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## Multiculturalism and Its Discontents

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## Multiculturalism and Its Discontents

### Cover Page Footnote

Catharine R. Stimpson is University Professor at Rutgers University and Director of the MacArthur Fellows Program. This talk was presented at Sacred Heart University on October 4, 1993. A version recently appeared in *Impact: Journal of OPENMIND* (Fall, 1993), 65-76.

CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

*Multiculturalism and Its Discontents*

In April, 1993 – two years after the beating of Rodney King, one year after the quincentenary of the first voyage of Columbus, in the middle of the agony of Bosnia – the word “multi-culturalism” is no laughing matter. Please forgive me, then, if I begin with the description of a recent cartoon. In this cartoon, two middle-aged, apparently respectable, white men are sitting comfortably in a room. One is saying, blandly I believe, “Quantum mechanics, Harrison, is 100% multicultural.” Now I am cursed, greatly cursed, by being in love with the possibilities and ambiguities of language. I sat before this cartoon and thought, “Whatever does it mean?” Does it mean that science embraces every culture? Or, does it mean that scientists of every race and ethnicity do quantum mechanics? Or, does it mean that Harrison and his Physics department need not fear the local affirmative action officer? Or, does it mean that Harrison and his friend are self-deluded in their belief that quantum mechanics has achieved a Utopian multiculturalism?

Obviously, my confusion about this cartoon is a symptom of the consequences of my love affair with language. My confusion about this cartoon may also serve as a symptom of our contemporary confusions about multiculturalism itself. I wish to offer a user-friendly guide to multiculturalism, a user-friendly guide that neither ignores the discontents of multiculturalism nor smears promise.

Our confusions begin with the word “multiculturalism” itself. Denotatively and connotatively, descriptively and normatively, it is a mess. *Denotatively*, “multiculturalism” has several meanings. It can refer to the co-existence of several different cultures, that is, to several different groups, each with its own norms and behaviors.

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Simultaneously, multiculturalism can refer to the co-existence of

several different races and ethnicities. Indeed, these two meanings of multiculturalism overlap. This co-existence can happen, not only within a society in general, but within a person, an individual, a child of different ancestries. Once we might have called it "miscegenation" or "mixed breeding." Now, if we are wise, we call it a richness of cultural inheritance.

Today, our multiculturalism, so defined, is increasing. Two developments push our lives. The first is national, the sheer social and cultural diversity of the contemporary United States. Our very lives are the raw material of a multicultural curriculum. It is neither politically correct, nor politically incorrect, but simply common sense to realize this. The 1980 census found that 1 out of every 5 Americans had a minority background. The 1990 census found nearly 1 out of every 4 claiming African, Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian ancestry.<sup>2</sup> The other 3 out of 4 – we are ourselves a motley crew. We live with this development on our campuses every day. In 1989, 55% of the undergraduate population at Berkeley was "minority." In 1991, 40% of the entering class at Stanford was "minority"; 35% of the Harvard Class of 1994 is minority; 25% of the Princeton Class of 1995 is "minority."

These demographic generalities are the source of my classroom rosters. In Spring, 1993, I looked at my classes. In one, I saw a young man, born in Somalia, to a Somali father and a German mother. He lived in the United States for two years when he was a teen-ager. Then his family moved to Germany. Bi-lingual in German and English, he considers Somali his "mother tongue." In another, about 25% of the class is African-American or Afro-Caribbean. The others represent a spectrum of races, religions, and ethnicities. One young woman has a Portuguese father and a Korean mother, a match made when the father was serving as an American soldier in Korea. Another young woman has a Portuguese mother and an Irish father. During one class, the liberal daughter of a conservative Cuban emigré family quarreled with the anarchist daughter of a liberal Italian family about the legacy of Castro.

The second development is international. Racial and ethnic "minorities" in the United States are the majority of the world's citizens. If the population of the world were figured as a village of 1000 people, there would be 564 Asians, 210 Europeans, 86 Africans, 80

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South Americans, and 60 North Americans.<sup>3</sup> Such facts push us into recognizing the sheer social and cultural diversity of the contemporary world. The global village has many different languages, streets, and neighbors, a diversity that CNN and C-Span transmit hour after hour after hour.

Recently, especially on our campuses, the meanings of multiculturalism have expanded even further. It has become a rubric for the efforts to understand and to tolerate our diversities, the 1000 points of difference among us, especially the points of difference that membership in a minority or a historically disadvantaged group creates. So multiculturalism can mean the efforts of the racially different – both to end racism and to recognize the creativity of a race. Or, multiculturalism can mean the efforts of women, one pole in our bi-polar gender system, to gain equality. Or, multiculturalism can mean the efforts of the handicapped, the physically different, to gain access to jobs and public facilities. Or, multiculturalism can mean the efforts of gays and lesbians, the sexually different, to gain social and legal acceptance. In this expansion, the bases for identity shift radically from group to group. They can be race and ethnicity, gender, the body, sexuality.

This expansion in the meaning of multiculturalism has had at least two contradictory consequences. First, it has provided more targets for the opponents of multiculturalism. Harrison and his friend, the figures in my cartoon, might be willing to have colleagues from all races and ethnicities. Harrison and his friend might be willing to have colleagues from any religion. Harrison and his friend might be willing to have colleagues from both genders. Harrison and his friend, however, might draw the line at homosexuals who are open and out. Next, this expansion has also meant that we have more and more self-conscious minority groups. In all probability, then, each of us belongs to one or more minority groups – be it a racial minority, an ethnic minority, a sexual minority, a religious minority, or a handicapped minority. Few of us have the easy comfort of being a Total Majoritarian. These groups may be in conflict with each other, a poignant theme of the literature of multiculturalism.

Given the number of multiculturalism's denotations, it is hardly surprising that connotatively, "multiculturalism" evokes a spectrum of responses. Let me describe the spectrum. At one end, multiculturalism

is perversion's synonym. Pat Buchanan, when a candidate in the presidential primaries in 1992, compared multiculturalism to a "landfill." When people think of multi-culturalism as garbage, they are engaging in a double operation. Simultaneously, they desire an impossible purity of existence, a life in which nation, race, place, culture, and identity are one. Recently, I was talking to a sophisticated citizen of an ancient European country. This country has given us the poetry of Ovid, Catullus, and Dante; the philosophy of Lucretius, Seneca, and Machiavelli; the art of Michaelangelo; the music of Verdi; the films of Fellini; the designs of Armani. "You Americans," she said, "are crazy."

I was polite. "Oh," I said, "how are we crazy?" I expected any one of a number of possible answers. She might even have been quoting the poet William Carlos Williams and his famous, sardonic line, "The pure products of America go crazy." I was not expecting the answer that I got. "You are crazy," she said, "because you believe a country can have more than one race. That's madness, impossible. A country can have only one race. That's what a country is, a race." Her alliance of racialism and nationalism was frightening, but it is not limited to the stupid sons and daughters of ancient European countries. Members of every race, every tribe, and every nation have forged this alliance. So has anyone who wants to transmute the base metals of human life into the gold of an implacably pure identity. In America today I see the rhetoric of this alliance in vulgar black nationalism and Afrocentrism; in vulgar radical feminism.

The next point on the spectrum consists of people who realize that multiculturalism connotes historical and anthropological realities. One reality: the United States is, and has been, a multicultural country in a multicultural world. Throughout time, cultures have interacted with each other, sometimes happily, sometimes miserably, sometimes both at once. One example: In 1991, the National Museum of Natural History of the Smithsonian Institution, organized a wonderful multimedia exhibit, "Seeds of Change: 500 Years of Encounter and Exchange." It commemorated the 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyages, the beginning of sustained relations between Europe and these longitudes. It did so by focussing on five material and cultural exchanges between European and native cultures. The Europeans brought three things to the exchange: disease, the horse, and sugar.

The native cultures brought two: corn and the potato.

However, the dwellers on this point of the spectrum are fearful that advocates of contemporary American multiculturalism is encouraging "Balkanization." The famous historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has made this case in an influential little book that is at once eloquent and sarcastic, learned and polemical. America, he writes, was to be a new nation and new place; Americans a new race. Americans were to mingle all tribes and peoples and races. Their identity was to be American, people who loved equality, justice, freedom, and democracy. The struggle of America, Schlesinger continues, was to realize this creed, to translate such principles into practice. Some Americans remembered their past. They were "hyphenated Americans," Irish-Americans or Polish-Americans. Nevertheless, to the right side of every hyphen were the four syllables of the word American.

Now, Schlesinger writes with foreboding, ethnicity has become "a cult" that "threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of American as 'one people,' a common culture, a single nation" (p. 43). This counter-revolution is being played out with special ferocity in our schools and curricula. Although he finds counter-revolutionaries among all ethnic groups, he focusses on African-Americans. The consequences of their work are frightening: ethnic separation and fragmentation; an attack on the principle of freedom of speech; a dissolution of the individual into the group; self-pity and a sense of victimization among various racial and ethnic groups; a fake history that makes racial groups better than they were and Europeans worse than they were. Schlesinger's last chapter is a jeremiad, an urgent cry against the currents of the day (p. 130).<sup>4</sup>

The third point on the spectrum is like the second in significant ways. It, too, believes that the United States is a multicultural country in a multicultural world, but it, too, distrusts contemporary cries for multiculturalism. Its terms of distrust are, however, very different. The dwellers on this point fear that multiculturalism is a cover for a happy, cheerful, inane, sloppy pluralism that will lack critical edge and reforming energies. Such a multiculturalism will, in effect, keep the cultural, social, political, and epistemological *status quo*. For Molefi Kete Asanti, multiculturalism is just another word for white European hegemony.

I inhabit a fourth point. Multiculturalism is both a historical truth and a possible good, a value that promises to invigorate our culture, society, and curricula. Certainly, in contemporary dance, literature, art, films, and music, multiculturalism is a jolt of energy and a blast of beauty. Certainly, too, on our campuses, multiculturalism, broadly defined, is a curricular boon. It is struggling, with some missteps and bad mistakes, for greater curricular inclusiveness and accuracy. It is asking new questions of traditional fields. It is also helping to create such fields as social history, African-American Studies, women's studies, and gay and lesbian studies. Each of these fields is generating useful knowledge and classrooms.

The stakes in the contest over the meanings and values of multiculturalism are very, very high. For me, they involve nothing less than the future of a beautifully crazy pact that the United States is negotiating with history. The struggle over multiculturalism represents a volatile round in these negotiations. This pact affirms that we will live, not only with civil rights and political equality, but with cultural pluralism. Cultural pluralism is, of course, the term that Horace Kallen, an American original, coined in the first part of the twentieth century. At our most confident and generous, we believe that we can make this pact with history work. At our most anxious and mean-spirited, we reject it.

My name for this pact is "cultural democracy." I did not invent the name. Alain Locke, the African-American intellectual, used it in the mid-part of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Europeans thinking about cultural policy adapted it in the 1970s. In brief, "cultural democracy" accepts multiculturalism but roots its practice in democratic principles. So defined, cultural democracy provides a map for our cultural and educational future.

Like America itself, the experiment with cultural democracy is not new. A standard theme in United States history is our the tension between "assimilation," becoming a nation with a single national identity, and "pluralism," becoming a nation with a number of regional and ethnic identities. We have a well-worn set of metaphors for such a tension: "melting pot" vs. "salad bowl" or "vegetable soup." Why these metaphors are domestic is curious. Perhaps they recognize the truth that the kitchen is where the heart of identity beats.

Again, like America itself, cultural democracy has many parents.



The Bill of Rights of 1791 established the constitutional principle of freedom of speech. Freedom of speech permits different voices to flourish, different tongues to shout and wag. The anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth-century taught us to respect the rights, minds, and humanity of African-Americans. The women's movement of the nineteenth-century taught us to respect the rights, mind, and humanity of women. The expansion of education in the nineteenth-century – the creation of the land grant university, the women's college, the historically black college and university – opened up more cultural opportunities for many. The academic disciplines of history, anthropology, and literature urge us to understand the otherness of others.

Diverse, multiplicitous, heterogeneous (my language echoes that of Cornel West, Jr.),<sup>6</sup> cultural democracy asks us to act on five principles. They are:

First, each of us – no matter what our race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality – deserves access to literacy, education, arts and letters, and public speech. Of course, some of us have more talent than others. I am no Louise Nevelson, the sculptor; no Rosalyn Yalow, the physicist; no Jessye Norman, the singer; no Pat Schroeder, the politician; no Madonna, the millionaire. Of course, some cultural works are more valuable than others. I read both Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) and Tom Clancy, but I prefer Thomas Hardy – except, perhaps, on airplanes. Of course, some works have had more cultural influence than others. The *Bible* and the *Koran* have had more influence than either Thomas Hardy or Tom Clancy. Obviously, our curricula must teach works of value, show why they have value, and teach works that have shaped our culture. At the same time, each of us has a human voice that deserves some training. As the 1990s open up shop, it is stupid and immoral that at least 27 million Americans are functionally illiterate and that this number increases by perhaps 2 million each year.

Second, each of us must have access to our own historical and cultural traditions. Our libraries, schools, and mass media must respect our individual cultural identities. I am fiercely proud of my grandfather who was born in England, who arrived in New York when he was 8, who worked his way across America as a ranch-hand, janitor, baggage handler. I am as fiercely proud of the grandmother who had to leave

her rural school in Iowa when she was 12 and go into domestic service. I want to root my pride in these progenitors in the soil of public knowledge.

Third, our pride in our own progenitors is not an end in itself, but the home from which we travel in order to meet others. I must move from learning the story of my grandmother and grandfather to learning the story of yours. Some stories, obviously, will have more drama than others. Moreover, my orthodoxies are not a single truth for you to swallow, but a perspective for you to use. Preferably, we will exchange our stories and perspectives in conversations, of the sort I have described. Conversations is, of course, the term that William James, the great American philosopher, uses in *Pragmatism* for the process of describing a consensual view of reality. After such an exchange, history is not simply the story of my own culture, but grand, turbulent narratives of all our cultures, sometimes at peace with each other, sometimes at each other's throats. And they have been at each other's throats. A tragic multiculturalism breeds victors and victims, disease-carriers and the diseased, slave-holders and enslaved persons. In *The Tempest*, Prospero has enslaved the spirits. In 1492, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain supported Columbus and expelled the Jews from Spain. However, if we have the courage to journey peaceably among our differences, if we have the wisdom to cross cultural borders, and if we have the brains to refuse to dig circles around experience and label them "Eurocentrism" or "Afrocentrism," then we will see, as clearly as we see the lines on our palms, the lines of connections between us. The great American poet of cultural democracy is Walt Whitman. In 1855, five years before the horror of the Civil War, he wrote, in "Song of Myself":

Whoever degrades another degrades me,  
and whatever is done or said returns at last to me.

Fourth, cultural democracy demands cultural and academic freedom. In 1990, in Empire, California, Lynn McPeak, no relation to Twin Peaks, an interim curriculum director of a public school district, locks up 400 copies of "Little Red Riding Hood." She is hardly a cultural democrat. The cultural democrat reasons that the benefits of cultural freedom are great enough to accept the price of the abuse of

cultural freedom. Psychologically, the cultural democrat is confident enough to permit many diverse voices to rise up, to float around – no matter how blasphemous, painful, corrupt, bigoted, hateful, and stupid they might be. And we can be blasphemous, painful, corrupt, bigoted, hateful, and stupid. Racist speech is racist speech. Sneering at homosexual and feminist art, Senator Jesse Helms and the Reverend Donald Wildmon of Tupelo, Mississippi, are hardly cultural democrats. Calling Columbia University in New York City “Columbia Jewniversity,” a member of the Nation of Islam is hardly a cultural democrat. Indeed, in 1991, the Anti-Defamation League found 950 incidents of anti-Semitic harassment, threats and physical assault in the United States alone.<sup>7</sup> For a cultural democrat, the limits on speech are these: we cannot cry fire in a crowded theater. We cannot pollute the environment for others until they choke on it.

Fifth and finally, no community can exist without some common values, some common moral and cultural language. A community means some commonalities. Indeed, for some seasoned observers, the difficulty with multiculturalism today is that it has gone too far; that it has made a fetish and cult of our differences; that it has forgotten our need for unity. The question is not whether we need commonalities but what they will be and who will create them and how. Today, the United States has its common languages. Education has a common language of respect for learning. Among our other common languages are those of big league sports, advertising, the mass media, and a consumer economy. Not everyone knows about Dwight Macdonald, an American intellectual; Betty MacDonald, an American humorist; Ramsay MacDonald, a British prime minister; or even Ross Macdonald, an American detective story writer. Most of us, however, know about Big Macs. Fortunately, the United States also has a common political language, when we care to speak it. This common political language has a syntax of freedom, equality, and self-government. Its canonical works are the *Constitution*, although it has had to be amended in blood, and the *Bill of Rights*, although every American institution has ducked out of obeying it. This common political language does not have a syntax of a shared moral, religious, or artistic system.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, our common political language, which we must nourish and defend, binds us together by binding us to cultural diversity.

Being a cultural democrat is, bluntly, exhausting and irritating. It demands nurturing mutual respect as if it were at once winter wheat and summer flowers. It requires of us that we embark upon a mission at once possible and impossible – to enter into another culture, to talk its talk, to breathe its air, to walk its walk. So requiring, it asks us to change our perceptions of ourselves, other people, and other relations with them. Moreover, it asks us to change our feelings about ourselves, other people, and our relations with them. Multiculturalism, broadly defined, compels us to recognize how firmly we stabilize our identities through comparing ourselves to others and then, in the process of comparison, finding “us” just fine and “them” pretty awful. The meaning of being “white” depends on having “black” there. The meaning of being “a man” depends on having “a woman” there. We know, too, how often we dislike the different and the new – in our offices, classrooms, clubs, and homes. Our cognitive and emotional schema probe, get prickly, then recoil. Moreover, as the historian Diane Ravitch tells us, emotionally, we tend to prefer “particularism,” an exclusive adherence to our own kind, to “pluralism.” We do not like gazing at others respectfully or even gazing at them at all. Instead, we prefer to preen before mirror images.

In December, 1992, Jane Kramer, the brilliant journalist, published an essay about what happen to our public lives, our public space, if we encase ourselves rigidly in one identity, psychologically, politically, culturally. In her essay, “In the South Bronx: Whose Art Is It?,” Jane Kramer gives a compelling, telling account of the issues of political correctness (PC) and multiculturalism. Significantly, her raw material is not the polemical literature about PC, multiculturalism, and artistic value, but daily life; her setting is not a pleasant campus, the South Bronx, a place of suffering, poverty, crime, crack, unemployment, homicide, and AIDS. Here, there are no resources to waste; here, having no power may not give birth to a terrible beauty. To be sure, Kramer is writing about New York City, but New York City, idiosyncratic though it may be, has not left the Planet Earth for Krypton. Kramer is both tough and tender-minded, acutely aware of the proximities of irony and poignancy, and because of these virtues, scrupulously fair. Her story about multiculturalism only too vividly and dramatically does her story illustrate Emerson's maxim, “One man's justice is another's injustice; one man's beauty, another's ugliness; one

man's wisdom, another's folly; as one beholds the same objects from a higher point."

The focus of Kramer's story is John Ahearn, a well-known and well-educated artist, white and male. For several years, he has lived and worked on Walton Avenue. He has also collaborated with a second artist in the borough, Rigoberto Torres. Though Kramer admires much about Ahearn, she refuses to romanticize him. Commissioned by New York City in 1986 to create a piece of art in front of a new police station in the 44th Precinct in the South Bronx, Ahearn decided to create bronze statues, done from life casts, of three of his immediate neighbors, one Hispanic, two black: Raymond, with his beloved pit bull, the Hispanic; Daleesha, on a pair of roller skates; and Corey, with boombox and basketball.

Going through a strenuous formal process, Ahearn got his plans approved by various agencies, including the local community board. Raymond and Corey also liked his work, which had real use value for them. For Raymond, the statues were a fitting memorial for his dog. However, very near the end of Ahearn's execution of his commission, opposition blew up. Historically, of course, public art has provoked outrage. The artistic and psychological success of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Wall in Washington, D.C. cannot erase the belligerent enmity it once provoked. PC and a fractious multiculturalism, however, inflected the controversy over Ahearn's work. Some of the opposition was bombastic and self-promoting. Some of it was chauvinistic and narrow: two black city bureaucrats, without seeing the finished sculptures, decreed that only blacks could represent blacks and that Ahearn was racist. Still other opposition, which is far more appealing, arose from residents near the new precinct house, especially from an older woman, Mrs. Alcina Salgado, a pro bono community activist, a "small, formidable woman." She found the bronzes "evil, ugly images." She wanted more socially stalwart and heroic representations, more "positive" images that would have had use value for her and her neighbors as they struggle to decent, self-sustaining lives. Her daughter, educated at Sarah Lawrence, also argued vigorously against Ahearn. In 1991, five days after installing the bronzes, wanting the neighborhood to be "happy," Ahearn took them down — at his own volition and expense.

Kramer's story asks adamant questions. If art is public, financed by

the public, situated in public space, how much power should the public have in determining what art is acceptable and for what moral and aesthetic reasons? Is the public wrongly fearful of realism, of well-crafted representations that refuse to flatter us, especially if the realist seems, by birth, an outsider? And whatever do we mean by "the public?" Who comprises a public? Who are its legitimate representatives? Surely not a couple of censorious bureaucrats. Surely, too, our civic life cannot assign an inflexible veto power over a cultural project to tiny groups or to one or two people who claim to speak for a large group. Kramer shows a feature of our multicultural civic life: we are fractionating ourselves into smaller and smaller components, splitting the meaning of "public" and "community" more and more finely in a hyperactive social mitosis, multiplying the number of vetoes over any civic project. "Hispanics" become Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Mexicans, Ecuadorans. "The community" becomes a series of blocks that are alien to each other. Kramer does not wax nostalgic for a monolithic sense of "national identity" to which every citizen must submit, but she sees clearly that we cannot pay lip service to multiculturalism while engaging in a "multicultural dialogue [that] is really a lot of strange and disheartening monologues." We must be able to listen to each other, and, after these acts of attention, to imagine generous alternatives that can gratify several moral and aesthetic needs.

Kramer's story is also far more heart-rending than those of a struggle between Jesse Helms and the images of Robert Mapplethorpe or, more abstractly, between a powerful, well-defended philistinism and an avant-garde art world with its own weapons. Jesse Helms eats in the Senate dining room. The Mapplethorpe estate has money and critical esteem. The 44th Precinct, however, has no public art. The pedestals in front of the police station stand without their statues. The social misery, the sheer ordeal of trying to survive, obdurately remains.

To add to our difficulties, not everyone in a diverse world believes in diversity. On the contrary, ethnic and tribal violence has literally ripped people apart. The blood from such violence still soaks the earth. Nor does everyone in our diverse country believe in diversity. Some of the most publicized cultural figures in America today say that cultural democracy is nonsense, mushwords from the politically correct. They cry that we want no culture, only cultural anarchy; no truths, only the babble of relativism. More vulgarly and viciously, such

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groups as the White Aryan Nation fail to call for cultural democracy. Nor have I heard David Duke, the former National Grand Wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan who campaigns hard for high public office, call for cultural democracy. In October, 1991, he was in a run-off for the governorship of Louisiana. On October 7, 1990, he won more than 44% of the vote in Louisiana's run-off for senator. Then, one of his supporters, a young white man, snarled to a reporter:

The blacks are just taking everything . . . They're taking everything from us, and the white race is going down the tubes. It's about time someone spoke up for white people.<sup>9</sup>

The former Grand Wizard's career gives a frightening new meaning to the phrase, the Dukes of Hazzard.

Finally, our own experience teaches us that cultural differences are not necessarily synonymous with equal powers, opportunities, economic securities, safeties, and rights. Some people can afford to buy books, some cannot. Some groups have privileges, some do not. Some people eat, some do not. Multiculturalism will not sing us out of a recession. Nor will it conjure up manufacturing jobs in our urban centers.

Cognitively, emotionally, ideologically, politically, economically — keeping our pact with cultural democracy is much harder than adding a book or two to a general education course; much harder than reading a Benetton ad; much harder than ordering an ethnic item from a mail order catalogue or getting the video of *Dances With Wolves*. Nevertheless, I urge us to continue our experiment with cultural democracy. I urge us to commit ourselves to this pact with history now. As Tracy Chapman says in "If Not Now":

If not now what then  
We all must live our lives  
Always feeling  
Always thinking  
The moment has arrived.<sup>10</sup>

If we figure out cultural democracy, we will have a cornucopia of

rewards. We will have more personal liberty. We will have some freedom from violence and wasteful prejudices. We will have more guides through the labyrinths of reality. We will have a much deeper, richer sense of history. We will have better curricula in schools and colleges and universities. By 1992, more than a third of all colleges and universities did have a multicultural general education requirement. At least a third did have classes in ethnic and gender studies.<sup>11</sup> We will have a far more interesting public culture, with a rich array of voices and visions, from past and present. During economic hard times, such a public culture will keep us from scapegoating minorities. It will also prepare us for the cultural realities of a multinational economy.

Let me offer a hopeful anecdote in support of these assertions. On January 29, 1992, I was reading the "Metro" section of the *New York Times*. The stories were more strands in the tapestry of postmodern urban life: often mundane, often terrifying. They told of sports, taxes, crime, street violence, kids with guns. They told, too, of the dangers of multiculturalism, of Professor Leonard Jeffries, Jr., whom I believe to be anti-Semitic, whose racial theories are hallucinatory and pernicious. One of Jeffries' faculty colleagues is, of course, Professor Michael Levin, whose racial theories — his belief in black inferiority — are equally hallucinatory and even more pernicious, because more people believe them.

There was, however, a cheerful story. It announced the 40 winners of the Westinghouse science contest for American high school seniors. Eleven out of the 40 winners were from New York City. Together, they represent the city's multitudinous races, religions, and ethnicities. Four out of the 11 were from one high school, Stuyvesant High School. They were all children of immigrants — from Russia, China, and India. These 4 victors have their unities: youth, place, a passion for learning, a great competency at science. They also have their cultural differences. However, for me, sitting there in my Staten Island kitchen, with my newspaper and All-Bran, Michail Leyb Sunitsky, John Alexander Abraham, Zachary Gozali, and Vanessa Wun-Siu Liu — they were all symbols of what the content of multiculturalism, the content of cultural pluralism, the content of cultural democracy — call it what you will — might be.<sup>12</sup>

Even more urgently, I believe that unless we learn to be culture democrats, nationally and globally, we will have to suffer more and



more battlefields – in private and public spaces. On these battlefields, we murder differences and the different. At history's worst moments, state, tribal, or individual violence destroys the differences among us. It does so through destroying the different among us. I remember with anguish seeing, on June 4, 1989, the TV reports from the battle ground of Tiananmen Square in China. I watch now as ethnic groups batter each other. I watch, too, as men batter women, abuse the Sexual Other. "Live and let live," is an old adage. Its postmodern variant might well be, "We will not live unless we live and let live." In brief, our experiment with cultural democracy is the testing of a non-violent survival technique: mutually assured survival.

Let us bear the realities of our diversities, of our multiculturalism. I wish to leave you with another voice. For several decades, our culture ignored and marginalized this voice, but we are now responding to its originality and strength. The voice is that of Zora Neale Hurston, the African American writer. I like to think that Shakespeare would have enjoyed this voice. In an autobiographical essay, she once presented herself in this way:

. . . in the main, I feel like a brown bag of miscellany propped up against a wall. Against a wall in company with other bags, white, red, and yellow. Pour out the contents, and there is discovered a jumble of small things, priceless and worthless. A first-water diamond, an empty spool, bits of broken glass . . . a dried flower or two still a little fragrant.<sup>13</sup>

Hurston is homing in on the wonderful messiness of our individual and cultural identities. She is telling us that we dwell in zones of variance. Here we are, up against the wall of existence, at once diamond and broken glass. She is asking us to note and celebrate our differences. She is encouraging us to break down walls of cutting indifference to these differences, walls of contempt for them. She is, as well, reassuring us that we can uphold and decorate the wall of existence when it is, correctly, our common and necessary shelter – even if, from time to time, the decoration is graffiti.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Carole Cable, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 30, 1991), B6.

<sup>2</sup>Felicity Barringer, "Census Shows Profound Change in Racial Makeup of the Nation," *New York Times* (March 11, 1991), A-1, B-6.

<sup>3</sup>Donald Stewart, "Building on Diversity: An American Tradition," Remarks before the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation Board of Trustees, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, New Jersey, October 18, 1990, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup>In a confluence of capitalism and lament, *The Disuniting of America* became life in 1991 as a Whittle Direct Books, the text interlarded with advertisements for Federal Express. Although I am less pessimistic than Schlesinger, although I find his description of the contemporary university overblown, this book has instructed me.

<sup>5</sup>I am grateful to Professor Teta V. Banks for pointing this out to me on January 30, 1992, at a conference at Rutgers University/Camden, New Jersey.

<sup>6</sup>Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," *October* 53 (Summer 1990), 93-109.

<sup>7</sup>"Anti-Semitic Attacks in '91 Called a Record," *The New York Times* (February 16, 1992), Section I, p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>I am grateful to Merrill D. Peterson, *The Humanities and the American Promise: Report of the Colloquium on the Humanities and the American People*, Merrill D. Peterson, project director (October 1987), p. 7, for making this point. The Texas Committee for the Humanities distributes the pamphlet.

<sup>9</sup>Peter Applebome, "Louisiana Tally Is Seen as Sign of Voter Unrest," *New York Times* (October 8, 1990), A-1.

<sup>10</sup>Tracy Chapman, "If Not Now," *Tracy Chapman*, April Music Inc./Purple Rabbit Music, 1986.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton, "The Quiet Revolution: Eleven Facts about Multiculturalism and the Curriculum," *Change* (January-February 1992), 25. The entire issue, "The Curriculum and Multiculturalism," is very helpful.

<sup>12</sup>"Stuyvesant Shines Again in Westinghouse Awards," *New York Times* (January 29, 1992), B9.

<sup>13</sup>Zora Neale Hurston, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me," in *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*, ed. Alice Walker (Old Westbury, New York: Feminist Press, 1979), p. 155.

<sup>14</sup>I have written about and discussed "cultural democracy" before. This

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paper, however, is indebted to on-going discussions about multiculturalism, including those with my colleagues Duncan Walton and Walton Johnson, who have taught me a great deal.