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Multiculturalism: A Challenge
to Two Myths of Liberalism

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Working collectively to confront difference, to expand our awareness of sex, race, and class as interlocking systems of domination, of the ways we reinforce and perpetuate these structures, is the context in which we learn the true meaning of solidarity. It is this work that must be the foundation of the feminist movement.

bell hooks, *Talking Back*

If feminism is the academic arm of the political movement for women's liberation (Jaggar 1983), then it must align itself with multiculturalism which is the academic arm of the political movement for a truly inclusive democratic society. Historically, feminism has had a dual relationship to the development of multicultural programs and policies in the academy. In relation to other bodies of knowledge, Women's Studies programs have been, and remain, a driving force behind multicultural and interdisciplinary work. And yet, issues of multiculturalism have also been raised *within* Women's studies programs and feminist scholarship--most notably by women of color (for example, see Collins 1991, DuBois and Ruiz 1990, hooks 1984, 1988, Joseph and Lewis 1981, Lerner 1993, Lorde 1984, Lugones and Spelman 1983). Given these relationships to issues of pluralism, it is crucial for feminist projects within the academy that we have access to a coherent notion of multiculturalism - one that makes clear both what it is and what it is not.

This paper comprises a mere beginning on this project. In the first part of this paper, we sketch a brief account of multiculturalism. This sketch is not intended as a complete account of the complexities of multiculturalism. Indeed, it serves merely to point out, rather than work out, those complexities. Nonetheless, it provides some of the contours of the concept of multiculturalism which serve to distinguish it from other positions that have been under attack recently. In the second part of this paper, we address two prevalent and diametrically opposed criticisms of multiculturalism, arguing that multicultura lism, properly understood, evades both of them. More

specifically, we argue that criticisms of multiculturalism as relativistic, on the one hand, and as absolutist, on the other, simply mask liberal democratic theory's myth-begotten attempt to resolve the tension between the one and the many. Multicultural-ism challenges the myths of meritocracy and abstract individualism which underlie liberalism and proposes a reconceptualization of democracy.

Understanding Multiculturalism

What is multiculturalism? Despite, or perhaps because of, increasingly popular usage, significant unclarity concerning this concept remains. Confusions are both revealed and perpetuated by the synonymous use of the terms "multicultural," "cross-cultural," and "culturally diverse." Confusions are further perpetuated by conflating descriptive and prescriptive uses of each of these terms.

Cultural Diversity

To emphasize cultural diversity is to emphasize group *differences*. This emphasis on difference may be either descriptive or prescriptive: one might be simply highlighting actual demographic trends or, alternatively, one could be advocating policy reform. The debates surrounding issues of cultural diversity in the university are not factual debates. Few would deny that cultural diversity is a sociological reality within the United States. Indeed, it always has been, although the specific racial and ethnic composition of the citizenry has shifted (Wiley 1993). More recently, linguistic, racial and ethnic diversity has also become a sociological reality within schools and workplaces. While in 1960 only six percent of college students were people of color (and many of these students attended predominantly black institutions), in 1991 twenty percent of college students were nonwhite or Hispanic (Menand 1991).

The contested issue concerning cultural diversity is a normative one. While some view cultural differences as *valuable*, others view cultural differences as *problematic*. Fuchs (1990:70), for example, "fears" that ethnic diversity threatens to "create a 'minority majority' that will make Eurocentrism obsolete by the 21st century." Those who fear loss of their own cultural dominance and privilege often view cultural diversity as a problem to be overcome. Thus, they may, as Fuchs does, advocate tightening immigration and hiring policies and restricting college admissions. Others may view cultural variety as something to be "tolerated." On university campuses, the attitudinal difference revealed by those who promote "respect" or even "appreciation" for alternative cultural traditions and values and those who promote "tolerance" for cultural diversity is worth noting. Academics who respect and appreciate other cultures will advocate university policies aimed at encouraging cultural diversity. Academics who merely tolerate diversity will not work to change the status quo within a school's population and curriculum.

Cross-cultural Understanding

Unlike the emphasis on cultural diversity, an emphasis on cross-cultural understanding highlights the ability and/or desire to negotiate, reconcile or transcend our cultural differences (Muskel 1991). Although the notion of cross-cultural understanding presupposes cultural differences, the emphasis here is on *shared* ideas, traditions and values. Claims concerning cross-cultural understanding, like claims concerning cultural diversity, can be understood as either descriptive or prescriptive claims. Here, however, it is more difficult to disentangle the two types of claims and thus there is apt to be less factual agreement. Increased incidence of sexual and racial harassment and violence on our college campuses - a reflection of larger social trends - testifies to a lack of cross-cultural understanding. Yet, there is little agreement concerning how prevalent, insurmountable or worrisome these events *are*. Thus, there is also little agreement concerning what, if anything, *should* be done to negotiate or transcend these campus conflicts.

Incidents of overt and covert racial assaults on blacks, Hispanics and other minorities intensified during the 80s on several college campuses (Farrell 1988). More than one hundred campuses reported incidents of racial or ethnic harassment and violence in each of 1988 and 1989 (Hurtado 1992). A 1991 survey of 128 four-year post-secondary institutions revealed that campus tensions are deeper than these reported incidents would suggest. Fifty-seven percent of the institutions surveyed claimed that intolerance posed problems on their campuses (People for the American Way 1991). Such racial and ethnic conflict among college students - allegedly among the best-educated and most open-minded population - has persuaded some educators to focus on cross-cultural understanding as a major higher education issue (Halcon and Reyes 1991). Yet others have criticized this focus, claiming that advocates of multiculturalism have exaggerated the extent and severity of the problem. Moreover, critics contend that multicultu ralism has been largely responsible for whatever racial and ethnic divisiveness exists on college campuses. D'Souza (1991), for example, claims that "overt racism is relatively rare at most campuses" and that multicultural policies have created an atmosphere of "academic apartheid" (see also Fuchs 1990, National Association of Scholars 1991, Schlesinger 1991).

Multiculturalism

Those who claim that multiculturalists have encouraged "tribalism" and exacerbated racial tensions (as well as those to whom this criticism accurately applies), misunderstand the goals of multicultural education. Indeed, they confuse a multicultural emphasis with an emphasis on cultural diversity. Seeing diversity and unity as mutually exclusive choices, advocates of cultural diversity have assumed that the only way to overcome cultural imperialism and hegemony is to deny the possibility of cross-cultural generalizations. Likewise seeing diversity and unity as mutually incompatible, critics of diversity goals have assumed that the only way to overcome

sectarianism and segregation is to deny the significance of cultural differences. Multiculturalism properly understood, however, is distinct from both of these approaches.

Multiculturalism is a normative vision of an academic community which attempts to synthesize unity and diversity. The multicultural vision is that of a *shared* community that maintains the integrity of the *different* groups which comprise it. As part of this synthesis, multiculturalism argues that the curricular and extra-curricular components of an academic community are intertwined. As Grant (1991) contends, multicultural education means that "ALL of education must be multicultural; staffing and personnel no less than curriculum; instruction no less than counseling and guidance; primary language maintenance no less than the food served to students in the school's cafeteria; and the pictures and symbols throughout the building no less than the policies and procedures that give direction to the school system." Issues surrounding the content of a student's education and the process of learning that takes place in the classroom have, until recently, been separated from issues surrounding the general atmosphere in which students live, the make-up of the student body, and so on. But, clearly, these two components exist within a reciprocal relationship. As feminists have also argued, the ideals which govern the pursuit of knowledge cannot be abstracted from the conditions under which students and faculty live and learn (Smith 1987).

Multiculturalism is part of a tradition which believes that education should include moral education. An academic community should (and does, although often unintentionally) impart moral as well as intellectual skills (Millem 1994, Sleeter 1991). More specifically, an academic community should prepare students to be good citizens, by instilling in them the values deemed necessary for living in and contributing to the larger society. Of course, one cannot prepare students to live in the larger society without having some conception of what that larger society *is* (descriptively) like. Nor can one prepare students to contribute to the larger society without having some conception of what that society *should* (prescriptively) be like. A multicultural academic community would be one that willingly and enthusiastically prepared its students to participate in a pluralistic, democratic society (Renyi 1993, Sigel and Hoskin 1991). Just as feminism is the "academic arm of the women's movement" (Jaggar 1983), multiculturalism is, thus, the academic arm of the political movement for a truly inclusive democratic society.

There is, however, an inherent instability in a pluralistic democracy deriving from a tension between the one and the many. Constant negotiation is needed between the values of unity and authority, on the one hand, and diversity and freedom, on the other. This tension will, therefore, also be present in academic institutions which attempt to honor both sets of values. Multiculturalism, as a means of honoring these

values, has been the focus of a variety of hostile responses. Underlying these responses is a pair of contradictory accusations which highlight the tension inherent in pluralistic democracy.

Responding to Multiculturalism's critics

Multiculturalism has become associated with an advocacy of relativism, on the one hand, and yet also with a commitment to absolutism, on the other. Multiculturalists have thus been attacked on the following contradictory grounds: 1) advocates of multiculturalism are charged with "lowering standards" and thus promoting an (anti) intellectual atmosphere in which "anything goes" (Bloom 1987, National Association of Scholars 1991, Woodward 1991, Will 1991) ; 2) proponents of multiculturalism are, however, also charged with enforcing absolute standards of "political correctness" which are intolerant, oppressive and dogmatic (Bush 1991, D'Souza 1991, Hentoff 1991, Schlesinger 1991, Woodward 1991). Obviously, at least one of these propositions is false. Below we suggest that both are false and that the multiculturalist need not be committed to either: multiculturalism is a third position distinct from both relativism and absolutism. Indeed, multiculturalism is as distinct from both of these theoretical extremes as democracy is distinct from the political extremes of anarchy and totalitarianism.

The fact that this is overlooked can be traced to a limited conception of democracy peculiar to liberal theory. Underlying the two accusations leveled against multiculturalism, and masking their inconsistency, are two myths of liberalism: 1) the myth of meritocracy; and 2) the myth of the abstract individual. It is by means of these two myths that the liberal (allegedly) resolves the tension between the one and the many in a democratic society. These myths work together to justify the authority structures of the *status quo* while allegedly protecting individual freedom.

Multiculturalism challenges both of these myths and offers an alternative vision of how to reconcile the tensions within a pluralistic society. It is because of this deeper challenge that multiculturalism is subjected to such contradictory accusations. The charge of relativism derives from the myth of meritocracy and the charge of absolutism derives from the myth of abstract individualism. Below we argue that each of these myths, and hence each of these charges, is false.

The Myth of Meritocracy
The myth of meritocracy suggests that political power, economic rewards and a variety of other social goods (e.g. college admission) are distributed to individuals according to the value of their skills, talents and potential or actual societal contributions. The myth of meritocracy provides liberal democracies with a political

justification for socio-economic and other inequalities by alleging that differential rewards fairly represent differing degrees of worth (e.g. Rawls 1971). The myth of meritocracy is a central thread in our North American cultural narrative. Indeed, it is so deeply embedded in popular thought that students (and others) asked to justify the radically inegalitarian distribution of wealth both within our nation and between first and third-world countries may often suggest that impoverished peoples are stupid, lazy, or barbaric, i.e. less intellectually and/or morally deserving of (local, national or global) resources than their wealthier counterparts. Despite widespread acceptance, however, the myth of meritocracy is just that - a myth.

The claim that social goods are distributed according to criteria of merit in our academic, economic and political communities overlooks nepotism, favoritism, back-door deals, old-boy networks and simple good luck as factors leading to the accumulation of social wealth. The claim that we live in a meritocracy presupposes there are equal opportunities for all community members to develop and manifest the skills and virtues, or make the contributions, deemed meritorious in our society. Without this assumption, it would make no sense to claim that some do and others do not "deserve" certain social goods. But, in any racist, sexist, classist (agist, h-eterosexist, ablist, etc.) society, opportunities for self-development and social contribution are radically unequal. Moreover, the social, economic and educational advantages enjoyed by the wealthy, and the disadvantages suffered by the impover-ished, will be inherited by subsequent generations (Gilbert and Kahl 1993).

It is worth noting that even if racism and other forms of discrimination were abolished, this problem would remain. As Jaggar (1983) argues, a meritocracy is an "inherently unstable social arrangement." Insofar as a meritocracy encourages an inegalitarian distribution of social wealth, some will accumulate advantages (including non-economic advantages) from which their children will benefit. Thus, while meritocracy "presupposes equality of opportunity, its effect is constantly to make opportunities unequal" (196).

Indeed, unfair competition is unavoidable. Even if the social playing field could be levelled out, certain "natural" differences may result in unequal opportunities. As Ezorsky (1976) points out, some candidates may be better qualified for a position than others due to certain biologically inherited traits. (Consider, for example, the advantage of height in seeking a basketball scholarship.) As several writers have suggested, such cases undermine the notion that a meritocracy is fair by illustrating that a distribution of social goods on the basis of skills, talents and achievements does not, in fact, and could not, in principle, coincide with distribution according to desert (Ezorsky 1976, Fienberg 1973, Rawls 1971).

Thus, the claim that our liberal democracy is a meritocracy is a myth in two

senses. First, it is a false depiction of the principles of distribution which actually operate in our society. Second, it is an ideal which is, in principle, impossible to attain. Nonetheless, the myth of meritocracy is hard to dislodge--perhaps especially so in its application to post-secondary education. The prevalent assumption of most colleges and universities is that institutions of higher learning are, and should be, intellectual meritocracies. In such (alleged) meritocracies, students are admitted and graded, faculty are hired and evaluated and scholarship is published and taught solely on the basis of intellectual merit.

It is because of this prevalent myth surrounding the university - together with the assumption that criteria of merit are universally applicable and objectively ascertained--that multicultural educators have been charged with lowering or abandoning intellectual "standards".

The Charge of Relativism
The multiculturalist seeks to increase student access to knowledge by admitting a greater variety of students (and faculty) to the university and offering a greater variety of courses, materials and pedagogical methods. The opponent of multiculturalism seeks to maintain limited access, by retaining traditional restrictions on who will be admitted and how and what they will be taught. Tradition alone, however, is clearly an insufficient reason to limit educational access. Hence, the defender of the status quo adverts to the myth of meritocracy. Thus, the National Association of Scholars (1991) expresses "alarm" at multicultural policies which "admit students widely disparate in their level of preparation in order to make the campus demographically representative." Likewise, they express dismay at "preferential hiring for faculty and staff positions determined by race, ethnicity and gender" and the presence of "ethnic and gender studies courses [without] genuine scholarly content." Such practices and policies, according to the National Association of Scholars, involve "the repudiation of appropriate intellectual criteria" (7-9).

The multiculturalist is thus accused of being a relativist who adopts an "anything goes" mentality which is tantamount, at best, to lowering academic standards and, at worst, to abandoning academic standards altogether (see also Bloom 1987, D'Souza 1991). This charge of relativism operates at both the curricular and the extra-curricular level.

Curricular issues
At the level of the curriculum, debates concerning multiculturalism take the form of academic canon debates. The multiculturalist supports ethnic studies programs, women's studies programs and so forth, and advocates integrating the questions, concerns, insights and interpretations of minority and feminist scholarship into traditional departmental curricula and general education programs. Opponents

to such curricular reform claim that such programs and scholarship are less valuable than "great works of Western culture" and are, therefore, undeserving of a central place in university curricula (D'Souza 1991). The homage paid to the traditional canon of great works clearly presupposes the myth of meritocracy. It assumes that the philosophical, literary and artistic works of (white, male) western European culture that have, until recently, been the sole content of university "core" curricula have merited that exclusive status by their clear and unchallenged intellectual profundity.

Closely aligned with the myth of meritocracy is the myth of objectivity. A defense of traditional curricula can only be maintained by presupposing that certain authors, issues, viewpoints and styles are included or excluded from the canon on the basis of an objective, non-biased and non-arbitrary assessment of their intrinsic worth. This is clearly the stance of Adler (1991) who defends his exclusion of most female and all black authors from the second edition of *Great Books of the Western World* as follows: "These exclusions were not, and are not, invidious. The difference between *great* and *good* books is one of kind, not of degree. Good books are not 'almost great' or 'less than great' books. Great books are relevant to human problems in every century, not just germane to current twentieth-century problems. A great book requires reading over and over, and has many meanings; a good book need be read no more than once, and need have no more than one meaning" (60). Thus, according to Adler, while African Americans and women have written some "good" books, their demand for inclusion in core curricula is not grounded in "objectively valid truth", but simply in a "wish for power or self-esteem" (64). Like Adler, the National Association of Scholars (1992) insists that "scholarship must strive to be objective. . . scholarly activities and scholarly products [should] be judged . . . solely by universal and disinterested criteria of merit without regard to gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, political leanings or other personal characteristics of the scholar" (1).

In sum, the charge of relativism levelled against advocates of a multicultural curriculum presupposes that curricular decisions can be, traditionally have been, and should be, made on the basis of an objective evaluation of a scholar's or cultural artifact's intrinsic worth. Yet this is a highly questionable assumption. It can be, and has been, questioned on at least two grounds: 1) whether such an assessment of the merit (or lack of merit) of a work is *objective*; 2) whether it makes sense to view a canon or curriculum as *intrinsically* worthwhile.

Feminist and multicultural scholarship have challenged the presumption of objectivity, pointing out that, historically, intellectual work has been valued or devalued according to criteria other than merit (Gitlin 1991). Moreover, the notion that merit criteria, even when adhered to, are themselves objectively established is highly problematic. As Harding (1979) argues: "within a meritocracy, those who

occupy positions of power and influence will determine what counts as a meritorious performance. Because they have achieved their own favored position by accepting prevailing standards of merit, they will not tolerate criticism of those standards. Thus a meritocracy will tend inevitably toward conservatism . . . " (219). Finally, deconstructive and reading-response methods emerging from literary criticism have challenged the very possibility of objectively assessing the value--or meaning--of a text, claiming (contra Adler) that all texts have multiple meanings, none of which are transcultural or transhistorical (Derrida 1985, Fish 1980, Patterson 1993).

Similarly, much of the new pedagogy challenges the notion that any canon is intrinsically meritorious, claiming that canons should be viewed as heuristic devices for exemplifying styles, techniques and issues to students (Castenell and Pinar 1993, Nisbet and Schucksmith 1986, Kennedy 1991). As feminist and multicultural research has shown, learning styles may differ along gender and ethnic lines (Belenky, et. al. 1986, Kolodny 1991, Ramirez 1982). New heuristic devices may, therefore, be necessary as the composition and needs of the student body change, since a pedagogical tool is only useful insofar as it enables our students to learn. Thus, we cannot determine the merit of our core curriculum without examining the demographic make-up of our student-body. Nor can we determine its merits without examining the cultural, political and economic climate which exists outside of the university. This broader climate affects not only what incoming students can be expected to know, but also suggests what students will need to learn in order to live in and contribute to that larger society.

Extra-curricular issues

At the extra-curricular level, debates over multiculturalism focus on the composition of the student (and faculty) body and typically take the form of debates over affirmative action. Here again, the multiculturalist, who supports affirmative action policies, is accused by opponents of "lowering standards" to let (allegedly) unqualified or less qualified students and faculty into the Academy. According to D'Souza (1991), "universities routinely admit black, Hispanic, and American Indian candidates over better-qualified white and Asian-American applicants" (17-18).

Here again, the charge levelled against multicultural policies presupposes the myth of the meritocracy propped up by the myth of objectivity. The critic of multicultural policy assumes that, were it not for affirmative action programs, students would be admitted and faculty would be hired at universities on the basis of an objective, non-biased and non-arbitrary assessment of their academic excellence. Thus, Woodward (1991), for example, criticizes university attempts to achieve a student population approximating the racial and ethnic variety found in the larger community as "impossible to reconcile with old policies . . . of acceptance according to merit and achievement . . ." (31-32). Hence, the proponent of affirmative action is

accused of relativism. But here, again, both the charge and the myths which support it are highly suspect.

The charge of relativism implies that only the 'best' students and faculty got into college in the past. But, as Woodward himself admits, the "old policies" of acceptance according to merit were "not always faithfully followed" (ibid). The fact is that Admissions offices and hiring units use, and have always used, a host of criteria in selecting students and teachers. Until the 1960s, some of the criteria utilized were explicitly biased and excluded women and blacks from the University.

Other criteria, which were and are utilized, are simply arbitrary if viewed as indicators of academic merit. Admissions offices may consider the applicant's place of residence, alumni connections or athletic prowess, in addition to GPAs and SAT scores, in selecting students. Similarly academic hiring units look at a job candidate's areas of interest, collegiality and personal connections, in addition to his or her teaching experience, publication record and letters of reference, in choosing new faculty members.

Finally, there is reason to doubt that even those criteria which are used as objective indicators of academic merit are value neutral. Test scores and publication records are limited indicators of intellectual acumen. Moreover, they will inevitably reflect the interests, knowledge and values of testmakers and publishers as much as they reflect the abilities of the test taker or essay writer.

In sum, when the critic of multiculturalism accuses the proponent of new research and policies of "lowering standards," he invokes the myth of meritocracy. This myth obscures the fact that traditional standards are problematic--they function, intentionally or unintentionally, to exclude certain groups of people. The proponent of multiculturalism seeks neither to abandon, nor to *lower* academic standards. Instead, the multiculturalist seeks to *broaden* (and diversify) standards which have traditionally narrowed the access to knowledge.

The Myth of Abstract Individualism
The myth of abstract individualism alleges that human beings are essentially isolated atoms whose individual attributes, needs, interests, abilities and desires are given prior to, and remain fundamentally unaltered by, concrete social circumstances and relationships (Jaggar 1983). This metaphysical assumption is closely connected to the myth of meritocracy discussed above. Viewing essential human characteristics (such as reason) as properties of individuals which are given independently of any particular social context, liberals are led to deny the impact of cultural norms on cognitive styles, intellectual interests and personal needs and identities. The myth of abstract individualism thus supports the liberal contention that great works of literature are those which speak (presumably in the same way and for the same

reasons) to all humans in all times and places. It likewise supports the liberal claim that it is possible to provide objective and fair evaluations of individual academic excellence. Admissions committees and hiring units (allegedly) make objective appraisals of candidates by using reason untainted by the evaluators' own social backgrounds, values or group memberships. And evaluators can make fair assessments of an individual's academic potential or achievement without considering the candidate's social memberships, since *ex hypothesi*, the race, class or gender of that candidate has not affected her intellectual aptitude, style or accomplishments.

In depicting individual humans as isolated from their social and cultural contexts, the myth of the abstract individual also depicts individuals as isolated--and insulated - from their political contexts. Thus, the thesis of abstract individualism leads the liberal to assert that all citizens enjoy equal freedoms, as well as equal opportunities--regardless of their relative powerfulness or powerlessness in the concrete communities they inhabit.

Like the myth of meritocracy, the myth of abstract individualism alleges something which is both false, in fact, and impossible, in principle. As feminists have argued, women and men may exemplify radically different cognitive and emotional styles which can be explained by their gender-sensitive socialization (Belenky et. al. 1986, Gilligan 1982, West 1988). And as anthropologists have argued, individuals inhabiting different cultures exhibit significant cognitive diversity (Geertz 1973, Whorf 1964). Finally, contemporary western philosophers and psychologists have questioned whether the notion of a presocial self with any determinate nature is even conceptually coherent. Harre (1984), for example, argues that our "sense of self" is nothing more than our particular way of organizing perceptions, thoughts, feelings and memories to help unify our experience. But our methods of organizing experience are publicly given by language and other cultural schema. Thus, the self and its (allegedly) internal states--as well as our sense of self as something which transcends culture--are ultimately social phenomena. To comprehend a self, its abilities, beliefs and desires, we must, therefore, observe the social contexts in which individuals are embedded. These phenomena are culture-relative (see also Gergen 1977, Scheman 1983).

Such challenges to abstract individualism undermine liberal conceptions of freedom and equality which are presupposed by recent depictions of multiculturalists as infringing on academic freedoms, as we will argue below. Yet, the myth of abstract individualism, like the myth of meritocracy, is hard to dislodge as the ongoing hysteria over "political correctness" demonstrates.

The Charge of Absolutism
In addition to, and closely related to, debates concerning curricular reform and affirmative action, are debates concerning university speech and behavior codes

and, more generally, the politicization of the academy. On May 4, 1991, George Bush used his commencement address at the University of Michigan to criticize the "Orwellian" tactics of "political correctness" at institutions of higher education. Across the nation, he warned, universities and colleges were engaging in "censorship": "declar[ing] certain topics off limits, certain expression off-limits, even certain gestures off-limits" (227). "Outraged" at such "bullying", Bush compared political correctness to an "inquisition" and urged a return to "reason" and the "freedom to speak one's mind".

The claim that multiculturalism breeds intolerance by imposing restrictive standards on individual behavior, like the claim that multiculturalism breeds over-tolerance by failing to adhere to restrictive standards of merit, plays itself out at both the curricular and extra-curricular levels.

Curricular issues

At the level of the curriculum, debates concerning multiculturalism's absolutism take the form of academic freedom debates. The multiculturalist, as described above, advocates integrating non-western and feminist scholarship into traditional university curricula. To facilitate this integration, the multiculturalist promotes faculty development workshops, incentives for curricular and pedagogical innovation and other institutional policies which recognize, support and encourage faculty efforts to make their classrooms and scholarship more inclusive. Adherents of traditional curricula, scholarship and pedagogy have charged that such institutional support for multicultural work infringes on their academic freedom. Thus, faculty opponents of multiculturalism claim that diversity trainers are "propagandists" and that those who support such training are "McCarthyites" who attempt to "control what would be thought and taught" (Adler 1991, D'Souza 1991, Hentoff 1991, National Association of Scholars 1991, Woodward 1991).

The notion of academic freedom which operates in these debates makes sense only if one accepts the myth of abstract individualism. The defender of academic freedom assumes that, until recently, university faculty have designed and taught courses and chosen research topics and methods, independently of any interpersonal influence. The charge of absolutism levelled against advocates of multiculturalism presupposes that faculty interests and teaching styles can, have and should emerge prior to cultural trends and remain unaltered by institutional values.

This is a highly implausible assumption. Feminist and multicultural scholarship have challenged this assumption of intellectual independence, pointing out that, as a matter of historical record, intellectual work has commonly reflected and reinforced prevailing (patriarchal, ethnocentric) social values in both its substance and style (Castenell and Pinar 1993, Gilligan 1982, Keller 1985, Scheman 1983, Smith

1987, West 1988). Moreover, common sense itself would suggest that, contrary to the assumptions of abstract individualism, faculty members have always been influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by their own teachers and mentors, past and present.

Not only does the critic of multiculturalism deny such common sense, he perverts it to suggest that the lines of influence run in the other direction. Thus, various professors have claimed that their rights to academic freedom have been violated not only by their peers or superiors, but also by their students. A widely circulated example concerns Professor Stephan Thernstrom, a liberal historian at Harvard who was, according to D'Souza (1991), "harangued by student activists" who charged him with racism for using slave owners' journals in his introductory history course. Students allegedly filed a formal complaint with the administration concerning this (and remarks in lectures concerning black men as wife-beaters) and publicly proclaimed Thernstrom a "racist" in the student newspaper, without first talking to him. The administration's (perceived) failure to defend Thernstrom against the students' charges made Thernstrom "feel like a rape victim" and he subsequently decided not to teach the course again.

This case has taken on mythical proportions as an example of "the attack on freedom . . . led by minorities" (Woodward 1991). Yet, "almost every element of the story D'Souza tells is erroneous" (Wiener 1991, 98). According to the three students directly involved (black, female and never interviewed by D'Souza), they did speak with him privately about their concerns with his perspective, they did not publicly charge him with racism, and their goal was to improve - not quash--his course by broadening, rather than narrowing the perspectives it offered. (One student requested the inclusion of slave narratives alongside--not instead of--slave owners' journals.) And according to all accounts, Thernstrom's included, the administration never sanctioned Thernstrom and, indeed, wrote him a strong end-of-the year report. Moreover, within days of the incident, Harvard's administration issued a freedom of speech proclamation which said: "[in] disputes over classroom material . . . instructors exercise full discretion over the content of lectures and the conduct of classroom discussion" and "in the classroom, our students are entitled to question views with which they disagree", concluding that "the University cannot prevent all of the conflicts that a commitment to free inquiry may provoke" (quoted in Wiener 1991, 102).

Although the university's official stance on the issue clearly affirmed Thernstrom's academic freedom, D'Souza reports Thernstrom finding their statement "equivocal", implying that "he had the right to be a racist, if he wished". Genovese (1991) shares this analysis, alleging that university administrators "create[d] an atmosphere in which professors who value their reputations . . . learn to censor themselves".

The notion that faculty self-censorship is an obvious evil makes sense only if one accepts the myth of the abstract individual. It embodies a failure to recognize that the professor works within a community and, moreover, occupies the role of an authority figure within that community. Clearly a teacher's speech and actions do not exist in a vacuum--the professor professes to others and, if he is an effective teacher, his words and actions will affect his students. It is imperative, therefore, that an instructor recognizes his power over his students and uses that power wisely.

Along with power comes responsibility. The emphasis, in current debates surrounding multiculturalism, on issues of professorial or academic freedom not only ignores this, but it also completely obscures relations of power. By viewing individuals as pre-existing socio-political relations, the myth of the abstract individual gives rise to the myth of abstract equality which alleges that all humans are fundamentally equal. This myth serves to mask the concretely inegalitarian nature of our social relationships including those between faculty and students, men and women, whites and blacks, the middle-aged and the young. Only by appealing to the notion of abstract individuals with abstract equality can a faculty member plausibly portray himself as victimized by his students. Clearly the claim that Thernstrom - a well-respected, tenured, Ivy league Professor - could be "raped" by three unknown young black female students is ludicrous if examined in light of the *actual* social positions and relationships occupied by the respective parties. Why then, have so many taken this claim (and other similar ones) so seriously? To answer this, one must examine how the myth of abstract individualism (and abstract equality) intersects with the myth of meritocracy (and objectivity).

By viewing people as isolated from their social and hence political contexts, the myth of abstract individualism obscures the fact that some people are better situated than others to dominate public (including academic) discourse. Further, it ignores the fact that "in any social organization, the views of the dominant tend to be taken for granted as objective and neutral. Challenges to these views - like those we are now hearing at universities - appear to seek special favors for the 'less qualified', or some compromising of academic standards" (Bartlett 1991, 123). Thus feminist and multiculturalist requests for the curricular inclusion of authors such as Mary Wollestonecraft or Toni Morrison (or student requests for course inclusion of slave narratives) are viewed as politically suspect pleadings of special interest groups, while the traditional curricular inclusion of Aristotle or Shakespeare (or slave-owners journals) typically goes unnoticed and (until three students had the audacity to notice) undefended. The presumption of political innocence (and objective merit) accompanies tradition. But as Bartlett (1991) points out, standard 'Western Civilization' courses are not apolitical. "In fact, it is precisely the alignment of these courses with particular points of view - the dominant ones in our society--that makes them appear neutral" (123-24).

Likewise, the insistence by some "girls" and "blacks" that they be called "women" or "African-Americans" is often viewed with suspicious irritation, while a teacher's request to be addressed as "Doctor" or "Professor" goes unquestioned. While all titles and names "convey substantive political messages about power and self-definition . . . those that conform to existing lines of authority are taken as neutral signs of respect, while those that implicitly encroach upon that authority stand out as shamelessly political and arrogant" (Bartlett 1991:124). Faculty, but not students, deserve respect according to the rules of an (alleged) academic meritocracy.

There is, in short, a double standard that operates in discussions critical of multiculturalism. In particular, faculty who allege that students are depriving them of their academic freedom demonstrate a fundamental lack of respect for the academic freedom of their students. Consider Professor Thernstrom's dissatisfaction with Harvard's response to student criticism of his course. What did Thernstrom want the administration to do, beyond issuing statements affirming his academic freedom? When asked this by Wiener (1991), he replied that Harvard's administration should have "declared that Harvard selects its faculty with enormous care and backs with great confidence the freedom of its professors to discuss subjects in which they are competent"; the administration should have "come out swinging" at his student critics. (104). In other words, Thernstrom wanted the university to uphold his authority (merit) and not simply his freedom. Students who questioned the legitimacy of his views should have been stifled. Harvard's failure, according to Thernstrom, was in portraying academic freedom as a right shared by all members of the academic community, instead of claiming it the sole privilege of (meritorious) faculty.

Extra-curricular issues
At the extra-curricular level, debates over multiculturalism's alleged absolutism also take the form of free speech debates. College campuses have witnessed in recent years a proliferation of racist speech and behavior outside of the classroom, including racist leaflets in dorms, white supremacist orators, effigies of lynching victims, "jungle" parties (in which white students paint themselves black and place rings in their noses), and even bomb threats at minority student union offices (Lawrence 1990). In an attempt to prompt a return to simple civility, some universities have developed campus speech and behavior codes. Opponents of multiculturalism often point to these codes governing student speech and conduct as further examples of censorship.

Here again, it needs to be pointed out that universities have always had behavior codes (and, for many years, dress and appearance codes as well) that set 'minimal' standards for community decency. Such codes, whatever their merits, are not the invention of multiculturalists. Similarly, restrictions on free speech are not a recent invention. Constitutionally protected speech is not, and never has been, absolutely free

speech. Slanderous and libelous speech, in addition to speech that offends "community standards" are not, nor should they be, constitutionally protected (Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire 1942, Miller v California 1973, Levinson 1990).

An academic community is just that - a community. It is not simply a place in which a variety of unconnected individuals can say or do whatever they want. (Students cannot plagiarize. Nor can they punch each other.) One's ability to say or do something is necessarily constrained by the impact of that speech or behavior on community goals and on the ability of other members of the community to work toward those shared goals.

One could only deny the necessity for guidelines governing the speech and conduct of individuals by denying the existence of community goals which may sometimes take priority over individual rights and freedoms. The myth of abstract individualism enables the liberal to do just this. By depicting a community as nothing more than a sum of individuals, the liberal reduces community goals to the aggregated desires of those individuals. The underlying metaphysics of liberalism (which views individuals as prior to groups) leads, thus, to a political theory which prioritizes individual rights and liberties over the common good. As Sandel (1984) argues, liberalism is committed to a framework which is neutral with respect to ends, and it thus prioritizes the right over the good in two senses: "First, individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good; and second, the principles of justice that specify these rights cannot be premised on any particular vision of the good life" (566). On this notion of the place and importance of individual rights, a government is never justified in imposing on its citizens a preferred set of values. Hence, the university is never justified in restricting individual freedoms (such as the freedom of speech) for the sake of furthering institutional goals.

There are several difficulties with this liberal picture, however. First, its portrayal of communities as nothing more than aggregates of loosely connected, autonomously choosing individuals is conceptually problematic for reasons alluded to above. If our social roles are even partly constitutive of who we are, then we cannot conceive of ourselves as wholly detached from our relations with others. Furthermore, "if we are partly defined by the communities we inhabit, then we must also be implicated in the purposes and ends characteristic of those communities" (Sandel 1984:567). The preferences and values of an individual are not defined in isolation from the preferences and values of the groups to which that individual belongs.

Finally, freedoms - to speak, act, and pursue various goals-cannot be abstracted from the concrete situations in which those freedoms are exercised. Closely related to the myth of abstract individualism are the myths of abstract equality and abstract freedom. The former masks the concrete inegalitarian nature of many of

our social relationships while the latter obscures the fact that one person's use of their freedom may interfere with another person's use of their freedom. When the critic of campus speech and behavior codes invokes the myth of the abstract individual, he thus obscures the fact that completely unrestricted speech and behavior in an inegalitarian society functions to further disempower already marginalized groups of people. A majority student's freedom to use racial epithets violates a minority student's freedom *from* racial harassment. It is *disabling*, not *enabling* speech and thus restrictions governing it are not arbitrary.

The proponent of multiculturalism neither has, nor seeks, power over other members of the community. The multiculturalist simply asks that all members of the community be empowered to pursue shared community goals. In the context of the academy, the multiculturalist thus requests that all students and faculty be enabled to participate in the discovery and construction of knowledge - a shared and co-operative project. This requires abandoning the liberal vision of democracy as defined by meritocracy and individualism.

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, we said that multiculturalism challenges liberal democratic theory's conception of democracy. That challenge, we have argued, takes the form of challenging two central, and several ancillary, myths of liberalism. Feminism is inevitably implicated in multiculturalism's challenge both by virtue of its support for multicultural academic policies and by virtue of the fact that feminist scholars have identified many of the myths we have discussed as essentially masculinist myths (e.g. Bordo 1987, Gilligan 1982, Keller 1985, West 1988). This work is crucial to responding to the current backlash against multiculturalism - a backlash that includes, but is not limited to, a backlash against feminism.

Equally crucial, however, is scholarship and practice aimed at developing a new conception of democracy which can replace the myth-begotten liberal conception. As Scott (1991) contends, the approach to multiculturalism within many universities has remained fundamentally structured by the logic of abstract individualism: "The call for tolerance of difference is framed in terms of respect for individual characteristics and attitudes; group differences are conceived categorically and not relationally, as distinct entities rather than interconnected structures or systems . . . psychological consulting firms . . . hold diversity workshops teaching that conflict resolution is a negotiation between dissatisfied individuals" (218). And so on. The problem, according to Lerner (1993), is that we have an inadequate conceptual framework for dealing with differences (238). On the one hand, those who emphasize cross-cultural understanding - under the guise of humanism - operate with the model of the "melting pot." This model assumes that we can only transcend conflicts and disputes by forging

a community identity which ignores individual and group differences. And, on the other hand, those who emphasize cultural diversity utilize the model of liberal pluralism, according to which our communities are not "melting pots," but "salad bowls." While the latter model is an advance over the former in that it assumes a "sharing of space by multiple parts which add up to a whole," it is ultimately inadequate insofar as it construes difference as categorical and not relational (ibid).

A conception of democracy adequate to the multicultural vision will need to reconceptualize difference in a way that recognizes diversity as a positive and dynamic force. In particular, a multicultural model of democracy needs to acknowledge that differences may be irreducible (they will not "melt" away); that differences are relational, often involving hierarchy and differentials of power that are constantly contested; that disagreements are inevitable in multicultural communities; that conflict resolution will always be temporary; but that alliance and co-operation is possible and desirable even where difference and disagreement exist (Riser 1994, Scott 1991).

Although much work remains to be done here, recent feminist work provides a model for multicultural praxis aimed at establishing a truly inclusive, democratic society (Belkhir, et. al. 1994). In challenging the myths of liberalism, feminists have come to recognize that they must grapple with difference within their own classrooms (Belenky et. al 1986, Tobias 1990, Kolodny 1991), organizations (Reagon 1981) and scholarship (hooks 1984, 1988). As feminists have come to appreciate, "woman" is neither a universal, nor a static term. Being a woman means something different to women of different races, classes, ages and so forth. Thus, the meaning of "woman," and the project of feminism, has been - and will continue to be - contested, reworked, rejected and refined. This has led to an emphasis on learning, knowing and community-building as an ongoing process, driven forward by the dynamic relation-ship between the one and the many. As hooks (1984) reminds us, in feminist *movement* (as in any social movement), "there is a need for diversity, disagreement, and difference if we are to grow" (64). Solidarity does not require, nor does it benefit from, the eradication of difference. Feminist conceptions of, and attempts at, intellectual and political coalition-building provide a model for working towards a common purpose while maintaining and valuing difference. Thus, the attempt to struggle with issues of multiculturalism within the feminist movement may guide us in addressing these issues within the academy.

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