting Pots and Salad Bowls: The Problem of Community**

**Goals:** Students will articulate a list of characteristics and create a working definition of what a true community is. They will investigate the problems of pluralism, integration, and intercultural exchange in our national “community” using their definition of that concept as a standard. They will generate ideas for strengthening their own communities.
The Sequence:
1. **Community-building activities and discussion.** The activities actually come at the outset of the course. Now students discuss how they have become more like a community and what that means, how those activities helped, how subsequent class experiences have helped, etc.
2. **Initial writing sample.** “What is a community?”
3. **Problem-solving groups.** Each group answers one of the following questions:
   - Is this school a community?
   - Is this classroom a community?
   - Is a church a community?
   - Is this city a community?
   - Is a culture a community?
   - Is a race a community?
   - Is a nation a community?
   As above, students defend the how and why of their answer to the class and explain the process they went through to arrive at that answer.

**Is a Race a Community? Is a Nation a Community? What is?**
Objective: Students will formulate a definition of community that involves an understanding of the necessary relationships between people and between people and the earth. Students will understand the difference between an aggregate, a social group, and a community (that a race or a nation is a community in only the loosest terms).
4. **The poetry of Walt Whitman and Sandburg’s “Chicago.”** Whitman’s poetry often sings the praises of the young United States and sees its workers and citizens as belonging to a brotherhood or community. Students analyze several poems along this theme and question if the nation can still be viewed as community today. Why and Why not? Sandburg narrows the focus to a large city. Can a city still be viewed as a community?
5. **Read “Population.”** Mark Halliday provides us with a humorous poem about the things we have in common as Americans and as people.
6. **Dumbing Us Down (excerpt).** Dagatto explains that he feels a school is not a community, or at least schools as they exist now are not communities. Thus, through negative example it helps students establish criteria for what a community is.
7. **Read “Conserving Communities.”** Wendell Berry’s essay discusses the impact of the industrialization/corporatization of farming on farm communities and the implications that it has for all communities. Berry stresses the importance of place to culture and community, noting the relationships between land and people necessary in a functioning definition of community. His essay also looks forward to unit four, where students will read the essay again, that time in light of questions of technology.

**How Can Our Nation Be More Like a Community?**
Objective: Students will apply the values that they have discovered are necessary for community to considerations of the conflicts within our national, state or local communities.
8. **Read and view “I Have a Dream,” Martin Luther King, Jr.** King’s speech envisioned a community-like nation where “black children and white children hold hands together,” noting the importance of tolerance, equality, and a sense of brotherhood in a community. His oratorical style is so engaging that students should view as well as read this speech.
9. Read “C. P. Ellis.” Studs Terkel documents this former Klansmen explaining the psychology of racism and how he crossed over from Klansmen to civil rights activist.

10. Read “I’m Black You’re White Who’s Innocent?,” Shelby Steele. Steele calls us to move beyond racial differences to heal our nation.

11. Read “A Dubious Battle in Oakland” from The Disuniting of America. Todd Gitlin tells the story of how separatist multiculturalism ruins the efforts for curriculum reform in one school district and how identity politics threatens to disband our nation.

12. Independent analysis project. Students choose a contemporary social problem or issue and outline how that problem could be solved or better if the criteria that they have established for community were applied to it. They are encouraged to present their project in some form other than straight essay writing. Perhaps a video or some other visual representation, a one act play or a poem. Students who choose alternative formats for their project should write a short blurb explaining how their project answers the question. Students should compare their finished product to their initial writing sample for purposes of self-assessment.

How Can We Strengthen Our Own Communities?

13. “Strengthening Our Community” project. Students brainstorm problems or places in which their own community falls short of their ideal definition of community, select one, and design a project to address that problem as a class. Ideas might range from starting a campaign to encourage their schoolmates to attend church regularly to writing and performing a play about the importance of family to starting a recycling program in the city or town.

Self-Evident Truths: The Problem of Democracy

Goal: Students will construct working definitions of democracy and systematic understandings of the conditions necessary and use those definitions to explore the problem of achieving and maintaining a truly democratic United States.

The Sequence:

1. Initial writing sample. “What does democracy mean to you? What do you think are the characteristics of a true democracy? What conditions do you think are necessary within a society for that democracy to work?”

2. Problem-solving groups. Students are given scenarios in which they must determine whether a given dynamic is democratic. Scenarios should include ones in which basic freedoms are inhibited as well as ones in which wealth is grossly maldistributed. The teacher may want to model scenarios after contemporary situations in various countries. As with the previous problem-solving activities, this one is designed to elicit criteria for defining our central topic and to hone the students strategies for developing criteria in general.
What Does ‘Democracy’ Mean?

Objective: Students will create a list of the characteristics of a democracy and begin to think of democracy as necessitating certain social conditions.

3. Read “Democracy and the Democratic Man,” from Plato’s The Republic. Plato’s idea of democracy is something closer to what we would call anarchy, he envisions a country in which men do whatever they please, whenever they please and subject themselves to the will of the courts only at will. His vision provides an interesting starting point and an interesting contrast to other visions. He opens up the question for us of the place of morality in maintaining the state. In addition, he addresses the influence of materialism on a society: “We can see at once that a society cannot hold wealth in honor and at the same time establish proper self-control in its citizens” (60). These topics begin to stimulate students’ minds for the following section on what is necessary to maintain democracy and for the following unit which explores consumer culture.

4. Read excerpt from Politics, Aristotle. Aristotle provides us with a more sophisticated definition of democracy than does Plato and he notes that the maldistribution of wealth precludes a true democracy.

5. Read “Aeropagitica.” John Milton’s passionate argument for freedom of press and speech gets students to think about what rights are necessary components of a true democracy and why.


7. Read the Constitution of the United States of America.

8. View 1776, (film). This humorous and mostly-historical musical about the framing of the Declaration of Independence tells how Jefferson was saddled with the job and shows the moral dilemmas he faced regarding slavery and other places where the US fell short of the principles he was outlining on paper.


10. Visualize democracy assignment. Brainstorm with the students a list of principles of democracy they have gleaned from the readings thus far. Students create a visual representation of democracy using any medium of their choice. Students present their paintings, mosaics, sculptures, dioramas, etc. with a short oral explanation of how their work displays the principles of democracy.

What is Necessary to Maintain a Democracy?

Objective: Students will create a list of social and moral conditions which are necessary in order for democracy to be achieved and maintained.

11. Read Leviticus 25. This chapter of the Levitical law of the Jewish people outlines the measures God dictated they take to ensure that all people maintained economic independence and that the maldistribution of wealth did not become too extreme.

12. Read Thomas Jefferson’s “?.” In this short piece Jefferson outlines why he feels an educated masses is necessary to maintain a democracy.

13. Read “Jefferson Swindle.” In this scathing one-page essay Mary Smith satirically blames Jefferson for creating “a nation of whiners,” noting how his concept of the right
to the pursuit of happiness has been warped in our culture into an expectation of happiness. She highlights the idea that responsibility has not frequently enough been attached to our understanding of rights and that happiness must be pursued or worked at.

14. Read “What High School Is.” Takes us through a prototypical day in the life a high schooler and, with minimal commentary, shows how little education takes place in the typical high school, or rather how far the education that takes place is from the goals outlined by the community and the school staff. Students consider the essay in terms of their own education and the kind of education they feel is necessary for participation in democracy. The teacher might start with a free-write or small group discussion and then move to a whole-class discussion using a question like:

Thomas Jefferson listed education of the masses a necessary component of democracy. Do you think so so thinks the contemporary American high school is really an agent of democracy? Do you agree?

15. Read Alexis De Toqueville. In this short excerpt, the French visitor to the nascent United States adumbrates the necessity of a moral ground for democracy. The piece recalls Plato’s fear of the “democratic man.”

16. Read “Communist Manifesto” (excerpt). In this excerpt shortened to be an in-class reading, Marx more fully explicates the deprivation theory (the idea that maldistribution of wealth inevitably leads to revolution) prefigured in Aristotle above. Students discuss how viable they find this theory to be, and if they agree with the Marxist conception of democracy.

17. Listen to “Revolution” and “Year of the Boomerang” (songs). Arrested Development and Rage Against the Machine offer us two contemporary commentaries based on deprivation theory.

18. Read Henry Louis Gates, Jr.? a reading emphasizing the importance of ethnic and religious tolerance and the dangers of relativism

19. Richard John Neuhaus? a reading emphasizing the importance of family and community, especially communities of faith and memory.

20. Undemocracy role plays. Students participate in role play scenarios involving situations with unequal distributions of power or seriously inhibited rights. Scenarios may be designed to mirror contemporary or historical situations which they can later be compared to or discussed in light of. Students first determine what was wrong with the situation, whether or not it was democratic, and how it could be improved.

Do We Have Democracy Now? How Do We Get More of It?

Objective: Students will answer the question of what’s needed to maintain and improve the democracy in contemporary US. They will use the democratic achievements of the recent past to consider how further democratization might occur.

21. View Eyes on the Prize (documentary). The riveting documentary takes us through the highlights of the civil rights movement.

22. Read “The Kennedys and King,” from Civil Rights and Wrongs, Harry S. Ashmore. This chapter from Ashmore’s historical tracing of the civil rights movement bolsters what students view above with further historical background.
23. **Mini-lesson.** Students study a contemporary situation abroad which is undemocratic and compare it to the United States.

24. **Read** "Fate of the Commons," Todd Gitlin. Gitlin argues that the rise of identity politics is threatening “the commons” in America, and that without a common narrative behind the American experience, we have no ground for democracy.

25. **Final writing project.** “After the readings, discussions, and activities of the last unit, what does democracy mean to you now? What do you see as your part in ensuring (obtaining? maintaining?) a democratic present and future?” Students compare their finished product to their initial writing sample for purposes of self-assessment.

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**How to Watch TV: The Problems of Technology and Media**

**Goals:** Students will understand that their status as consumer implies a relationship not only to a product but to the producers of that product and to the earth; they will reconsider how these relationships can be more ethical. Students will learn to read the mass media, particularly television, developing some ability to discern the corporate/industrial agenda behind much of pop/consumer culture.

**The Sequence:**

1. **Initial writing sample.** “How do technology and specifically media influence your life and the quality of life in your community?”
2. **Problem-solving groups.** Students are given scenarios which represent various theories of the influence technology and the media future. Students are ask to discern the likelihood of their respective scenarios and defend the how and why to the class.

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**What is a Free Market? What is a Corporation? Where Do Nikes Come From?**

**Objective:** Students will gain an understanding of the basic principles of a capitalist economy and the basic structure of a corporation. Students will begin to consider the costs of industrialism.

3. **Mini-lesson on capitalism.** Students review the basic principles of a free market system and brainstorm the virtues and drawbacks of such a system.
4. **Read** "Chomp." In this article from the March/April 1998 issue of the UTNE Reader, Jim Hightower provides a short, humorous and readable history of corporations, including an explanation of charters and how we might influence the chartering process through democratic means.
5. **Mini-lesson on corporations.** (to be written)
6. **Role play corporate economy.**
7. **View Roger and Me (film).** Michael Moore’s documentary traces the history of the GM corporations influence on the community of Flint, MI. It is an excellent chronicle of the sometimes devastating effects of both corporate capitalism and industrialism. Among other things students can discuss the implications of the Flint story for other communities whose economies rest in the hands of a single corporation or industry, e.g., Battle Creek and Kellogg.
8. **Listen to** “Union Sundown.” Bob Dylan’s song includes a list of products made in other countries: “My shoes come from Singapore. . .this shirt I’m wearing is from the Philippines” and subsequent commentary: “it was assembled by a man who makes
twenty cents a day.” It provides students with an accessible text which stimulates thought about the origins of the things we consume and the relationships implicit in that consumption. It also provides a springboard from which students might explore the relationship between democracy and global capitalism: “You know capitalism is above the law. . .Democracy don’t rule the world. You better get that through your head. This world is ruled by violence, but I guess that’s better left unsaid.”

9. **Product origins trace.** After brainstorming a list of products as a whole class and choosing a favorite product, students will research the origins of that product, answering as many of the following questions as possible:

- What store sells the product?
- What company supplies the store?
- How does it get there?
- What company produces the product?
- How are their workers treated and paid?
- How do they get the product to the supplier?
- What corporation owns the company?
- What other companies do they own?
- Where do the materials used in production come from?
- What are the environmental costs of the production and distribution of the product?
- What are the human costs?

Results are presented to the class via a flow chart or some other visual aid and a short oral report. Implications of the students findings are discussed in small groups and then as a whole class.

10. **Reread “Conserving Communities.”** Wendell Berry’s essay discusses the impact of the industrialization/corporatization of farming on farm communities and the implications that has for all communities. It should remind the students of Dylan’s prediction that “the day is coming when even your home garden is against the law” and of the story behind *Roger and Me*; however, it more clearly explains what constitutes good relationships between people, place and “nature.”

11. **Read 1984 or Brave New World.** The class is split into four “reading circles,” two for each novel (other appropriate novels may be offered as well). In their respective novels, George Orwell and Aldous Huxley offer two views of how the centralization of power that comes with man’s increased technological capabilities will ultimately manifest itself. Each reading circle will read a novel and create a presentation for the class on their author’s prophecy. Presentations include the group’s argument for how likely their author’s vision is in light of what they have learned about industrialism, the globalization of the economy, etc. The whole class discusses which of the two visions they feel is more accurate.

**Who’s Selling Us What? How and Why?**

Objective: Students will understand media products as both products (in the economic sense) and texts which they can critique. Students will become aware of the amount of television programming and advertising they consume.

12. **Television viewing logs.** Keeping pen and paper near the set, students keep track of all the television they watch for a week. They record the names and duration of programs and the number and duration of advertisements. When they have completed their tallies and calculated totals, the opportunities for math activities are copious: Students can make a pie graph of how they spend their waking time each week and visually see how much of their time it consumes. They can calculate the average
number of hours they watch in a year or how much they will watch in their lifetime and compare these figures to how much time they will spend doing other things such as reading or going to school or calculate how much time they would have if the reduced their TV diet and brainstorm productive ways to fill that time. They can do class totals and averages.\footnote{For the basic concept of the TV log and many of the math activities, I am indebted to Bob Peterson’s article, “Coping with TV: Some Lesson Ideas.” Rethinking Our Classrooms} Note: This activity and activity No. 12 must be timed so that they take place two weeks and one week before the “What’s Left” reading, respectively. Thus, they will not actually fall into the sequence in these positions.

13. **TV-Free Week.** Beginning by reading an excerpt from Neil Postman’s *Amusing Ourselves To Death*, students discuss some of their favorite television shows and the reasons that they like them, what parts of Postman’s critique of television they agree with, and what criticisms they have of television. Postman’s critique provides students with a few general criticisms so that can begin to think about television critically. This will prepare them for the more specific criticisms in the next activities. Following the discussion, students abstain from watching TV for one entire week. Possible preparatory activities include brainstorming alternative activities (or planning one for the class) or making “survival kits” with games, books, recipes, etc. In addition to helping them find better ways to use their time, TV-Free Week serves to re-sensitize students to the content and presentation techniques of television.

14. **Read “What’s Left After Violence and Advertising.”** The author of this essay systematically compares the world of television and the real world and comments on the disparity. Because the essay is dated (1970’s), students can conduct similar comparisons between real life and the shows they watch without leaning on this essay.

15. **“Read” commercials and ads as whole class.** I have not chosen any specific material, as this form of media dates itself quicker than any other and examples used in class should by familiar to students. The activity should include viewing television commercials several times, discussing them, viewing them again, and discussing them again. If the students do not raise the questions themselves, the teacher should ask What audio-visual effects are used to sell the product? What fears or desires does the commercial play on? How does the world of the commercial compare to the real world? What ramifications might the fantasy sold in the commercial have on real life?

16. **View episode of “Fresh Prince.”** An episode of “The Cosby Show” or some other black family show can be used as a springboard to explore the relationship between media and our conceptions of race.

17. **View an episode of evening news (in class).** Students view an episode of nightly news, rewinding and re-watching pieces as necessary. Discussion should raise questions about what types of stories make the news, what order the stories are presented, the attitude of the newscasters, how much a segment actually teaches us about an issue or event, etc.

18. **Repeat activities 15, 16, or 17 in small groups and then as individuals.** Students are broken into groups which repeat the activities above focusing on a specific medium.

19. **Who controls the media?** (to be written, School House Rock parody?)
20. *Adbusters project.* After looking at and discussing several examples from *Adbusters* magazine, working in groups or alone, students create parodies of ads which make some comment about the product or the company that produces the product.

21. *Read “The Joy of Sales Resistance.”* In this short but perceptive piece, Wendell Berry offers students a simple and satisfying answer to resisting the detrimental effects of advertising: Don’t buy the products.

**Why Has Media Become Anti-Media? (A Teacher Models the S.T.U.)**

With the following two activities, the teacher models for students the student-taught unit, in which they will create their own assignment for the class in order to demonstrate their own reading of a particular form of media. Thus, the following two activities grow out of my own reading of the media and cannot simply be borrowed by another teacher.

21. *Read “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” and “Alternative to What?”* Thomas Frank outlines how the countercultural ideal of rebellion is in harmony with the corporate agenda and why media portrayals of rebellion and the revolutionary spirit are not dangerous to the status quo at all. He lambastes alternative music culture for simply being another face of the materialism and consumerism of corporate culture. The ideas of rebellion, individualism, etc. should be exciting to teenagers many of whom fancy themselves rebels. This assignment will help them rethink their ideas of what constitutes rebellion or what one should be rebelling against, and hopefully help them channel their rebellious energies in more fruitful directions.

24. *Read various contemporary ads in which “rebellion” is a theme.* Teacher shows a video collection of rebellion commercials. Examples at the time of this writing include Taco Bell’s “revolutionary taco” series, Sprite commercials which purport to be anti-marketing, and a commercial for a four-wheel-drive vehicle which shows its driver breaking all the rules and eluding a fat man who is presumably a member of the corporate elite. Students are asked to find the common theme in the ads and then deconstruct that theme in small and large group discussions.

25. *Final research assignment.* “Pick a theme for a kind of media (for example, tennis shoe ads, television shows with black characters, love songs, or magazine ads with pictures of women) then collect a large sampling of that type of media and find a common message, agenda, or psychological technique in the advertising or programming. Remember to look for both the explicit and the implicit messages and to ask all the questions we asked in class. Write a critique of the advertising/programming which includes a thesis about your findings and supportive statements which try to convince the reader of your perspective. Don’t forget to quote the ads/shows directly and describe the visual and audio effects in detail. Finally, your critique should consider the effects the advertising/programming on its viewers, specifically within your community.”

Students collect and discuss media samples in groups, but write individual critiques. They use these critiques to create student-taught unit. This critique takes the place of the final writing sample. Armond White’s *The Resistance*, a collection of

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4 OK, OK, so the whole unit comes from my own reading of the media.
critical essays on pop culture, though a bit radical, may provide a good resource of examples for students.

26. **Student-taught units.** Following the teacher's model, students take the work they have done above to create a presentation and an activity to teach the class what it is they have learned about the media.

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**Final Writing Project**

1. **History mini-lesson on Clawrence Thomas hearing.**
3. **Brainstorm for final with concept map.** After reading the final writing prompt (below), draw the four concepts and list their components or major subordinate ideas as defined by the class. Then have the class brainstorm connections between the concepts listed on the board and create visual representations of relationships using arrows and descriptions.
4. **Final writing sample.**

   In the essay we have just read by Wendell Berry, he explores the relationship between sex, economy, freedom and community. Your final task is to explore the relationship between two or more of the four major concepts we have studied in this course. For example, you might address a question such as In what sense is *community* necessary for *democracy*? or How do the *media* influence our concept of *race*? You may discuss a problem involving more than two of the concepts, such as how living in a *democracy* has influenced our formation of *racial communities*. You may connect other major concepts or issues to the two that you choose from this course, such as How does the *media*’s portrayal of *sex* influence our ideas about *community*? You must quote three of the materials we have used in the class. You may quote other material as well.

Students are given class time for much of the writing process. This includes the opportunity to “publish” by sharing part of their essay with the class. They should also compare all of their writing samples and oral presentations from the semester and write a reflective self-assessment piece.