

Multiculturalism and Cultural Authenticity

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Recent years have seen the emergence of two interrelated trends in the arena of cultural politics. First, there has been a call for multiculturalism: for greater diversity in artistic and educational offerings, for a broadening of the spectrum of society's interest beyond the activities and experiences of dead or living white males. Thus, students demand courses in black, Hispanic, and women's studies; children's librarians clamor for more books about Native American and Asian youth; viewers of all races protest if their stories are not told on television's nightly news and prime-time sitcoms. Second, there has been an insistence that those offering representations of previously unrepresented groups be themselves members of the group in question -- that courses in black studies be taught by black faculty, books about Native American youth be written by Native American writers, and reporters covering the Hispanic community be of Hispanic descent. It is this second and more controversial requirement that I wish to submit to examination here.

The thesis that interests me is what I will call the authenticity thesis. The authenticity thesis maintains that the individuals representing the experiences of group A should (generally or even always) be members of group A. By "representing," I mean to include a range of activities, such as writing books, teaching courses, acting roles, directing plays, providing cultural commentary, engaging in political activism -- any activity that can be roughly be construed as having a subject matter. By "experiences," I mean to include not only the subjective inner life of group members, but their history, culture, mores -- their shared public life, as well.

The authenticity thesis can be put forward in both a broad and a narrow form. In the narrow form, it applies when group A is what we may call a victim group, a group that has previously suffered and currently continues to suffer from oppression and discrimination -- e.g., blacks, Native Americans, women. In the broader form, it applies to any group A, whatever its history or status. Some of the available arguments for the authenticity thesis support it whatever group takes the place of A, whereas others work only if A is a victim group.

Of course, we will not be able to apply the authenticity thesis without having some clear notion of what defines the boundaries of the group in question and what legitimates claims

of membership in it. The authenticity thesis is generally applied to groups that have some clear genetic or physical component (sex, race, ethnic heritage, disability) and a clear cultural component as well (gender, race, ethnic heritage, religion). It applies in particular where some genetic or physical component gives rise to a difference in culture or experience. We do not find, e.g., persons arguing that only red-haired persons should represent the activities of the red-haired, or that only stamp collectors should write about stamp collectors. But wherever a group's boundaries are either physically indeterminate (what percentage black ancestry is required to count as black? or as white) or at least partially socially constructed -- (sex is biologically given; gender is socially constructed) -- we raise the question about how the boundaries of the group should be determined and defended. I will return to these questions below, in closing.

Why should individuals representing the experiences of group A be A's rather than B's? We may identify five possible arguments here. The first two, the Argument from Opportunity and the Argument from Ownership, focus on the expressive claims of A-group members -- the view they are uniquely entitled to provide representations of their own experiences. The next two arguments explore the interests of the audience for

representations of A-group experiences: The Argument from Accuracy focuses on the general audience, made up of both A's and B's; the Argument from Solidarity focuses on the narrower A audience. The final argument, the Argument from Authenticity, raises questions about the members of the B group undertaking the representation of A-group experiences. I shall discuss each of these in turn, concluding that together they provide at best qualified support for the authenticity thesis.

The Argument from Opportunity

In some cases, where a B is selected for a job that involves the discussion or representation of A-group experiences, this means that some A is rejected for the position in question. In hiring a male professor for an open position in women's studies, a university rejects all the competing female applicants for that position. The director who notoriously cast a Caucasian actor in the role of a Eurasian pimp in his production of Miss Saigon denied that role to aspiring Eurasian actors. When women face such keen prejudice in so much of academia, why hire a man to teach in a women's studies department? When roles for Eurasian actors are so sparse, why give the one meaty Eurasian role to a Caucasian? So the first argument for the authenticity thesis is that its violation

constitutes a denial of crucial opportunities to members of group A. If A's cannot get jobs for which their identity or experiences as A-group members would seem to make them ideally suitable, what jobs can they get?

Where it is applicable, the Argument from Opportunity seems fairly compelling -- as in the Miss Saigon example -- but it applies in only a limited range of cases. It defends only the narrow version of the authenticity thesis, where A is a victim group whose members face severely limited opportunities elsewhere. And it applies only when some fixed position is to be awarded within a competitive framework, where by choosing one person, I am passing over another. Many applications of the authenticity thesis are not naturally viewed in this way. The white man who writes a novel about a black woman need not be viewed as thereby silencing or stifling black female voices; the editor who accepts that novel for publication may not have received any competing publishable novel from a black female author for that season's list. Nor does it seem that what troubles us most about a white man writing a novel about a black woman is that it may cause some black female author to receive a rejection slip. Objections to violations of the authenticity thesis cannot all be cashed out in terms of some value placed on equal opportunity.

Its limited scope aside, the greatest danger in the Argument from Opportunity is that it may appear, rightly or wrongly, to reinforce the authenticity thesis not just in its narrow version, but in the broader one as well. And in its broader form, the authenticity thesis works on balance to limit rather than to expand opportunities for members of victim groups. If the experiences of any group should be represented only by members of that group, then the majority of opportunities for representation will continue to go to dominant group members. If the bulk of the curriculum concerns dead white males and so only (dying) white males can adequately teach on those subjects, this ensures that only a handful of non-white-males can find employment in the university. Now, if this is our model, it does seem that, on equal opportunity grounds, those remaining opportunities should indeed go to non-white-males. But the model itself should be challenged, on equal opportunity grounds. Actors of color will get more roles through nontraditional casting across color lines than through color-bound casting. Black and female and Hispanic scholars will teach and publish more widely if we permit all scholars to join voices in examining all subjects with equal freedom. Moreover, even if multiculturalism gives rise to a theater with a more diverse repertoire, or to a curriculum in which the works

and lives of dead white males are no longer dominant, the authenticity thesis may still unacceptably limit the opportunities of women and minorities if it reinforces expectations that they will limit themselves to exploring the activities of the victim group to which they belong.

The Argument from Ownership

A related argument for the authenticity thesis proceeds from the claim that A-group activities and experiences are in some way the property of A-group members, so that members of other groups who seek to imitate or represent those experiences are guilty of a kind of expropriation. Thus, many Native American leaders decry New Age adoption of Native American religious practices as the last in a long series of thefts: first, the whites took the land, then the buffalo, and now, in the gravest assault of all, Indian spirituality. Likewise, when a white author retells indigenous folktales, or writes fiction portraying indigenous life, this may seem a species of plagiarism, of profiting from stories that are not one's own. It is one thing for me to write a novel about my life; it is another thing for you to write a novel about my life.

It is not clear, however, that stories, or spirituality, or in its totality, a culture, are the kind of things that can be

owned; I can copyright sentences, paragraphs, and pages, but not plots, themes, or truths. Furthermore, my retelling of your stories or my imitation of your rituals does not violate your right or opportunity to perform them as well. In this sense, I can make your experience my own, without its thereby ceasing to be yours.

In part, however, the charge against B's appropriating A's stories, spirituality, and culture arises precisely because in some cases B seems to treating these as property -- as his property, as a commodity that can be bought and sold for a profit, for his profit, in a marketplace that continues to exploit and impoverish A. Sharing in someone's spirituality is one thing; trafficking in it is another. We may feel that no one should be making a profit off certain experiences; and where profit from A's experience is appropriate, it should be A who reaps it, not B. These arguments powerfully indict B's commercialization of A's experiences. In the Native American example, these concerns are heightened by instances of outright fraud, as when shopkeepers falsely claim that trinkets manufactured in Taiwan are the "authentic" products of Native American artisans.

Sometimes, what sound like simple assertions of ownership actually reflect worries about the misrepresentation or

distortion of certain beliefs and practices. In other words, the Argument from Ownership may look for support to the Arguments from Accuracy and Solidarity, which I discuss below. For example, the New York Times recently interviewed an Osage professor of theology who argued that whereas Indian spirituality focuses on the larger community, New Age adaptations are "centered on the self, a sort of Western individualism run amok." "The danger," this professor explained, "is that these mutations of spirituality will make their way back into the Indian world." If this were to happen, then the attempts of others to make Indian experience their own would attenuate Native Americans' hold on that experience, their capacity to safeguard and perpetuate it.

Nonetheless, where a B-group member represents an A-group experience respectfully and conscientiously, rather than opportunistically, the Argument from Ownership in its strongest form will fail to apply.

One test for something counting as property is that if I have it, you don't: that by my appropriating it, I disappropriate you. If I plant a garden on a plot of land, you cannot plant a garden on the same plot of land -- exclusive use and ownership (talk to Derek Shaw). Here I have to have exclusive use to use something at all. This seems to be the

hallmark of physical property. What about intellectual property? Here the issue seems to be who can profit from something that everybody can use. This seems to pose a real issue now -- hmm. Still, here the details matter: is I retell a folktale, I make it harder for you to publish a retold version of the same tale -- the market here can get glutted. Can the market get glutted for stories about Native American life generally? In a sense, the market can never get glutted for good stories. Hard to think of it as glutted for white stories. Maybe here we return to the argument from opportunity. We also need a distinction between things that are appropriate to make a profit on and things that are not. If a profit, A should make it rather than B, if A wants to. But what if A doesn't? Or if it something needed? And some things no one should make a profit on: worship.

I must admit, however, that many Native Americans argue precisely that their culture, if diluted and deformed in the general culture, will cease to be in any recognizable sense their own.

Range of issues here -- is a culture less mine if it is also yours? See Kymlicka here on threats to a culture from assimilation.

The Argument from Accuracy

Perhaps the argument invoked most often to defend the authenticity thesis is that members of group A simply do the best job representing the experiences of group A, that it "takes one to know one," that you have to be a member of group A to get it right. This argument focuses on group A membership as an epistemological requirement for knowledge about group A. Thus understood, the argument defends the authenticity thesis in both its broad and narrow versions: Whatever kind of group we consider, dominant or victim, its experiences will be represented most accurately and knowledgeably by its own members.

The first thing to note about the Argument from Accuracy is that it is an empirical and not a normative argument. It does not say that only members of group A have the right to talk about group A; it merely claims that representations of A by A's will be more accurate than representations of A's by B's.

Now, accuracy is not an all-or-nothing affair, and the Argument from Accuracy can best be understood as pointing to a likely difference in the degree of accuracy of representation. It does not maintain that no B can know anything at all about A's, but only that A's are better placed to gather accurate

information about A-group experiences and to submit these to more penetrating analysis and interpretation. This generalization is bolstered by common-sense appeals to the need for firsthand experience of one's subject; it posits limits to the powers of imagination, in comparison to the vitality and immediacy of "real life."

As an empirical argument, the Argument from Accuracy is subject to empirical evaluation. One possible test here might be some form of a controlled experiment. For example, we might take novels about black life and experience written by both black and white authors and submit them, in a blind screening, to a panel of black readers. If the black readers succeeded in identifying the race of the author, by noting systematic inaccuracies in presentation, this would provide some support for the Argument from Accuracy; if they could not detect any telltale traces of the author's racial background, the Argument from Accuracy would be undermined. One can certainly point anecdotally both to striking examples of whites getting the black experience wrong (blackface minstrel shows) and getting it right (Bruce Brooks's recent young-adult novel The Moves Make the Man, acclaimed by many black librarians). Our conclusion here would see to be that it is possible for B's to do a good job representing the experiences of A's -- but perhaps

sufficiently unlikely that the Argument from Accuracy provides good reason to hold the authenticity thesis as a cautionary standard.

Even here, important to note limits to the privilege of the first-person perspective and the importance of outsider perspectives. We gain from seeing ourselves as others see us as well as from gazing into our own inner mirrors. In some cases, we learn more from seeing ourselves as others see us. The case can be made that no American ever laid bare the heart of his own culture as piercingly as de Tocqueville did in Democracy in America. Aristotle argued that we learn about ourselves best, not in solitary introspection, but in observing one another through the give-and-take of friendship. The premise behind psychotherapy is that we cannot find out all we need to know about ourselves unaided. Who has not felt the shock of recognition in being confronted with the truth of another's perceptions of ourselves?

Some defenders of the authenticity thesis would go further and maintain that no B can ever (really) know about A's, any more than an A can ever (really) know about B's. Each of us, A or B, can see the world only through the lens of our own

identity; all accounts are inescapably biased by the identity of their author. This stronger version of the Argument from Accuracy is not easily subject to empirical investigation, for all such attempts at investigation will also be subject to the biases of the investigators. While a full exploration of this argument lies beyond the constraints of this essay, let me just note that if bias is indeed omnipresent, neither A's nor B's have any privileged claim to an accurate representation of A-group experience: There will be no such thing as accuracy-in-itself, just competing biased representations, accuracy-for-you and accuracy-for-me. Thus, the female representation of the female experience will have a female bias, just as the male representation of the female experience will have a male bias, with neither representation reflecting reality-in-itself. If this is so, the authenticity thesis remains groundless, for while it will certainly be important to have a black-biased account of black experience and a female-biased account of female experience, it will also be helpful to have a white-biased account of black experience, and a male-biased account of female experience.

One trouble with this claim is that it may overestimate the extent of our self-knowledge, without acknowledging our capacity for evasiveness, partiality, and self-deception. That which we

fail to recognize in ourselves is sometimes visible to outsiders. Even though they are bound to approach us with biases of their own, we gain from seeing ourselves as others see us as well as from gazing into our own inner mirrors.

The Argument from Solidarity

The next argument also focuses on the audience for representations of A-group experiences, but now specifically on the A audience. It charges that the interests of A's as an audience for material about their own life and culture go beyond an interest in merely receiving an accurate representation of these. The provision and reception of such representations is one way to create or foster a sense of community among A's, and thus it is important that A's can band together, with some exclusivity, to provide and receive them. Likewise, various cultural events can also provide a focal point for cultural solidarity.

In this way, a women's studies course serves as more than another academic offering in a university's curriculum, on a par with mathematics and geology; it is also a rare, protected, all-female space where women may engage in a shared journey toward awareness of their own personal and social identities. Thus, female students may feel cheated and betrayed if they arrive on

the first day of class to find a male professor, or even male students, in the class.

The Argument from Solidarity, like the Argument from Opportunity, seems to provide significant support for the authenticity thesis, but, again, only within certain limits. Group solidarity is arguably most important for victim groups -- it seems to have far less (perhaps even negative?) value for dominant ones -- and so the Argument from Solidarity supports the authenticity thesis only in its narrow version. Even for victim groups, solidarity may not be a value of overriding importance; in many contexts it may be secondary to some other value. University seminars, for example, serve many functions, only one of which might be to provide the occasion for an identity-forming experience. Moreover, not every representation of A-group activities works as a crucible for the formation of group identity; this effect may be muted, for example, when individuals experience a representation in isolation from each other, as readers engage books in essentially private rather than shared space.

Finally, we might want to encourage a vision of the possibility of forms of social solidarity that cross fixed racial, gender, and ethnic boundaries. It is important to belong to some community; it is less important, and perhaps

ultimately undesirable, that these communities be defined in racial, gender, and ethnic terms.

The Argument from Authenticity

Whatever the force of these first four arguments, one may feel that they fail to capture something of the sheer unseemliness of a member of group B waltzing into a room, waving his A-ish syllabus or novel or painting, having the nerve to think that he can successfully discuss or represent the experience of group A.

In our initial negative response to such nervy B's we may hear first an echo of the Argument from Accuracy. Given the daunting magnitude of the task in question -- to step outside the boundaries of your own group and accurately and sympathetically represent the character of another's group -- how dare you think you have gotten it right? But if our response above to the Argument from Accuracy is a good one, some members of B will get the A-group experience right, even if most will not. I believe it was Dizzy Dean who said that braggin's only when you ain't got nothing to back it up. If a white male author purports to have created a vivid, vital, black female character and actually has done it -- well, more power to him.

And yet . . . it seems that there is still something

troubling about a member of group B trying to tell a member of group A what it is like to be an A -- when B takes upon himself the superior role of teacher, adviser, consciousness-raiser, and so forth. I find myself drawn here to challenge B's standing to speak to A on the subject of A-ness. I am tempted to say that B has no right to speak to A about A-ness, that there are subjects that are simply closed to those who have not -- actually, not imaginatively -- experienced the necessary initiation. If a victim group is characterized in part by its shared sufferings, then those who have never felt any wounds have no business holding forth on the general subject of scars.

I remember taking my second child, who would not sleep through the night, for his six-month checkup. As the 20-something pediatrician offered me helpful hints about what to do, I found myself feeling more and more annoyed, until finally I asked her point blank: "Do YOU have children?" She did not, and I promptly lost all interest in hearing any more of her advice. Now, her suggestions could well have been the best available medical wisdom, distilled from the experience of thousands of equally suffering mothers; nonetheless, I did not want to hear them from someone who herself had never gotten up at 3 a.m. with a crying baby. Those living every day with the legacy of slavery may not care to hear some tweedy white

professor lecture to them on the horrors of slavery; women may resent men lecturing to them -- oh, so sympathetically -- on the emotional aftermath of rape.

But while this objection strikes an emotional chord, I think it fails to stand up to closer scrutiny. While it may be arrogantly inappropriate for a B to claim that he fully understands the scope and depth of the sufferings of A, it remains the case, if our reply to the Argument from Accuracy holds true, that he may be able to provide accurate accounts of and enlightening commentary on A-group experiences. Ten or twenty years of intense scholarly study may give a professor some claim to be able to educate students even on topics closer to their historical experience than to his own. After all, my baby probably would have slept through the night sooner if I had listened to my well-trained pediatrician's highly paid professional advice.

Finally, one may want to say to the white man toiling importantly away on his wrenching novel about a black woman dying while giving birth to her eleventh child: Write your own story! And many would say the same thing to the black woman writing her novel about a white man: Blacks are criticized as much -- or far more -- for trying to pass as whites as whites are for trying to pass as blacks. We may be drawn to the

general authenticity thesis in part because we believe that people should not try to pretend to be something they are not. Why try to tell someone else's story, when your own story is right there, staring you in the face? I had a male friend once, whom I found rather pathetic in his attempts to be one of our group of women, in his yearning identification with everything female. His girlish giggle was particularly irritating. Oh, just give up and admit you're a boy!

But the principle that each of us should tell our own story cannot entail that this story must be the story of our own gender or race or religion or ethnic group. Our stories go beyond strict literal autobiography, and given that they do, in the end we are left only with the limits of our own imaginations, and our own visions of what we can be and become. One black writer once defended his choice of a white protagonist, saying, "I write out of my imagination, not out of my skin color." Our identities are not assigned to us as much as they are created and constructed by us; to some extent, we can choose the groups of which we will make ourselves members. It may seem naive at this moment to assert the existence of relations and commonalities that cut across these divides; yet the task of discovering and affirming these aspects of identity may well be an urgent cultural task in its own right.

The authenticity thesis receives some qualified support from the Argument from Opportunity, the Argument from Ownership, the Argument from Accuracy, and the Argument from Solidarity, but perhaps the ultimate failure of the Argument from Authenticity reveals its limits most strikingly. For the more we can make good on the hope that our authentic identity can transcend our physically and socially assigned group characteristics -- the more the authenticity thesis in the end proves to be false -- the better off we, as individuals and as a society, will be.

-- Claudia Mills