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Multiculturalism or Multi-Cultural Imperialism? An Investigation into the Language of Multiculturalism

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This article examines the extent to which U.S. based multiculturalism and the language that it engenders can adequately represent the voice of the Third World. The author who views multiculturalism as a vital force in our contemporary society, questions the language of inclusion that may distort historical and contemporary realities in the Third World. Using examples from Latin American and the Caribbean, the article stresses multiculturalism's educational values and warns against political distortions. Dr. Davis is the editor of *Slavery and Beyond: The African Impact on Latin America and the Caribbean* (1995). He can be reached at the History Department, Middlebury College, Middlebury, VT 05753.

Multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon. It has pervaded North American society ever since the founding fathers created a Constitution and a Bill of Rights, and when other European groups and nationalities demanded inclusion or representation in the largely Anglo-Saxon view of nationhood. Michael Lind calls this initial phase of multiculturalism "Anglo-American forging of nationhood"(Lind 1995).

In the last few decades, multiculturalism may seem more menacing to those who claim a predominantly Euro-American national identity since non-European minorities and interest groups have begun to define a new multiculturalism as they demand adequate representation. Multicultural advocates often employ politically correct tactics to ensure that they are included with a "language of dignity." At academic institutions, business establishments, and in a host of media enterprises, multiculturalism has aimed to awaken American society to its diverse heritage and to force it to live up to its myth of the melting pot, by appropriately accounting for those groups previously ignored, overlooked, or marginalized for hundreds of years. Multiculturalism demands not only that diverse voices be heard, but also that they be heard on their own terms. Similarly, multiculturalists in the United States often bear the responsibility of educating North Americans on diversity, which includes imparting knowledge of foreign cultures and people who are becoming increasingly important in the global village.

But can all groups really be heard on their own terms?

Latin American language has long been recognized by what may seem to be the antithesis of political correctness. People are often referred to by the physical attributes: "*gorda*" (fat),"*narizona*" (with the big nose). At the same time terms such as "*negra*" (literally black girl) or "*chinita*" (little Chinese girl) can be applied to women of any race as a term of affection. These terms are obviously at odds with U.S. parlance and values. In fact, even in Latin America some of these terms can be used to denigrate and

subordinate, depending on the context. The proper condemnation of gender subordination cross-nationally cannot simply be translated for an American audience.

After multiculturalists of any political persuasion win academic battles to include materials or texts about under-represented people of the global community the intellectual (educational) challenge of multicultural inclusion has just begun. How and what to include? And on what terms are "others" to be included? Many educators overlook these questions—or when they are posed, often craft political, fundamentalist, or emotional responses that are ultimately counterproductive. If education is the final goal, a certain degree of equanimity and research is necessary.

Multiculturalism as practiced in the United States is, after all, not a global phenomenon. U.S. supporters of multiculturalism are not propitiating clients in the Third World. Rather, multiculturalism shaped by U.S. national politics and cultural values emerged in the United States as a result of a historical climate that continues to redefine the liberal concept of democracy and the rights of individuals. To what extent can the rhetoric of U.S. multiculturalism effectively represent the Third World in educational institutions? To what extent is multiculturalism and the language that it engenders a political agenda to forge communities across cultures where no commonalties exist? This presentation will attempt to answer these questions using examples from Latin America and the Caribbean, paying close attention to the impact of scholarship on race and gender in the United States.

Rather than oppose multiculturalism as writers such as Daniel Bonevac seem to do (Bonevac 1994, 157–173), this article calls for a critical look at the language of multiculturalism in the hope that we can avoid distortions that writers consciously or unconsciously infuse into their scholarships. Without denying the importance of cross-cultural ties, this essay represents a call for the diversification of our often static concepts of multiculturalism and a summons to examine the way in which foreign cultures are introduced into the curriculum and into the mainstream in general.

Many societies around the world have their own particular brand and concept of what we call multiculturalism, nuanced and shaped into a specific rhetoric by national and local factors. In Brazil for example, writers, politicians, and intellectuals at large have propagated for a long time a national identity that accounted for the inclusion of Africans, Native Americans, and Portuguese —the three ethnic/national groups that form the pillars of Brazilian nationhood—but this was largely in the realm of culture, and did not translate into political or economic representation. Writers such as Gilberto Freyre, Sergio Buarque de Holanda, and the renowned novelist Jorge Amado promoted what is popularly known as the "racial democracy" in Brazil. By insisting on the inclusion of other ethnic groups they advocated a multiculturalism "from

above." As in the United States, multiculturalism has developed in Brazil since the 1930s.

In Cuba after 1959, the government spearheaded the drive to ensure the inclusion of women and previously excluded ethnic groups into the mainstream, provided, however, that they agreed with the aims of the revolution. At the same time, Cuba has attempted to avoid all vestiges of segregation or separatism. The revolution avowed to eradicate both racism and sexism and promoted or attempted, at least, to promote a sense of identity that would include women, blacks, and mulattos in all aspects of Cuban culture.

In the United States, multiculturalism emerged from a predominately Western liberal construct which values the rights of the individual.

The emergence of "multiculturalism" in Cuba and Brazil and in many other Latin American countries must be understood within its local context and historical traditions—influenced by Catholicism, extended patterns of colonization, slavery, and a host of other variables. In the United States, multiculturalism emerged from a predominately Western liberal construct which values the rights of the individual. Although the Bill of Rights was elaborated by a small elite group, the civil rights, feminist, and gay movements represent an attempt to further define/clarify individual rights in a historical era where more and more sectors in society are becoming aware of their "separate identities."

In education, multiculturalism is also a philosophy that demands inclusion of previously excluded groups, such as the African-American, the Latino, Native American, and women not only because of their political importance as writers such as Linda Chavez claim (Chavez 1994, 26–30), but also from a deep-rooted educational conviction that the study of other cultures and societies is an enriching experience that helps develop both awareness of and respect for others.

When multiculturalists write about "other cultures" for the mainstream, a certain degree of translation must take place. In other words, multiculturalists must describe the foreign culture (the subject studied) in a jargon that the receiver (North American students, for example) understands. At the same time, multicultural educators must painstakingly avoid oversimplification and abuse of language that creates bonds among minority groups and their allies cross-nationally, especially when no links exist. In the race to include others, many multiculturalists from relatively privileged positions end up distorting or simplifying other cultures or groups and thus perpetuating misinformation and ignorance, against which they appear to be battling.

Ethnic, class, or women groupings are often much more complex than the language of multiculturalism reflects. Indeed while political correctness may

forge a language of dignity, in so far as it fails to reflect the desires of any group (especially when applied to foreign cultures), it borders on intellectual dishonesty. Multiculturalists cannot simply assimilate "foreign cultures" into a North American *weltanschauung*, but must translate language with all the nuances, cultural, and historical contexts which may often mean introducing foreign words into the U.S. mainstream. Multiculturalists cannot simply use and propagate the language of oppression or dichotomous paradigms black-white or men-women, but must analyze issues of race, gender, or sexuality in order that we understand their influence on foreign cultures, and perhaps learn something about our own. Language is after all an arbitrary set of tools influenced by geography, history, and culture, while at the same time representing a reflection of both.

Multiculturalism and the Language of Race

Multiculturalism operates under a simple but absolutely necessary assumption: ethnic groups that make up the nation should be accounted for on all levels of society. While multiculturalism has been attacked both from the left and the right (Banks 1986, 221–224), what is remarkable about much of this criticism is that multiculturalism, especially in education, is rarely seen as an integral part of a larger *weltanschauung* that engenders power, privilege, or cultural hegemony.

While multiculturalism must be seen as a rejuvenating movement of inclusion, as far as the global village is concerned, it has two shortcomings: (1) Many ethnic or minority groups such as women, gays, and lesbians underrepresented in the mainstream, are still introduced through western or North American eyes; (2) furthermore, these groups are often included using the language of the mainstream, which may not always be appropriate.

Given the cultural, economic, and political hegemony of the United States in Latin America and the Caribbean, the inclusion of the underrepresented in education, scholarly debates, and journalistic reporting is rarely presented from their perspective. The voice of underrepresented communities or ethnic groups is often filtered through a North American lens and reinterpreted with North American terminology. This is seen particularly in the language of studies and reporting on race and gender by individuals across the political spectrum.

For most of the 19th and 20th centuries, much of the history written about Latin America and the Caribbean could be categorized as imperialist history. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob have rightly pointed out, history as a universal pursuit to uncover the past was often synonymous with a Western attempt to incorporate the whole world into a Western scheme of interpretation. These authors present an excellent assessment of the changing historical perceptions on history, but which nevertheless argues that history still adheres to the value of objectivity despite the post-modernist critique (Appleby et al. 1994).

This globalizing impulse, sometimes synonymous with the idea of modernization, often overlooked or ignored realities in foreign countries. The neo-liberal attempt toward multiculturalism, influenced by Charles Beard who in 1913 shattered the myth of a monolith in U.S. history (Beard 1986), emerged in the 1960s with a focus on ethnicity apparent in social history, which William Taylor defined as the "recognition of people in categories previously neglected" (Taylor 1985, 119–121). Yet many of these studies have ignored Gramsci's contention that every societal (interest) group has its own intellectuals, an organic class that emerges to organize the ideas of that particular group vis-à-vis the state. These intellectuals, despite their social location, are influenced by political and philosophical trends of a given historical reality of a given national context. Therefore, it is necessary to question multicultural views that see "exclusion" and "inclusion" in global terms. Certain intellectuals who ascribe to multiculturalism may indeed represent, and thus become the voice of, minority communities within the United States. When multiculturalists attempt to become a voice for Third World communities without in-depth knowledge, however, their legitimacy as well as their language should be questioned (Gramsci 1971, 2–23).

Language is a manifestation of culture. Until recently, the United States had a very simplistic bipolar construction of ethnicity in which Native Americans were ignored and citizens were classified officially as black or white. In the second half of this century "regional terms" such as Hispanic and Asian emerged in census and official government reports. The power of the U.S. government's official language cannot be underestimated. U.S. government labels have pervaded academia and a host of other intellectual centers around the country. At the same time, social scientists have long acknowledged that "ethnicity" is a social construction. Moreover, as Milton Yinger so aptly described, an ethnic group is:

> any segment of a large society whose members are thought, by themselves and/or others, to have a common origin and to share important segments of a common culture, and who, in addition, participate in shared activities in which the common origin and culture are significant ingredients (Yinger 1985, 151–180).

Applying this definition cross-nationally, multiculturalists must acknowledge in their language that ethnic boundaries and traits are defined by social forces within a given national context. Nonetheless, the U.S. mainstream mentality continues to interpret ethnicity through bipolar or at best quadrapolar terminology (black, white, Hispanic, and Asian).

Because "whiteness" in the United States is often synonymous with privilege it continues to be used as a monolithic ethnic category to include all peoples of European or near-European background. This clearly has its drawbacks since even within the European context there have historically been ethnic

groups largely ignored from official history; Jews, Roma, and Arab minorities, for example.

The Roma represent a case in point. In Romania, the Roma people have been fighting for years to be called "Roma," but to no avail. The official government and therefore most mainstream sources in Romania continue to call them gypsies.

Official, arbitrary language anywhere will prove problematic (Emerson 1995, 2). John O'Sullivan argues that many African-Americans are being deceptive when they demand diversity, but treat European-Americans as a monolith, even while acknowledging their intellectual debt to Europeans (O'Sullivan 1994, 36–46).

O'Sullivan's criticism is only partly relevant. Multiculturalism concerns those who have historically lacked a voice in U.S. history, and who have yet to critically examine racial terminology effectively—but neither have many other thinkers—particularly because in the United States "whiteness" means relative privilege. On the other hand, there is no contradiction in the fact that black scholars show their admiration of European writers. Ideology is not necessarily racially coated, and minorities for centuries have had their allies and advocates who yield a certain degree of weight in the mainstream. By categorizing those writers as, "European writers," O'Sullivan contributes to the problem with which multiculturalists must grapple. One must seek ways to deconstruct categories such as "white," "African-American," "feminist," by political commitment, language, and a host of other variables.

The Language of Blackness

This practice is pervasive among some scholars and writers of Latin America and the Caribbean, particularly U.S. based Afrocentric writing. In the 1930s the prefix "Afro-X" (X = nation) came in vogue with the Negritude movement. Negritude was an extremely valuable first step in the modern consciousness and civil rights movement in the Americas as it engendered a confidence in African culture previously absent from Western society. But Negritude was also essentialist, describing "black" and "white" in static terms. The fall of the "white culture" described by such writers as Pales Matos, Aimé Césaire, and others was a cause for optimism for black writers, as it meant the renaissance of cultures suppressed by the West, specifically those of Africa. Oddly, this renaissance was much more dependent and culturally tied to Europe than the revolutionaries of the Harlem Renaissance (Arnold 1981, 22–49; Coulthard 1962, 30–31).

Afrocentrists believe quite rightly that they must create and enforce a language that reflects dignity, but they cannot decide how others should be called. While critics such as Stanley Crouch refuse to see Afrocentrism as both philosophy and reaction to Western racism, few critics have recognized that Afrocentrism is unique to the United States milieu and born out of the Western liberal philosophy. Afrocentrists may not necessarily be very differ-

ent in their visualization and explanation of foreign cultures from other U.S. writers and scholars in the multicultural debate. While many multiculturalists have also promoted political correctness in the articulation of a language of dignity, some terms often distort local issues and practices. Latin American and Caribbean societies are particularly problematic since U.S. language often fails to account for the Latin American or Caribbean *weltanschauung* where racial language is much less important than color and class.

In attempting to create a more inclusive language of dignity, for example, many multiculturalists have in the process linguistically alienated a number of migrant groups who say that they do not see themselves reflected in multicultural texts. As Bonevac has previously pointed out, cultures are multicultural texts. When one person from one culture unified by language, history, and customs (regardless of political affiliation, race, or class) attempts to explain another culture, he or she must include the context and overcome the difficulty by adjusting to a cultural sensibility different from his or her own (Bonevac 1994, 157–173).

How do we then assess another culture on its own terms and translate it into an American language? Indeed is this even possible? The task is a daunting one in which educators must balance issues of advocacy, education, objectivity, and neutrality. Romanticizing African, Asian, Latin American or other cultures is as dangerous as condemning a culture for being backward because of its difference from the United States or Western ways in general.

In "Reinventing America," Michael Lind explains that U.S. attempts to define and explain globalization (and by extension multiculturalism) have engendered bad semantics, and confused linguistic phrases both from the right and the left. Thus terms like "Balkanization of the Americas" and "America Herzegovia" are losing touch with reality when applied to racial tensions in the United States. Despite the tradition of segregation, given the eclectic origins of most U.S. citizens, it comes as no surprise that all "races" in the United States are "mongrels" (Lind 1994, 77–85).

> *African-Americans, above all, are an ethnically mixed population. But so are all of the other U.S. racial categories—"white," "Hispanic," "Asian," and "Native American."*

African-Americans, above all, are an ethnically mixed population. But so are all of the other U.S. racial categories—"white," "Hispanic," "Asian," and "Native American." Applying U.S. based nomenclature uncritically to regions with distinct histories and attitudes will necessarily produce distortions. Evoking U.S. terminology when discussing Latin America and the Caribbean, regions that have in general celebrated their racial and cultural mixing, even if only rhetorically, becomes doubly problematic in multicultural education. As Lind correctly and quite poignantly explains, the United States is

becoming more Latin Americanized. As miscegenation and cultural mixing continue to rise, the current racial categories will fast become obsolete. In fact they are already (Lind 1994, 77–84).

In its current form, however, few multiculturalists approach these labels critically in the United States, and less so when applied to Latin America and the Caribbean, regions which have similar but not identical patterns of colonization with the United States. Mainstream U.S.A. has had little interest in any profound understanding of Latin American and Caribbean societies (Lind 1994, 77–84). Multiculturalism has not changed that. The problem is both philosophical and linguistic. One example centers around the study of people of the African diaspora. In the United States, people of African descent have fought hard to create a language of dignity. The linguistic transformation from Negro and coloreds to blacks, African-American, and Afro-American may signal progress in the United States, but to apply this process to Latin America and the Caribbean is nothing short of cultural imperialism. African-Americans in the United States were categorized historically as a group based on the one-drop principle. Latin America and the Caribbean has suffered a drastically different development and has generated its own language of expression. Terms such as "Afro-Cuban," "Afro-Brazilian," and others may serve as important paradigms, but should be explained since they may have no real significance in the country under investigation.

In many Latin American countries, neither race nor ethnicity is officially recorded in public life. This does not mean that ethnicity is unimportant, however. On the contrary, the indigenous and black populations of the nations of Central and South America have experienced patterns of racism, isolation, and discrimination similar to those in North America. While some scholars have tried to attribute this to the Iberian mode of colonization, one only needs to look at the English, French, and Dutch colonization of the Caribbean to realize that similar patterns arise. Where distinctions of "white" and "black" are blurred due to miscegenation, there is a laxity in laws of social interaction and economic demands relative to the demographics at any particular moment in time.

Consider the case of Brazil.

Mainstream Brazilian society abhors racial categorization. A majority of Brazilians have indigenous, Portuguese, and African ancestry. While in the United States many peoples of mixed ancestry have often "passed for white," in Brazil, these individuals do not "pass." They are "white." In other words, the term "passing" has a specific meaning in the United States. It cannot be applied simply to what may seem like similar situations in other countries. In a plethora of statistics, Afrocentrists and other multiculturalists are using the "Afro" or "black" to refer to "Afro-Brazilians" in the same way they refer to African-Americans. While black is equivalent to African-American in the United States, it may not be in Brazil.

Hosts of other examples from the region illustrate the linguistic restrictions of our multiculturalist ideology. According to mainstream Dominican society, for example, most Dominicans are some type of "mulatto" or mixed ancestry. Haitians are black. This distinction is based on a long history of confrontation with the Haitian Republic. Dominicans (particularly mulattos) in the United States resist being classified or called "black," but many also reject Hispanic since that term seems to accentuate their Spanish heritage. In Guatemala, people who, as one student commented "look kind of Indian," are in fact "ladinos" owing to the fact that they speak Spanish and wear Western-style clothing. In many Latin American nations a more complex categorization of race and ethnicity operates. To be sure this social hierarchy privileges "white," but does not necessarily discriminate against people with indigenous or African ancestry. Furthermore, ethnic terms are relative and carry class considerations. And depending on the historical moment in time as many as 13 distinct categories may exist between "black" and "white." When referring to race relations in Latin America, therefore, multiculturalist are faced with a dilemma: how to introduce in the American vernacular foreign concepts of identity such as "mulatto," "moreno," "zambo," "prieto," and "ladino" (Davis 1995).

Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition has perhaps come closest to understanding the need for a richer public vernacular. Jackson frequently speaks about "the blacks and the browns." While this language enriches North American understanding of the complexity of the multicultural agenda, it is only a beginning, and we must keep in mind as Edward Said warns us that "a label is only a starting point." "The browns" presumably refers to Latinos in the United States. But many Latinos are also "black."

The world is indeed getting smaller due to immigration and communication technology. The problem may not be that individuals from different cultures do not understand each other, but it may be that our delusive multiculturalism may convince individuals that they DO know one another, when they do not. The inclusion of all the complexities of all the immigrant cultures that make up the United States in a public forum is obviously highly impracticable. Multiculturalism in education, however, is another story. Multiculturalists must understand and impart the nuances of the cultures they attempt to include. Where possible they must illustrate those complexities first in nonpolitical terms.

Multiculturalism and Gender in the Americas

While the language of race, and translation of racial language, has historically presented scholars and educators with linguistic challenges, the problems with the language related to gender studies are relatively new. This is due in part to the incipient nature of "gender studies" as an accepted and legitimate form of intellectual inquiry. With the rise of multiculturalism and its feminist component, a plethora of works is filling the lacunae created due to

the earlier lack of interest in women in general and women from the Third World in particular.

It comes as no surprise that those who have led this educational direction have been women in the West, particularly in the United States, Great Britain, and Germany. Indeed, the rise of feminism in its most radical form in the post-1960 era has challenged cultural studies by introducing gender into the equation. In seeking to legitimize gender studies and create a language of dignity cross-culturally, scholars (both men and women) who use a multicultural approach, if not a politically correct one, face serious challenges from the cultural-linguistic barrier.

In studying women as a group (read monolithic group) cross-culturally, many feminists employ an inappropriate language that creates a solidarity among women where radical differences may exist both within and outside of the culture. As Marilyn Freidman correctly illustrates, feminism is largely a Western construct. The problem of defining sisterhood in the context of multiculturalism thus becomes as much a linguistic problem as a political one (Freidman 1995, 56–69). Freidman herself acknowledges that many feminists often fail to engage in genuine dialogue and community building with women around the world. Linguistic contortions and overuse of feminist labels may often serve global community goals, but may be pedagogically dishonest (Freidman 1995, 56–69).

Multicultural feminists in education can, as Freidman and others have claimed, help to promote communication among women and other groups across cultures, but any dialogue must understand the various cultures and therefore the linguistic terminology appropriate for given communities. Gerda Lerner has in the meantime critically assessed relations among women in her 1990 article "Reconceptualizing Differences Among Women." Lerner explains that we have inherited an inadequate linguistic and conceptual framework for analyzing differences. Women, she argues, have always been active participants in the shaping of events. If we accept Lerner's argument that once a system of dominance is institutionalized in custom and law and practice it is eventually seen as "natural," we must also extend this to our analysis of language. Since gender, class, and race dominance are interrelated and inseparable, it necessarily follows that the language of oppression that emerges from dominance is interrelated and inseparable. Thus in constructing a language of liberation, feminism's primordial focus on gender often overlooks local issues of importance (Lerner 1990, 106–122).

Adamant feminists are often perplexed by women within the U.S. and abroad who "appear" to tolerate or endorse practices that subordinate women to men. They often criticize the continual use of a language that they may regard as subordinate. Under the banner of multiculturalism, many of these women are introduced into the U.S. mainstream with a North American language that suggests empowerment and dignity, but that may be historically and anthropologically inaccurate—especially when women in specific communities would not employ it to describe themselves or even see themselves as oppressed.

Imperialistic emancipation? The roads to hell and ignorance are paved with good intentions and may serve to alienate women from other communities.

One of the fundamental questions that multiculturalists must ask then becomes: what is the role of cultural relativism in cross-national studies? Can multiculturalism be culturally relative? This is the uneasy road between advocacy and education. In fact, multicultural educators must first introduce materials from the "inside perspective" before they advocate or propose an ideological view. The central issue here is that multiculturalism must first educate, i.e., provide the data of how foreign cultures and societies operate. Only after students have the wider picture can they understand, the outcry against what people in the West may call violations of human rights. Why, for example, was the move in France to prohibit Muslim girls from covering their heads (championed by many feminists as a victory against female oppression), met with anger from Islamic women and men living in France?

In the United States, history has already illustrated that political change from above is ineffective. Communist Cuba provides us with another example. With the success of the revolution in 1959, leaders quickly moved to tap into the growing consciousness among women who supported the revolution with the creation of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC). In 1962, membership was slightly over 376,000 women, many of them household servants and rural workers. Under Director Velma Espín women met to discuss their new role in Communist Cuba. By the 1970s, the number of women in leadership positions had grown substantially, as had their numbers in the work force. Most impressive was the increasing level of education, as the Cuban government instituted various systems of quotas. Were women in Cuba included on their own terms or were they co-opted by the revolution? Leaders of the FMC take pains to avoid the language of feminism. According to Velma Espín, "The ideal new woman is a healthy woman, mother of the future generations who will grow up under communism" (Pérez-Stable 1993, 107). Yet many feminists hail the women in Cuba under the FMC as pathfinders.

Cuban society propagated a language of camaraderie. Women (and men) were called "companions" (*compañeras* and *compañeros*). Other linguistic changes were made. At a conference in Cuba in 1994, a teacher of Latin American Studies remarked to me that she categorically would not allow Latin Americans to call her *chica* or *nena* (literally translated as girl). A product of the age of political correctness, she found *compañera* to be a positive change. But *chica* is not equivalent to "girl," as a denial of womanhood or a term used to condescend. These terms depend on context and can be used to show affection and informality—especially since equivalent male terms are also used.

In the study of gender and race in other cultures, U.S. scholars and students have the privilege of developing paradigms and theories from the outside. While distance and objectivity are much needed ingredients to good scholarship, they may also translate into cultural superiority, which in fact is antithetical to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism can lead to simplification and reductionism. Analysis of womanhood within multiculturalism involves trying to understand how differently Latin American women feel or understand their context. It is not prudent to regard any group of women as a monolithic group. Nor is it particularly meaningful to regard any woman or woman's group fighting against oppression or organizing around gender issues as "feminists." This linguistic blunder may lead to further distortions of women's reality. Even if we take the broadest definition of feminism to refer to those who adhere to a philosophy that seeks equal opportunities for women and men in any particular society, calling the Latin American women such as Rigoberta Menchú, or the audacious working-class women who protested against dictatorship in Argentina and Chile, "feminists" teaches us little about other contexts that shape these women's lives.

Rigoberta Menchú, who was awarded the Noble Peace Prize, represents an enigma for multiculturalists interested in promoting the study of race and gender in Latin America. Menchú is often claimed by the feminist movement and introduced into multicultural curriculum through her writing (*I Rigoberta Menchú*). While the question of whether Menchú is a feminist may seem pedantic on one level, to immediately claim her as a feminist globally, as many have, is subversive and indeed misleading. This assumes that gender is the primary variable that affects women's lives. Menchú's identity and struggle are much more complex.

Dinesh D'Souza is wrong to ridicule Menchú's inclusion in the modern canon (D'Souza 1991). Menchú should be included in a multicultural curriculum, but it is absolutely necessary to scrutinize our linguistic labels to attain a fuller understanding of Menchú's role of "preserver" of a culture that assigns specific roles to men and women (essentially an antifeminist stance), and as a revolutionary who steps outside the confines of what is deemed appropriate for women, but yet is seemingly accepted by her community as spokeswoman. Indeed, we return to one of our original comments that feminism, like multiculturalism, is a Western construct that evolves from a concept of personal liberty and conflicts with the Mayan concept of community in which Mayan women apparently chose to construct themselves in relationship (not opposed) to men.

As Third World personalities and texts such as, *I Rigoberta Menchú*, are integrated into a multicultural educational framework, "feminism" as a linguistic label is often commodified and applied uncritically. Similarly studies of women have now attained a market value and the act of reading, as Hazel-Carby comments, has substituted for actions that press for real social change, in part because a given reality may be distorted or only partly

transmitted (Aparicio 1994, 576–584). Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal has already cautioned many scholars interested in promoting Latin America, (whether it be race, gender, or class) that they ought to consult or rely on specialists who "mine the field, rather than dabble in it" (Geisdorfer Feal 1991, 12–20). Moreover, Geisdorfer Feal encourages educators to distinguish among specialists writing within a given field from those who write from outside. Feminism, she argues in relation to Afro-Hispanic Studies, runs the risk of becoming commodified as a part of a larger "gender industry," and thus losing context. This is true of feminism as applied to Latin America in general (Geisdorfer Feal 1991, 13).

Geisdorfer Feal joins Stanley Cyrus in criticizing Western feminists for their "cannibalistic operations on Third World women" (Geisdorfer Feal 1991, 14). Indeed the only way that women from Latin America, regardless of race, class, or region can be appropriately included is to understand how they perceive themselves. This arduous task defies essentialism and means that "women" as a category is not easily constructed, and may necessitate the introduction of a language that cannot be translated, but that nevertheless is essential to understand.

Conclusion

United States multiculturalism, if it is to be effective, must understand the nuances of nations within the Third World. As John O'Sullivan has clarified, multiculturalism is ultimately "a theory of American nationality," which grew out of the liberal concept of nationhood. Linda Chavez is not entirely correct when she notes that multiculturalists hope to ride the immigrant wave to greater power and influence and that the impetus comes not from immigrants, but from more assimilated native-born counterparts. As a movement, multiculturalism is itself a diverse phenomenon with many definitions. Chavez is particularly insightful in pointing out that as an educational philosophy multiculturalism's impetus tends to come from those who come from "minority" backgrounds. At the same time, these minorities are joined by a host of allies who believe in the power of education to transform and enlighten. The political rewards for such individuals, however, are not entirely clear. Nonetheless, the problem of speaking or representing others is a drawback for multiculturalism as it is for education in general (Chavez 1994, 26–30; O'Sullivan 1994, 36–46).

Perhaps Frances R. Aparicio best explained it when she wrote:

> Those definitions of multiculturalism and processes of implementation that do not probe into unearned advantage based on skin color, socioeconomic class and sexual orientation among other variables of power are destined to leave intact the very inequities protected and perpetuated by social institutions and structures (Aparicio 1994, 576–584).

Communism died, in part, not because of its lack of relevance, but because its implementation was highly paternalistic so that it lost relevance for most

people. If multiculturalism is to have a transforming role it must not go the way of the communism of the past: the language of dignity must emerge from local context. Language as a vehicle for culture should evolve. Political correctness may be more damaging, in this sense, than we realize. On the other hand, political movements should continue to forge liaisons across cultures, provided that activists are well-versed in the respective cultural nuances.

Harland Cleveland explains in "The Limits of Cultural Diversity," that we have indeed inherited a "fuzzy vocabulary" (Cleveland 1995, 24). Unclear language begets confusion. But multiculturalism is no Satan. It should not be an instrument of repression, exclusion, or extinction. Its language must reflect a diversity that transforms our narrow sense of race, ethnicity, and gender imposed on us from government census and misinformation from pop-culture serving as educational authority. As the U.S. becomes more baroque, like its South American neighbors, multiculturalism will cease to become political platform—and must be true to its most simple intent—to educate. In so doing, multiculturalism will transform and enrich U.S. language both in academia and in the mainstream culture at large. ■

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