

LOOSE CANONS

NOTES ON THE CULTURE WARS

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

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Introduction

Few commentators could have predicted that one of the issues dominating academic and popular discourse in the final decade of the twentieth century—concomitant with the fall of apartheid in South Africa, communism in Russia, and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union—would be the matter of cultural pluralism in our high school and college curricula and its relation to the “American” national identity. Stories on race and education have appeared on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*; in television news magazines such as “The MacNeil-Lehrer Report” and William Buckley’s “Firing Line”; and in hundreds of news items in the daily press—attesting to the urgency of the scattered, and often confused, debates over what is variously known as cultural diversity, cultural pluralism, or multiculturalism. And not only are these matters pressing in this country: In September 1991, the *New York Times* could note that “East and West agreed today—the greatest threat to civil liberties was no longer communism, but violent nationalistic passions unleashed by its collapse.”

Increasing incidents of violence are associated with ethnic differences in very many places in the world: Hasidim and African-Americans in Crown Heights, Brooklyn; Serbs and Croats in Yugoslavia; Koreans and African-Americans in Flatbush, Brooklyn; Zulus and Xhosas in South Africa; Poles and Gypsies in Poland; the Tutsis and Hutu in Rwanda; the Yoruba and Igbos in Nigeria; and, of course, the fate of the Jews in Ethiopia and in the Soviet Union. The list seems to grow longer, rather than shorter, as we stumble our way as a society into the twenty-first century. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois could write, prophetically, that the problem of the twentieth century would be the color line. We might well argue that the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of ethnic differences, as these conspire with complex differences in color, gender, and class. As actual cultural differences between social and ethnic groups are being brought to bear to justify the subordination of one group by another, the matter of multiculturalism becomes politically fraught. Until these differences are understood in an era of emergent nationalism, the challenge of mutual understanding among the world's multifarious cultures will be the single greatest task that we face, after the failure of the world to feed itself.

The essays collected here are the attempts of a critic of literature and culture to examine the implications of nationalistic eruptions and the politics of identity for the future of American society and culture, for our university and public school curricula, and, to be sure, for literary and cultural studies themselves. Perhaps it should seem anomalous that I, a person whose first scholarly passion is the recovery and editing of "lost" and ignored texts, should find myself preoccupied with these questions. And yet, what is often referred to loosely as the "multicultural" movement traces its origins in the academy to the birth of Afro-American Studies in the late 1960s.

Just as the birth of black studies had both a larger social as well as an academic dimension, so, too, have recent academic debates about the curriculum and America's ever-increasing proliferation of subcultures. That literary scholars and their works have been assigned central roles in the public drama of cultural pluralism and its place in our schools—that is, that members of Congress, governors and their staffs, and even President Bush find it necessary to enter the debate about the nature and function of our curriculum and what its shape (and perhaps, colors) shall be in the next century—is one of the more curious developments in the recent social history of this country.

When, to put the matter bluntly, have literary studies so engaged the attention of American society at large? Why does William F. Buckley take the time to inveigh against Stanley Fish and Catherine Stimpson on "Firing Line," when a decade ago Mr. Buckley would have found the idea of inviting two literary theorists to his studios most improbable? Particularly following two decades of what was once called *high theory*, replete with difficult ideas enveloped in equally difficult jargon, the apparent social and political "relevance" of the thinking of literary scholars to the actual lives of our fellow citizens is quite astonishing. For a scholar of African-American Studies, this new state of affairs is especially gratifying, given the link between the social and economic conditions of African-Americans and our field of inquiry. Debates about multiculturalism have given to literary studies a renewed urgency.

But is the political and social significance of our work as immediate as all that? Or is the noisy spectacle of the public debate a kind of stage behind which far narrower gains are secured or relinquished? I must confess to considerable ambivalence on the matter. The "larger issues" that frame the classroom clamor are profoundly real: but

the significance of our own interventions is easily overstated; and I do not exempt myself from this admonition.

To both its proponents and its antagonists, multiculturalism represents—either refreshingly or frighteningly—a radical departure. Like most claims of cultural novelty, this one is more than a little exaggerated. For both the challenge of cultural pluralism and the varied forms of political resistance to it go back to the founding of our republic.

In the university today, it must be admitted, the challenge has taken on a peculiar inflection. But the underlying questions are time-tested. What does it mean to be an American? Must academic inquiry be subordinated to the requirements of national identity? Should scholarship and education reflect our actual diversity, or should they, rather, forge a communal identity that may not yet have been achieved?

For answers, you can, of course, turn to the latest jeremiad on the subject from, say, George Will, Dinesh D'Souza, or Roger Kimball. But in fact, these questions have always occasioned lively disagreement among American educators. In 1917, William Henry Hulme decried “the insidious introduction into our scholarly relations of the political propaganda of a wholly narrow, selfish, and vicious nationalism and false patriotism.” His opponents were equally emphatic in their beliefs. “More and more clearly,” Fred Lewis Pattee ventured in 1919, “is it seen now that the American soul, the American conception of democracy, Americanism should be made prominent in our school curriculums, as a guard against the rising spirit of experimental lawlessness.” Sound familiar?

Given the political nature of the debate over education and the national interest, the conservative penchant of charging the multiculturalists with “politics” is a little perplexing. For conservative critics, to their credit, have

never hesitated to provide a political defense of what they consider the "traditional" curriculum: The future of the republic, they argue, depends on the inculcation of proper civic virtues. What these virtues are is a matter of vehement dispute. But to speak of a curriculum untouched by political concerns is to imagine—as no one does—that education could take place in a vacuum.

Stated simply, the thrust of the pieces gathered here is this: Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class, and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions—to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture. Beyond the hype and the high-flown rhetoric is a pretty homely truth: There is no tolerance without respect—and no respect without knowledge. Any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how "alien" it may appear to be.

Indeed, the historical architects of the university always understood this. As Cardinal Newman wrote over a century ago, the university should promote "the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." In just this vein, the critic Edward Said has recently suggested that "Our model for academic freedom should therefore be the migrant or traveler: for if, in the real world outside the academy, we must needs be ourselves and only ourselves, inside the academy we should be able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure. But most essentially, in this joint discovery of self and other, it is the role of the academy to transform what might be conflict, or context, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, creative interaction."

But if multiculturalism represents the culmination of an age-old ideal—the dream known, in the seventeenth century, as *mathesis universalis*—why has it been the target of such ferocious attacks?

The conservative desire has been to cast the debate in terms of the West versus the Rest. And yet that's the very opposition that the pluralist wants to challenge. Pluralism sees culture as porous, dynamic, and interactive, rather than as the fixed property of particular ethnic groups. Thus the idea of a monolithic, homogeneous "West" itself comes into question (nothing new here: literary historians have pointed out that the very concept of "Western culture" may date back only to the eighteenth century). But rather than mourning the loss of some putative ancestral purity, we can recognize what's valuable, resilient, even cohesive in the hybrid and variegated nature of our modernity.

Cultural pluralism is not, of course, everyone's cup of tea. Vulgar cultural nationalists—like Allan Bloom or Leonard Jeffries—correctly identify it as the enemy. These polemicists thrive on absolute partitions: between "civilization" and "barbarism," between "black" and "white," between a thousand versions of Us and Them. But they are whistling in the wind.

For whatever the outcome of the culture wars in the academy, the world we live in is multicultural already. Mixing and hybridity are the rule, not the exception. As a student of African-American culture, of course, I've come to take this kind of cultural palimpsest for granted. Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane have influenced popular musicians the world over. Wynton Marsalis is as comfortable with Mozart as with jazz. Anthony Davis writes in a musical idiom that combines Bartok with the blues. In the dance, Judith Jameson, Alvin Ailey, and Katherine Dunham all excelled at "Western" cultural forms, melding these with African-American

styles to produce performances that were neither, and both. In painting, Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, Martin Puryear and Augusta Savage, learned to paint and sculpt by studying Western artists, yet each has pioneered the construction of a distinctly African-American visual art. And in literature, of course, the most formally complex and compelling black writers—such as Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Gwendolyn Brooks—have always blended forms of Western literature with African-American vernacular and written traditions. Then again, even a vernacular form like the spirituals took as its texts the King James version of the Old and New Testaments. Morrison's master's thesis was on Virginia Woolf and Faulkner; Rita Dove is as conversant with German literature as she is with that of her own country. African-American culture, then, has been a model of multiculturalism and plurality. And it is this cultural impulse, I believe, that represents the very best hope for us, collectively, to forge a new, and vital, common American culture in the twenty-first century.

With just a few exceptions, the pieces collected here originated as talks prepared for oral delivery, and have been altered very little since. All bear the impress of the occasion that produced them. In particular: "The Master's Pieces" was originally given at a conference on cultural diversity at Duke University in 1988. "Talking Black" in part originated as a Modern Language Association panel discussion, "Integrity and the Black Tradition." (A bit of context: "theory" was, at the time, frequently depicted as inimical to the supposed communal trust of black nationalism, an opposition I sought to undermine.) "Integrating the American Mind" was first given as a talk to the New Jersey State Superintendents of Education in 1987, an audience mostly composed of

state college administrators. "African-American Studies in the 21st Century" was a talk given at the 1991 Wisconsin Conference on African-American Studies; and "Trading on the Margin" (originally entitled "Good-bye, Columbus?") was a talk given at a panel, "Firing the Canon" at the 1990 American Studies Association. The collection of these talks and essays must be credited to Elizabeth Maguire, my splendid editor at Oxford University Press, who persevered, despite an at times foot-dragging author, in the belief that these briefs, however occasional, might have somewhat more than ephemeral interest, and who organized and edited them into something very much like a book.

Now, I should admit up front that there are significant differences in perspective and emphasis among these pieces. Some of them speak with a confidence greater than I now can muster. Some strike me as insufficiently critical, others as excessively critical: with hindsight, I fear I have sometimes been in the hapless position of blowing up balloons and then pricking them. I realize, as well, that guild speeches, addressed to members of my profession, can trail clouds of stale cigarette smoke in a manner offputting to those who are outside these institutions, and those who imagine themselves to be. Then again, one of my concerns is to take a stand against the delightful if reflexive rhetoric of institution bashing, a rhetoric that is itself highly institutionalized.

Even so, I feel pangs of misgiving when I look over this collection, since it records, in a sense, what I was doing when I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing. Literary criticism and scholarship are discussed here, but not practiced. But that, too, is symptomatic of these past few years of foment, dissension, and position taking, of a time in which audiences, both general and academic, were much more interested in my position in the contemporary "culture wars" than in my analysis of

nineteenth-century slave narratives. Nor do I think we have safely emerged from the other end. Today, the mindless celebration of difference for its own sake is no more tenable than the nostalgic return to some monochrome homogeneity. My hope is to have contributed, however stumblingly, to the search for a middle way.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
September 1991

H.L.G., jr

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I

LITERATURE