"The Very House of Difference": Toward a More Queerly Defined Multiculturalism

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Being women together was not enough. We were different. Being gay girls together was not enough. We were different. Being Black together was not enough. We were different. Being Black women together was not enough. We were different. Being Black dykes together was not enough. We were different. . . . It was a while before we came to realize that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference.

—Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*

I invoke Audre Lorde’s decade-old words to begin a discussion of strategies: how might we advocate for queer studies in academic institutions? One arena is opened by the current debates concerning multiculturalism as an anti-oppressionist educational reform movement. But to till this field is to unearth larger, more fundamental problems: when we try to enact a pedagogy based on the kind of multiple subjectivity from which Lorde and others write, we bump up against—and need to strategize around—the binarized, segmented structure of Western thought and modern academic institutions.

Why use multiculturalist reform as an inroad into queering up the academy? Partially because the rhetoric of cultural pluralism—deeply flawed though it may be—is, as Jacquelyn Zita argues, cunning; so far it has been the most effective means of placing large endeavors to study oppression into mainstream institutions. For this reason, examining the language and logic of multiculturalism, in order to revise and extend it, is fruitful. Further, a critique of multiculturalism leads
us inevitably into a critique of the epistemology of identity upon which it is based. It is the false notion of a unitary subject—and the institutions and language which reinforce it—that is at the root of the conflict.

The term multiculturalism is slippery. Mostly it seems to be employed as a euphemism, helping those who use it to avoid naming the power relations that distinguish and stratify the multiple cultures constituting US society. In academic institutions the word multiculturalism is invoked as a panacea, to promote a colorizing of US history and culture without fundamentally questioning its structural underpinnings. This superficial type of multiculturalism sees US society as a colorful tossed salad rather than as a tasteless and monolithic WASP melting pot. Either way, the language does not challenge us to go beyond the cultural tourist/minority-du-jour level of analysis. The culinary metaphor allows for only limited revision; the tossed salad of United States cultures is not constituted of equally positioned ingredients, and hegemonic power relations dress the whole thing. Such dreary-sounding concepts threaten to dull the perkiness that multiculturalism attempts to convey.

David Mura charts these semantic vicissitudes in his review of the anthology Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures. He writes: "As its title tells us, this collection focuses not on multiculturalism but on marginalization... The editors' choice not to use the word multiculturalism is telling. Multiculturalism is too easily depoliticized. Marginalization, on the other hand, views culture as a battleground for economic and social power." Mura's juxtaposing the term "multiculturalism" with "marginalization" foregrounds a key distinction. "Multiculturalism" draws attention to the various constituent groups that make up US culture and which have thus far been edged out of the master narrative of history. "Marginalization," on the other hand, draws attention to the construction of that master narrative, and in so doing foregrounds questions of how and why such groups have been written out.

Whether we use multiculturalism or marginalization as a defining tool, the subjects at the center of inquiry are those who have been heretofore at or near the margin: individuals and groups who, to varying degrees, differ from what Audre Lorde calls "the mythical norm": "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure." The multiculturalist movement, at its broadest, redresses gaps in public knowledge regarding the cultures and lives of those who reside, varyingly, outside this mythical norm. Cultural pluralist or American cultures requirements on college campuses—where

we would find institutional definitions of multiculturalism—are designed to focus most essentially on comparative studies of race and ethnicity in US society, sometimes including European Americans or so-called white ethnics, sometimes not. (This matter itself is no small debate.) Often as subsequent or secondary considerations, the study of gender and class are also suggested for inclusion in the courses which would meet such a requirement. The net of multiculturalism is cast out wider in other contexts. In their book Multicultural Education: Issues and Perspectives, James Banks and Cherry McGee Banks provide chapters on social class and religion, gender, ethnicity and language, and exceptionality.

Discussion of sexuality or sexual minorities crops up in some contexts. Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History includes an essay specifically on lesbian culture. Another recent anthology, Out There—which reprints the essay in which Audre Lorde introduces her discussion of the mythical norm—includes an essay by Monique Wittig titled "The Straight Mind," one by Martha Gever on the politics of inclusion and exclusion in lesbian identity, and one by Richard Dyer on gay male pornographic cinema. For the Minority Discourse Initiative of the University of California Humanities Research Institute, one of the faculty research fellows is writing an essay called "the queering of America."

These inclusive anthologies show that a growing awareness and inclusion of sexuality as a power-laden signifier in US society are finding their way intermittently into the literature on multiculturalism and minority issues. But it is difficult to distinguish the contexts in which sexual minorities are central or peripheral to discussions of multiculturalism and marginalization. When the literature of multiculturalism is silent about sexuality, the silence is not accompanied by cogent arguments against including an analysis of the hegemony of heterosexism. Without clarity on the terms of exclusion, we are left to conclude that heterosexist biases and ignorance, rather than conscious analysis, generate the silences.

How then, would we strategize fillings those gaps? What would be the most useful and the wisest means with which to queer up the dialogues around multiculturalism and power relations within the academic institution? I want to explore two paths here, each based upon a different conception of identity. The first, what we might call the "single pie" approach, capitulates to the fragmented, sorted, and ranked organization of identity which the current structure of the academy reinforces. This route, focusing on adding another constituent
group to the panoply of those in US culture, supports the segmented ways of thinking that the logic of "multiculturalism" presupposes. The second route focuses on the forces that construct individual subjects in US culture, and is better supported by the language of "marginalization." This path pursues a supple, polysemic understanding of identity which is more responsible to the ways people understand themselves, and which challenges the traditional structure of disciplines and the epistemology of identity in the academy. This is the path illuminated by the work of Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Trinh T. Minh-ha, to name just a few.  

The single pie approach conceives of identity as fixed and limited, a sum of individuated parts, some essentially privileged over others. This perspective is powered by Enlightenment individualism, which recognizes a single, unitary subject. Using this model, to acknowledge each new slice of identity would be to necessarily diminish the amount of space remaining for the other slices. So one would either lobby for consideration of sexual minorities by incorporating them into already existent categories, or by demanding space for a new one.

One could make the case, as Stephen Epstein does, that gayness in North American cultures functions in much the same ways as ethnicity. 12 While "queer ethnicity" is not nurtured from within the family, as ethnicity is with other groups, the community with which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals can choose to identify contains most elements that characterize ethnicity: a common culture, a sense of shared history, rituals or signs of initiation into the community, a sense of solidarity formed by sustaining threats from without. In short, queer ethnicity would represent a sense of group identity, something which lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals have developed fiercely since the medicalizing, pathologizing, and codifying of so-called deviant sexualities in Western cultures dating from the end of the last century. 13 There's an obvious shortcoming with this argument, though: it does not account for the degree to which sexual minorities are already always embedded in another ethnicity. 14

Another problematic approach to queering up the multicultural curriculum, still using the single pie model, would be to carve out a whole new slice in the pie. The reform here, in the analysis of identity, would be to tack sexuality onto the trilogy of race, class, and gender, a familiar and unsatisfying tactic. For instance, an introductory class called, say, Literature of American Subcultures, would now contain a unit on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual literature, ostensibly diminishing the time students would spend studying (heterosexual) African-Ameri-

Canadian, Chicano, Native-American and Asian-American works. Within this rubric, how does one decide where to place the writings of Jewelle Gomez, or Kitty Tsui, or Chrystos?

The futility of such an organizational structure points up that we are utterly derailed when we regard such facets of identity as separable from one another. But current institutional structures cloud our vision of a synthetic approach to understanding the dynamic, complicated nature of subjectivity and oppression. Given the fractured, departmentalized structure of the university, it is a challenge to think outside these divisions and an even greater challenge not to reinforce them as we work within them. Further, the sites in the academy where identity politics and the politics of oppression are by definition made central are places that are ostensibly organized around one unitary facet of identity. Ethnic studies programs have foregrounded the study of race and ethnicity as they interact with power in society. Women's studies programs have privileged gender.

For all the problems this fractured conception inevitably entails, people tend to organize around their first emergency—the facet of their identity that they feel plunges them most deeply into social crisis. For those who are multiply minoritized, with more than one emergency, this recalls the familiar sorting and ranking of identity, that no-win "oppression derby." 15 But we need to understand the first emergency as always in flux, dependent upon conditions which themselves are always shifting—a contingent emergency, changing both vividly and subtly with our movement between differencing social spaces, some of which foreground one dimension of identity, others of which foreground others.

Hate-crimes statistics throw the complexity of identity into striking relief. Not surprisingly, in the gay community it is white men who most often report hate crimes perpetrated against them. Because the number of their emergencies is smaller than that of many white lesbians, gay men of color, and lesbians of color, they can be more certain that they are being bashed for being queer. 16 Those who collect such statistics and organize lesbian and gay community responses to hate crimes, such as San Francisco's Community United Against Violence, find this dynamic borne out. 17

Whatever lens we use—the complexity of hate-crimes reporting for the multiple minoritized, or the language of multiculturalism as it's spoken within the structures of the academy—it's clear that we need to insist on analytic structures that account for the multiplicity and simultaneity of identity. We know that many writers have been articu-
lating this conception of identity with eloquence and power for a long
time now. But how, then, do we visualize and apply this analysis in
the institutional structures within which we are working, especially if
those structures are identity-based, such as ethnic studies, women’s
studies, and lesbian or queer studies?

I am imagining a three-dimensional graphic field in which to plot
identity, one whose horizontal base axis is replaced by another when
the analytic context is shifted. For example, if a study or a course were
based on late twentieth-century lesbian literature, one would plot that
dimension of identity along a horizontal axis provisionally, merely as
a means to provide a consistent basis for analysis. That axis—in this
illustration, writers who are lesbian—could not be conceived of as
one-dimensional. It would by definition be intersected with other axes:
of class, of race, of ethnicity, of ability, of age, of region, and so forth.
But for the purposes of the class—to study writing by lesbians—the
position of lesbianism, yet to be intersected by other axes of identity,
is plotted as the consistent horizontal axis. Using the same structure,
a course on the Harlem Renaissance would plot African-American
cultural workers in Jazz Age Harlem as the base axis, through which
multiple axes of gender, of sexuality, and perhaps other power-laden
facets of identity such as skin color could be intersected.

The analytic subtleties following from this multidimensional concep-
tion of identity are known to us. Clearly, when we regard identity and
oppressive dynamics with the complexity they warrant, we strengthen
our ability to understand each in isolation. Anti-Semitism, racism,
sexism, classism, and homophobia are all in differing ways complicated,
and in fact through their definitions and mythologies buttress
one another.

To actively employ this fluid analysis not only does justice to the
material we study, but broadens the impact of our work as we advocate
for queer studies in the academy. It’s not simply that we cannot talk
of the oppression of sexual minorities in Western history outside of a
recognition of their multiply identified status as, among other things,
gendered, raced, and classed subjects, though the strength of this argu-
ment alone argues for such an approach. The fact is there are too
many illuminating historical parallels to draw between the reception
and rejection of Jews and other minorities, and the reception and
rejection of homosexuals. For example, when Anti-Semitism is on the
rise, racist and homophobic intolerance and violence consistently in-
crease apace. To overlook this would weaken our analysis and deprive
us and our students of more sophisticated analytic tools with which
to construct queer studies and queer theories. Further, the advent of
queer studies in the academy at this historical moment—after ethnic
studies and women’s studies—provides a rare opportunity for this new
antiprocessionist field to learn from the exclusionary mistakes made
by its predecessors. Their early underpinnings have been based on an
un- or underinterrogated sexism or racism (and for both, hetero-
sexism), reinforced by inadequate constructions of identity.

At the root of these constructions is Aristotelian logic, positing
identity around binarisms—you are either A or Not-A; Me or Not-
me. We know that the “me” who has theorized himself at the center
of this order is he who occupies Lorde’s “mythical norm.” So as we
reconstruct a conception of identity that is multiple and simultaneous,
we need to come up with a system more useful than an Aristotelian
dualism, or even a one-dimensional, finite pie in which sections of
identity are comprehended individually and sequentially, in which one
portion robs space from another.

In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh T. Minh-ha describes “multiple
presence”: “I’ is, therefore, not a unified subject, a fixed identity, or
that solid mass covered with layers of superficialities one has gradually
to peel off before one can see its true face. ‘I’ is itself, infinite layers.”
The best visual image I have to contain such a notion of identity is
the house of difference of which Lorde speaks. I don’t know what
shape this house will take—or, actually, if this conception would even
be served by something resembling a fixed blueprint. I do know that
we who wish to construct it, inside and outside the academy, are best
served if we discard notions of identity built around Aristotelian logic
and Enlightenment individualism, the most powerful of “the master’s
tools.”

Notes

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Rebecca Ramirez, and Jacquelyn Zita.

1. Audre Lorde, Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press,
1982), 226.

2. I employ the term “queer studies” advisedly. While I recognize the significant
political debates regarding the implications of the term—especially regarding its
potential elision of lesbians—they must be bracketed here; I use the term as a
shorthand to refer to work which could include lesbian, gay male, bisexual, and
transgender studies.

4. Tomás Almaguer speaks of "articles on third world issues written by white queers who have ventured into our communities ('tourist' literature I call it)," in "Race and Its Discontents at Out/Look," Out/Look 12 (Spring 1991): 4.


10. As of this printing, work from the first year of the Initiative was being gathered together for publication.

11. I refer here to Lorde's collection of essays, Sister Outsider, Moraga's Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios (Boston: South End Press, 1983), and Trinh's Woman, Native, Other; Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).


15. For this term I am indebted to Ian Barnard.

16. Jacqueline Zita also points out that white men tend to have a greater sense of ownership over the public domain, and thus turn more often to public institutions to redress infringements on their movement there (personal interview, October 29, 1991).