

Redefining the American Canon: Multicultural Identities, Assimilation Ethnic and American Solidarity

Mukesh Williams

“So what are you saying? You want me to shut down this operation? Round up the bad guys?”

“Nothing like that,” she said huskily. “I got no beef with the canon as such. It serves a legit purpose.” She looked around nervously and lowered her voice. “What I’m telling you is, it’s fixed. It’s not on the level.” She paused. “What I’m telling you is, this is the biggest scam since the 1919 World Series.”

Chapter. 1, “Canon Confidential: A Sam Slade Caper,”
Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons*

The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.

A twelfth century monk from Saxony,
Hugo of St. Victor in *Didascalicon*¹

The works of culture come to us as signs in an all-but-forgotten code, as symptoms of diseases no longer even recognized as such, as fragments of a totality we have long since lost the organs to see.

Fredric Jameson, “Towards Dialectical Criticism,”
Marxism and Form, (p. 416).

The liberal tradition in America conceptualizes cultural diversity or multiculturalism in relation to established democratic ideas of a single nation—justice, liberty and cooperation—and finds the two opposing ways of thinking incompatible. The notion of cultural uniqueness on the one hand and social cooperation on the other seems inescapable in any discussion of multicultural identity, representation or literature. Therefore, cooperation, as a process towards social solidarity, working within an American democratic ideal, has found importance amongst theorists, since it involves a common purpose in social construction. The radical and conservative traditions work out their own exclusionist program of social reconstruction rejecting multiculturalism as “ethnic chauvinism” out to “fragment” American culture.² However it is both the strength and dilemma of the liberal American tradition that concerns us here vis-a-vis multiculturalism. Right wing liberals such as Robert Bellah, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Michael Sandel and left wing liberals such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Michael Walzer have centered their concern for sometime now on issues raised by a new multiculturalism and the concept of a democratic ideal. In doing so they find it rather frustrating. Neoconservatives such as Mark Gerson, though reject an outright multicultural bias, grant that some more attention must be given to minority groups in shaping school curricula than has been accorded them in 1950s.³ Central to multiculturalism is the notion of otherness that liberals find hard to incorporate within the notion of either an assimilation ethic or more significantly American solidarity. Social thinkers now agree that unless Americans practice the value of cultural tolerance, based on mutual understanding and evolve a “common public culture” American society, as a plural democratic polity will not survive.⁴ In working towards a redefinition of these tropes, theorists, literary critics, cultural historians and anthropologists are in a way also redefining the American canon.

The multicultural movement originated in the American academia in the late 60s together with the development of Afro-American Studies. This development has not only helped to focus attention on the socio-economic plight of Afro-Americans but has given to literary studies “a renewed urgency.”⁵ Multiculturalism may be defined as the existence and occasionally the coexistence of diverse interdisciplinary practices to identify, understand, and separate cultural uniqueness of ethnic and marginalized or non-ethnic or dominant groups. By centering upon group identity, multiculturalism focuses attention upon multi- and inter-ethnicity and its expression in political, social, economic and cultural mainstream. Therefore, in many cases multiculturalism involves the problems of identity politics, a phenomenon affecting capitalistic societies, something unheard of in peasant communities of the past. Capitalism, as Karl Marx argues in his *Manifesto*, gives rise to a highly developed economic society, forcibly bringing nations and groups together through slave trade, white settlements and Third World immigrant workers. In such situations, as Alex Callinicos points out, “identity becomes an issue.” But together with the formation of identities the process of assimilation also starts giving rise to “eclectic cultures.”⁶ The insidious nature of cultural capital as shown by Pierre Bourdieu leads to hegemony of cultural knowledge and subsequent stratification of society. Therefore, the concept of a grand canon employing unchanging texts as repositories of cultural heritage has been easily displaced. However, when ethnic groups confuse textual representation with political representation they cannot co-opt and, instead, establish a textual non-canon.⁷ In recent years the canon of American literature has been redefined and expanded to include ethnic writings of different hyphenated Americans, such as Afro-American, Native Americans, Chicano/a, Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans. In other words ethnic groups now compete for space with the hitherto white hegemonic texts for recognition. These are the disturb-

ing beginnings of multiculturalism.

A recent sociological study by John J. Miller, *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic*⁸ argues that multiculturalism has prevented the Americanization of immigrants. Miller, vice president of the Center for Equal Opportunity in Washington, sees the multicultural agenda responsible for this. Since the ideology campaigns for affirmative action and bilingual education in public schools in order to preserve its cultural heritage it finds the idea of Americanization somewhat disturbing. Miller's strongly conservative position, flaunted as liberal, makes him see multiculturalists as "global village people" and prompts him to link them with gay and Communists with the phrase "fellow travelers." Therefore, Miller advocates for a return to the coercive process of Americanization that prevailed at the turn of the 20th century in public policy issues.

Multiculturalism also faces the problem of ideological positioning in a post-communist world mythologized by the supposed triumph of the free world. Western liberalism still remains an intellectually viable proposition despite its failures in Vietnam and Guatemala, "stemming from," what Robert Latham calls "its overzealousness and its greed due to its grounding in capitalism."⁹ Though the strong appeal of liberalism had weakened in the early 90s it still remains "a historical modality, a way of life" in which we may construct our "political existence" and enjoy our rights and liberty. However, the problem lies in the way liberalism constructs the other or the enemy, its role as a heroic global protector of liberal siblings; and the development of an awesome military power.¹⁰ Fredric Jameson in his discussion on literary theory condemns the "antispeculative bias" of the liberal tradition, and "its emphasis on the individual fact or item at the expense of the network of relationships in which that item may be embedded."¹¹ Cultural pluralism (literary texts, cus-

toms and traditions), which is central to the notion of multiculturalism, involves the idea of a superstructure and its implied opposite infrastructure (a socio-economic base). As Jameson argues while writing about T. W. Adorno that:

The sociology of culture is therefore first and foremost, I would like to suggest, a form: no matter what the philosophical postulates called upon to justify it, as practice and as a conceptual operation it always involves the jumping of a spark between two poles, the coming into contact of two unequal terms, of two apparently unrelated modes of being. Thus in the realm of literary criticism the sociological approach necessarily juxtaposes the individual work of art with some vaster form of social reality which is seen in one way or another as the source or ontological ground, its Gestalt field, and of which the work itself comes to be thought of as a reflection or a symptom, a characteristic manifestation or a simple by-product, a coming to consciousness or an imaginary or symbolic resolution, to mention only a few of the ways in which this problematic central relationship has been conceived.¹²

Jameson traces the sociology of literature to the “invention of history” in the Romantic period and theorizing about the apparent “unity of the cultural field.”¹³ The bugbear of multiculturalism has to be addressed by the time-tested though somewhat dated and defective weapon of liberalism. But for the want of a new cultural tool that can bring about some consensus in America, for the moment liberalism must survive.

Lynne V. Cheney in her book *Telling the Truth* finds multiculturalists deliberately distorting the presentation of American system, that has “uniquely nurtured justice and right,” to effect a political and social transformation they have in mind.¹⁴ Betty Jean Craige argues that once American students learn

about the faults of their once glorified country they would be less inclined to support American war efforts or hegemony. Craige writes: “Multicultural education may well be incompatible with patriotism, if patriotism means belief in the nation’s superiority over other nationsThe advantage to the nation of multicultural education thus may be increased reluctance to wage all-out war.”¹⁵ Craige underscores, rather approvingly, the potential of multiculturalism to ideologically disunite the nation; and then America could once more return to the golden days of the 60s when there was no public support for the Vietnam War (as it was for the Gulf War). Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society*, sees this logic of the multiculturalists as fomenting ethnic separatism.¹⁶

Political philosopher Allan Bloom, in his popular work *The Closing of the American Mind*, highlights the “fundamental conflict between liberal society and culture.” He believes that Continental nihilism, despair and relativism circulating in intellectual circles as tolerance have infected the liberal tradition in America. Therefore, he finds the social and political crisis in America today as primarily an intellectual crisis. He argues against the notion of preserving ethnic differences at the cost of “fundamental beliefs about good and evil, about what is highest, about God.”¹⁷ Liberal education must therefore mean,

reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them—not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read.¹⁸

Bloom laments the fact that most American professors of the humanities do not see it this way. He writes:

The effort to read books as their writers intended them to be read has been made into a crime, ever since 'the intentional fallacy' was instituted. There are endless debates about methods—among Freudian criticism, Marxist criticism, New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstructionism, and many others, all of which have in common the premise that what Plato or Dante had to say about reality is unimportant. These schools of criticism make the writers plants in a garden planned by a modern scholar, while their own garden-planning vocation is denied them.¹⁹

Nonetheless, even Bloom by invoking the names of Plato and Dante to attack modern critical methodology forces them into a controversy they were never aware of. Using writers in this fashion, critics such as Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins argue, “‘forces’ them into categories made up by” Bloom himself, leading to another variety of traditional humanism, “one more cultural and political agenda, among others.”²⁰ Graff and Robbins believe that methodologies have multiplied not only because the academic critic wants to rise above reader and writer but also because of the rise of new conflicts “over the meanings of cultural texts” and the “‘forcing’ of texts ‘into categories we make up.’”²¹

Bloom’s rejection of methodology, what Geoffrey Hartman calls the philosophy of “anti-self consciousness” finds expression in theorists such as Robert Alter and Denis Donoghue. Robert Alter in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (1989) attacks literary theory by arguing that “the new academic sectarianism” in America leaves behind “dogmas” and “arcane language.”²² Donoghue campaigns for a “trouble free zone of reading” that would keep out ideological and political conflict²³ However, Graff and Robbins do not concur with this view. They believe that an emergent historical reality has made it incumbent on our part to see old texts in a new way. They see “theo-

ry-driven academic criticism” not as a “symptom of terminal decline but the recovery of the aims of the older cultural criticism at a time when that older criticism is no longer adequate to express a dissensual cultural scene.”²⁴ And since there is no consensus today, as Gerald Graff and Henry Gates, Jr. have been saying, then “teach the conflicts.”²⁵ For the idea of plurality, as John Dewey understood, implies the ability of the philosopher to work out a method where “variety, difference and individuality” can go hand in hand with “cooperation.” Gates, Jr., believes that “Learning without center is not learning without focus.” All we need is fresh “rigor and coherence” to address this new cultural plurality.²⁶

One of the strongest critics of multiculturalism is Harold Bloom, who in his classic book *The Western Canon* (1994) finds no place for cultural or political ideology in literary criticism and campaigns for the restoration of aesthetic standards. In an “Elegiac Conclusion” to the book Bloom attacks “professors of hip-hop,” “clones of Gallic-Germanic theory,” ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions,” “multiculturalists unlimited” and concludes that the “Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible.”²⁷ He lambastes literary theory and its “social energies” which like Freud’s libido Bloom finds a myth. He wonders:

Either there were aesthetic values, or there are only the over-determination of race, class, and gender. You must choose, for if you believe that all value ascribed to poems or plays or novels and stories is only a mystification in the service of the ruling class, then why should you read at all rather than go forth to serve the desperate needs of the exploited classes? The idea that you benefit the insulted and injured by reading someone of their own origins rather than reading Shakespeare is one of the oddest illusions ever promoted by or in our schools²⁸

However, Bloom's campaign for autonomous aesthetic values free from ideology and social leanings find few takers today in America, where the academic climate is rife with Gallic-Germanic theory.

Bloom fails to recognize the scarred faults of race, nationality and gender running deep in American society. Gates, Jr.'s seminal work, *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* sums up the controversy underlying multiculturalism thus:

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 thought 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.²⁹

Gates, Jr., believes ours is a multicultural world, and Afro-American writers sensitive to this new development have already “blended forms of Western literature and African-American vernacular and written traditions.”³⁰ This “cultural impulse” can revitalize American culture in the new century. It is an undeniable fact that American society has become fragmented “by ethnicity, class and gender” and this society would undoubtedly disintegrate without the twin values of “cultural tolerance” and cultural understanding.” America faces the challenge of building a common “public culture” and responding to the “long-silenced cultures of color.” Gates, Jr., emphatically concludes: “If we relinquish the ideal of America as a plural nation, we've abandoned the very experiment that American represents.”³¹

A somewhat recent book by Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History*,³² deals with the changing relationship between social theories and historical narratives. Callinicos argues that social theory can effectively contribute to our better understanding of the past. To this end he analyses the ideas of Francis Fukuyama's Hegelian conceptualization of history, to Hayden White's postmodernist attempts to visualize past through human representation. In the book he attacks a Eurocentric theory of history wondering "how a critique of oppression can proceed except on a non-relativist basis." He takes up Richard Rorty's argument in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*³³ and bends it to suit his purpose. Callinicos employs the Rortian rhetoric that moral and political action is not based on "some universalistic notion of moral autonomy or human rights but the narrower solidarities which emerge in specific historically contingent circumstances."³⁴ Though Callinicos accepts Rorty's idea that our construction of "us" is more localized than universal, Callinicos finds it hard to believe that Rorty can question the humanistic basis of man's generosity to others. Nevertheless, Callinicos's objection to Rorty's argument is more fundamental. He wants to know:

Who are the *we* shared membership of which is to be the basis of moral and political action? Solidarities 'smaller and more local than the human race' necessarily exclude as well as include. The politically effective 'we' in the antebellum American South excluded slave. Abolitionists challenging the 'peculiar institution' appealed, among other things, to the very fact that black slaves were as much human beings as free whites. Looking back, we condemn various historically constituted solidarities as too narrow, in an ethically relevant sense—classical Athens, for example, for excluding women, slaves and metics from the 'we' of free citizens. But how is this condemnation to be grounded?³⁵

The ongoing controversy about multiculturalism can best be exemplified by the publication of two books and their varied reception in America. The first is Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars*³⁶ and the second David Hollinger's *Postethnic America*.³⁷

Gitlin's book provides a rich historical and psychological analysis of American culture, leading to the clash of cultures in contemporary America. He finds emphasis on new identities as somewhat detrimental to a better life based on shared values. He is overwhelmed by the fact that, "American culture in the late twentieth century is a very stewpot of separate identities. Not only blacks and feminists and gays declare that their dignity rests on their distinctness, but so in various ways do white Southern Baptists, Florida Jews, Oregon skinheads, Louisiana Cajuns, Brooklyn Lubavitchers, California Sikhs, Wyoming ranchers, the residents of gated communities in Orange County, and 'militias' at war with the U. S. government."³⁸ Though Gitlin understands the differing political strength and impact of these groups, he points out that multiculturalism has somehow evaded "the central wound in American history," the conflict between whites and blacks.³⁹ However his strongly leftist and highly confrontational position has met with strong reactions from multicultural critics furthering their brand of aggressive political identity.

Hollinger's is a more balanced and well-argued work on multiculturalism that looks beyond the present controversy proposing ways to circumvent it. He agrees that multiculturalism opens up a Pandora's box of beleaguered minority politics, unacceptable to most, and more often than not ending in fiasco or confrontation. Hollinger expresses his sense of disgust at the many conflicts within the multicultural construct. He writes:

Mixed-race Americans demand recognition from the United States census, while many black politicians defend a “one-drop-rule” for identifying African Americans that was designed to serve slaveholders and white supremacists. Women’s rights activists try to help victims of clitoridectomy, while cultural relativists warn that westerners have no standing to instruct Saudis and Sudanese on culturally specific rights and duties. Educational reformers add new cultures to school curricula, while guardians of civility demand the banning from campuses of speech that might offend certain groups. Illegal immigrants from Mexico complicate the public services of California, while prophets of “postnationality” explain that the boundary between the United States and Mexico is an imperialist fiction.⁴⁰

Reading Hollinger’s catalogue of multicultural catastrophes seems as if pluralists are quarrelling with cosmopolitans within the trope of identity reinforcement. In other words multiculturalism has been unable to resolve squabbles within its own interest groups—the squabble between a pluralist perspective of social life and a futuristic cosmopolitan vision of social order.

Hollinger’s normative program campaigns for a common culture, undivided by ethnic and racial identities, yet allowing the right to exit from ethnic-racial-religious group. His post-ethnic American position stands for “voluntary over involuntary affiliations, balances an appreciation for communities of descent with a determination to make room for new communities, and promotes solidarities of wide scope that incorporate people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds ... [and] resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history, but works within the last generation’s recognition that many of the ideas and values once taken to be universal are specific to certain cultures.”⁴¹ Hollinger however fails to address the concerns of Afro-

Americans where affiliation is not indeed voluntary but governed by a cruel historical fate.

Both Gitlin and Hollinger agree that the inherent contradiction in multiculturalism is responsible for its dismal failure. Multiculturalism, they believe, lacks the ability to balance singular cultural difference with universal cultural unity. After all multiculturalism ultimately ought to exist within the framework of social solidarity and must contribute to social unity. And therefore, both authors critique the notion of multicultural alterity standing against the idea of cultural togetherness. Since a multicultural identity underscores cultural difference it puts on hold the notion of human solidarity, making it look somewhat suspect. Moreover its emphasis on legitimating and empowering identity makes it see the notion of human solidarity as a plea for ethnocentrism.

In *Getting Beyond Race* Afro-American scholar Richard J. Payne finds multiculturalism a “two-edged sword.” On the one hand it emphasizes racial and ethnic uniqueness over and above a common American culture, and on the other the special contribution made by marginal groups to American common culture.⁴² Payne presents a balanced, but somewhat assimilationist, perspective. He writes:

Multiculturalism that encourages balkanization on the basis of racial group identities seriously impedes the process of racial inclusion. On the other hand, multiculturalism that highlights different historical facts, ideas, and approaches to problems within the framework of a common culture strengthens efforts to move beyond race. Yet the advocacy of multiculturalism as well as the strenuous resistance to it indicate major shifts in American culture.⁴³

Payne argues that resistance to multiculturalism emanates from a narrow

view that assumes American culture as “essentially Western.” Attempts to include African, Asian and Native American cultures in the American mainstream are construed as a threat to American culture. Once this view of culture becomes global the resistance to it will go. Payne concludes that while multicultural debates give rise to the notion that there are “irreconcilable differences among various ethnic groups, the reality is that blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, and others are being assimilated into American culture even as they wrestle to find their positions in it.”⁴⁴

Notes and References

- 1 Hugo of St Victor, *Didascalicon*, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1961), p. 101.
- 2 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 174–5.
- 3 Mark Gerson, *In the Classroom: Dispatches from an Inner-City School That Works* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).
- 4 Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. 176.
- 5 Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. xiii.
- 6 Alex Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives: Reflections on the Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 200.
- 7 Gates, Jr. *Loose Canons*, p. 179. Gates, Jr. refers to John Guillory's analysis of canon formation and representation. p. 179.
- 8 John J. Miller, *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism has Undermined the Assimilation Ethic*, (New York: Free Press, 1998).
- 9 Robert Latham, Liberalism's Order/Liberalism's Other: A Genealogy of Threat,” *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Jan–Mar), 1995, p. 111.
- 10 Latham, *ibid.* Liberal heroes have entered into global struggles arguing that they wish to protect their liberal brothers but remain “committed” to military power. “Upon whom this might be turned and for what reasons remains a crucial question.” Latham concludes: “To move beyond the positioning of liberalism as the master referent of post-Cold War change, at a minimum the myth of liberal heroism will need to need abandoned.” pp. 111–2.

- 11 Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, [1971] rpt., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. x.
- 12 Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, pp. 4–5.
- 13 Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, p. 5.
- 14 Lynne V. Cheney, *Telling the Truth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 29–30.
- 15 Betty Jean Craige, “Multiculturalism and the Vietnam Syndrome,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (12 January 1994), B8.
- 16 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). At the Paula Rothenberg’s New Jersey conference in 1993 Schlesinger Jr.’s, anti-multiculturalist position, apart from Allan Bloom and William Bennett, drew strong disapproval from multiculturalists.
- 17 Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 192.
- 18 Allan Bloom, *ibid.* p. 344.
- 19 Allan Bloom, *ibid.* p. 375.
- 20 Gerald Graff and Bruce Robbins, “Cultural Criticism,” in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1992), p. 431.
- 21 Graff and Robbins, *ibid.* p. 430.
- 22 Robert Alter in *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), pp. 14–5.
- 23 Denis Donoghue, “The Joy of Texts.” *Review of The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* by Robert Alter in *New Republic* Vol. 26 June 1989, pp. 36–8.
- 24 Graff and Robbins, *ibid.* p. 431.
- 25 Gates Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. 118.
- 26 Gates Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. 119.
- 27 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1994) p. 517
- 28 Bloom, *ibid.*, p. 522.
- 29 Gates Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. xv.
- 30 Gates Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. xvii.
- 31 Gates Jr., *Loose Canons*, p. 176.

- 32 Callinicos, *Theories and Narratives*
- 33 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), p. 191.
- 34 Callinicos, *ibid.* p. 196.
- 35 Callinicos, *ibid.* p. 197.
- 36 Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995).
- 37 David A. Hollinger's *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).
- 38 Gitlin, *ibid.* p. 227.
- 39 Gitlin, *ibid.*, p. 228.
- 40 Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, *ibid.* p.
- 41 Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, *ibid.* p. 3.
- 42 Richard J. Payne, *Getting Beyond Race: The Changing American Culture* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1998), p. 59.
- 43 Payne, *ibid.* p. 59.
- 44 Payne, *ibid.* p. 60.