Nomads and Migrants: Negotiating a Multicultural Postmodernism

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This is the place where everyone takes command
No man’s land

—Latin Alliance

Postmodernism and multiculturalism, seldom discussed as if they belong together, might remind us of bickering partners. Each of these contested terms serves as a center of attraction, collects friends, makes enemies, coordinates allies, sets up networks of information. These networks seldom cross. The camps that identify themselves with these positions offer each other only the most cursory nod of recognition. This despite the fact that postmodernism and the multicultural share many affinities: a valuation of marginality, a suspicion of master discourses, a resistance to empty conventions.

Maybe part of the problem is that these polysyllabic terms—postmodernism and multiculturalism—seem to engender more questions and tensions than answers and resolutions.
Is postmodernism primarily an aesthetic or historical condition? Does it describe the site of elite cultural interests or define a more general system of production and consumption? Does postmodernism really exist at all as a significant epistemological break from modernism? A schematic breakdown of postmodern theorists might run something like this: Ihab Hassan and Brian McHale (aesthetic postmodernism), Jean-François Lyotard (positively decentering postmodernism), Jean Baudrillard (nihilistically decentering postmodernism), Hal Foster (critical postmodernism), Andreas Huyssen (culturalist postmodernism), Fredric Jameson (repressive postmodernism), Jürgen Habermas (modernist postmodernism). This list, however, does little to resolve the question: what do we enact when we utter the word “postmodern”?

By contrast (but no less problematically), notions of the multicultural seem so clear that there debate rages about its definition. While a stormy debate still continues about what to do with the multicultural, the term itself within both academic and popular discourses generally invokes notions of “diversity.” Multiculturalism implies a recognition that North American societies have become more culturally, racially, and ethnically diverse. Our curriculum therefore needs to address this reality. Perhaps, if one were seeking an even more adventurous version of academic multiculturalism, one might acknowledge not just a present demographic diversity but a historical re-examination in which past contributions to American culture by non-white, non-European peoples are acknowledged. What controversy exists over the term arises out of the way the academy is to treat multiculturalism: does its incorporation into the curriculum corrupt or challenge or enhance institutional knowledge?

At the root of these controversies, obviously, lie the issues of cultural power and the politics of signification. These issues circle back to postmodernism.

While they should be viewed as sympathetic conditions—postmodernism and multiculturalism are not coterminous—neither should they be understood as synonymous with poststructuralism. The point to make here is that a discussion of multiculturalism and postmodernism should help clarify how these terms can be used productively to construct an inclusive discourse about cultural empowerment.
Rather than view the crossing of the multicultural with the postmodern as a “grafting” of one interest onto another (or subordinating one under another), the concerns associated with the multicultural and the postmodern interpenetrate and traverse. They come finally to shape one another. Multiculturalism must refuse the position of civilizational Other in relation to the dominant cultural field. It cannot be used, as Susan Suleiman suggests, simply as a “political guarantee postmodernism needs in order to feel respectable as an avant-garde practice” (116). People of color cannot be required to act as the conscience of contemporary cultural discourse.

Simultaneously, the postmodern valuation of difference—informed by poststructuralist thought—must come under scrutiny by “minority” discourses. This is true if the “margin” is to claim any constructive and empowering space within academic and cultural institutions. It is also true if postmodernism is to do something more than resurrect a hollow monument to abstract difference and a reified margin. In their introduction to the volume of Cultural Studies devoted to Chicano cultural production, Rosa Linda Fregoso and Angie Chabram argue that the invocation of difference within poststructuralist discourses should come under sharp scrutiny:

poststructuralism’s concept of “difference” as a category imposed on and used to describe the cultural identities of people of color . . . subsumes ethnic identity into a universal category of difference without attention to our specific historical internal differences. Furthermore, this notion of difference is predicated on a singularity which takes as its center the Western speaking subject and which posits that all people of color are different to this subject yet transparent among themselves. (207)

Difference, as Fregoso and Chabram (and Spivak and hooks and West and others) argue, becomes within some poststructuralist discourses a reified category. This does nothing more than to reinscribe the centrality of those who define difference. More damaging, as George Yúdice argues, is that the deployment of marginality by poststructuralism becomes “the condition of possibility of all social, scientific, and cultural entities . . . that constitutes the ba-
sis for a new, neo-Nietzschean ‘freedom’ from moral injunctions” (214). Under the poststructural, everything is marginal, so the margin can no longer serve a critical function. Everybody dances across a Brownian cultural universe, fragmentary and decentered.

Some critics refuse this diffusion of the margin. Speaking from a self-defined radical marginality, bell hooks seeks to distinguish qualities of marginalization: “Postmodernist discourses are often exclusionary even as they call attention to, appropriate even, the experience of ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ to provide oppositional political meaning, legitimacy, and immediacy when they are accused of lacking concrete relevance” (23). The postmodern looks to the historically marginal in order to supply a political consciousness and relevant dimension. The position hooks takes regarding the postmodern conflates the postmodern with the poststructural, a move of which one must remain suspicious. Bracketing for the moment a discussion that distinguishes postmodernism from poststructuralism, hooks’s observation about the abstraction of difference by contemporary cultural discourse is well taken. This stand cannot, however, serve as an excuse to cast off the postmodern as a problem that does not involve the historically marginal. Indeed, hooks refuses disengagement. She seeks instead to recuperate the critical potentiality of postmodernism for constituencies positioned by dominant discourse as “different” and “other.” These constituencies, hooks argues, engaging with the postmodern condition of decentered subjectivity, can take advantage of ruptures and gaps that make space for oppositional practices. The discontinuous terrain of the postmodern can allow Others to stake a claim in a new cultural order.

I would like to discuss, in the pages that follow, how and why that stake should be claimed.

1. It’s a Schizo World

From a strategic standpoint, the postmodern infatuation with alterity clears ground by which the multicultural can articulate the highly textured and multiplicitous condition of marginality. For example, Guillermo Gómez-Peña—a Mexican-born performance artist and MacArthur Fellowship winner—treats in his work the transnational and transitional identities to be found in the border-
lands. As a Mexican who identifies with Chicano issues, Gómez-Peña resists any easy categorization of identity: “I believe in multiple identities. Depending on the context I am Chicano, Mexican, Latin American, or American in the wider sense of the term. The Mexican Other and the Chicano Other are constantly fighting to appropriate me or reject me. But I think my work might be useful to both sides because I’m an interpreter. An intercultural interpreter” (Carr 43). This vision of the multicultural self as translator suggests that the subject of the borderlands crosses numerous cultural and historical configurations. Rather than underscore place, this view foregrounds the movement inherent in a constructively decentered subjectivity.

The vision of multiple identities articulated by Gómez-Peña clearly resonates with the issues of schizophrenia that characterize postmodern discourse. Viewing postmodern schizophrenia critically, Fredric Jameson sees schizoid disconnection as the near triumph of late capitalist hegemony. Jameson argues that in modernism, reification “liberated” the Sign from its referent. So modernist culture could play with systems of meaning separate from connections to an “outside world.” In postmodernism, reification liberates the Signifier from the Signified. The systems of meaning themselves break down. Postmodernism thus begins “to project the mirage of some ultimate language of pure signifiers which is also frequently associated with schizophrenic discourse” (“Periodizing” 200). Language becomes a language disorder. Syntactical time breaks down, leaving behind a succession of empty signifiers, absolute moments of a perpetual present. The links of the signifying chain snap, leaving behind nothing but the rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers:

The connection between this kind of linguistic malfunction and the psyche of the schizophrenic may then be grasped by way of a two-fold proposition: first, that personal identity is itself the effect of a certain temporal unification of past and future with the present before me; and second, that such active temporal unification is itself a function of language, or better still of the sentence, as it moves along its hermeneutic circle through time. If we are unable to unify the past, present and future of the sentence, then we are similarly unable to unify the past, present and future of our own biographical experience or psychic life. (Postmodernism 26–27)
The rupture within the linguistic realm finds its homology in all epistemological realms. The rubble of language functions in the same way that the rubble of history or the rubble of identity function: sites of postmodern dissolution in which all things, now detached and free-floating, collapse into—within Jameson's conceptualization—the marketplace.

Simply put, Jameson overstates the case. The equation of schizophrenia with postmodernity neutralizes any historical memory. This process of historical amnesia may be at work within the general discourses of mass cultural hypnotism. (Media representations of the noxious presidential “elections” serve as good an example as any. Where in the mass media are stored memories of the war with Iraq, the savings and loan bailouts, the upward redistribution of wealth?) As the 1992 insurrection in Los Angeles should serve to show, historical memory cannot be erased with the punch of a button. This is particularly true among those communities and constituencies who have borne the brunt of history. Another example lies in the construction of the AIDS quilt—memory serves to inform acts of defiance and rage.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari give schizophrenia a more positive spin than Jameson. Schizophrenia characterizes a revolutionary tendency of desire that produces liberating movements against the structures of systemic order. Modern societies are caught “between the Urstaat that they would like to resuscitate as an overcoding and reterritorializing unity” and the schizophrenic “unfettered flows that carry them toward an absolute threshold.” Our societies organize themselves around systems that can move either toward a regime of stratified order or dissolve into fluid movement toward a joyful chaos. Societies thus “recode with all their might, with world-wide dictatorship, local dictators, and an all-powerful police, while decoding—or allowing the decoding of—the fluent quantities of their capital and their populations. They are torn in two directions: archaism and futurism, neoarchaism and ex-futurism, paranoia and schizophrenia” (260). Deleuze and Guattari speak more persuasively to the potentially empowering movements a dissolution of systems—detrimentalization—can entail. However, the fact that these deterritorializations also resonate with dispossession and displacement grounds the “lines of flight” along which desire moves. The anti-oedipal model—
strung between paranoia and schizophrenia—does little to ground the historical effects of capitalism. The driving forces of capitalism and its reterritorializing processes always haunt migrations, invasions, enslavements, and other multicultural deterritorializations. It is very easy to value schizophrenia when it doesn’t drive you crazy.

Neither the conceptualization by Jameson nor that by Deleuze and Guattari adequately addresses the multiple subjectivities—constrained by historical conditions but constructively empowering nonetheless—suggested by Gómez-Peña. His description of a multiple subject-position is not simply a dissolution of self or anarchically transgressive—it is a position of translation, of interpellation, of liberation, of confinement. As a historically inscribed position, it manifests the numerous discontinuities and disruptions inherent to its various localities.

2. Mapping Borderlands

Overlapping the grids postmodernism and multiculturalism changes their configurations. It brings each discourse into sharper focus so that the diversity and multiplicity of each terrain becomes clearer. For example, Hal Foster, Jürgen Habermas, and Andreas Huyssen have noted—each in their own way and for different ends—that there are at least two discernible strains of postmodernism: the culturally resistant and the neoconservative. The neoconservative postmodern rejects modernism, reduces it to a style, and elides the pre- and postmodern in “a resurrection of lost traditions set against modernism, a master plan imposed on a heterogeneous present” (Foster xii). The nostalgia for tradition—rather than the critical examination of what tradition means—marks a neoconservative agenda that seeks to impose social control based on words like “morality” and “justice” and “quality.” Empty convention returns in force (anti-choice arguments, the idea of reverse discrimination, p.c. bashing).

To counteract this neoconservative construction of the post/anti-modern, the critic must articulate what comprises a resistant rather than a reactionary postmodernism. Foster provides an incisive sketch of this critical cultural practice:
A postmodernism of resistance, then, arises as a counter-practice not only to the official culture of modernism but also to the "false normativity" of a reactionary postmodernism. In opposition (but not only in opposition), a resistant postmodernism is concerned with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop- or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short, it seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations. (xii)

In a move sympathetic with multicultural concerns, resistant postmodernism seeks to problematize the bases—"morality" and "justice" and "quality"—upon which exclusivity rests. "Justice" within a suburban courtroom infused by a dominant social discourse might very well mean something quite different than it does on a street corner in South-Central Los Angeles infused with social discontent. Multicultural concerns and a resistant postmodernism seek to scrutinize the political and cultural affiliations terms like "justice" and "quality" enact.

The attention to detail and locality implicit to Foster’s concept of resistant postmodernism resonates with the demand for specificity and historical acuity voiced by multicultural critics. Wahneema Lubiano, for one, argues that the general celebration of the multicultural by postmodern critics serves to collapse a highly textured space. She argues against a blind affirmation of African American cultural products that ostensibly give voice to demands for justice and morality: "morality for whom, when, and under what circumstances? It seems to me more useful to think of African American postmodernism as a way to negotiate particular material circumstances in order to attempt some constructions of justice" (157). The discourse of African American (and may I add multicultural) postmodernism serves to work toward the construction of justice, not the proclamation of some originary source of justice.

Yet, while roughly outlining the shape of a resistant postmodernism, pointing toward issues of multiplicity and locality as possible sites of postmodern and multicultural confluence, I have avoided a singularly thorny issue: what do I mean by "multicultural"? Where the term "postmodern" has stimulated an academic critical industry, "multicultural" has not. What it has done, of
course, is create a pedagogical industry in which it seems every anthology or panel discussion strives to be multicultural. The voice of the Other in the academy is a big-ticket item.

The ideological category “diversity” collapses into notions of the multicultural and brings home—in these post-1960s, post-civil rights, postmodern times—in a new guise the dream of *e pluribus unum*. Reed Way Dasenbrock, for example, defines multicultural literature as “both works that are explicitly about multicultural societies and those that are implicitly multicultural in the sense of inscribing readers from other cultures inside their own textual dynamics” (10). The multicultural serves an educational purpose. It makes manifest the dream of a benign liberal plurality and draws diverse constituencies together through greater understanding. This blithe use of the term “multicultural” ultimately leads to an evacuation of any critical potential. Multicultural texts in Dasenbrock’s argument manifest little more than a “respect for difference.” The counterdiscursivity of multicultural texts—their refusal to engage in a dominant system of symbolic exchange—is reduced in Dasenbrock’s argument to a heuristic element, “teaching” readers about multicultural difference and making them “literate” in the multilingual “world” of the characters. All differences can be understood; all differences can be overcome.

The introduction to one of the many multicultural anthologies published in the last few years similarly typifies the pluralistic bent behind much academic use of the term “multicultural.” This particular collection, *Braided Lives*, emerges from a collaboration between the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English and the Minnesota Humanities Commission:

> Both organizations share a mission of promoting the study of literature as part of the humanities and of contributing to quality education for all Minnesotans. Both also agree that the multiplicity of American views, beliefs, and histories is a story that always must be heard. . . . We dreamed of a strikingly beautiful collection of stories and poems that would reveal the abundance and diversity of American writing. (Minnesota Council 9)

Here again, hollow diversity. Everyone is different, and let us celebrate that difference.
Within the body of the collection, however, something else occurs. The stories collected in *Braided Lives* are divided into four sections: Native American, Hispanic American, African American, and Asian American. The representative stories reprinted in the collection undercut the empty pluralism promised by the introduction. Each of these multicultural groups is marked racially, economically, and ethnically as contemporary “others” in the United States. Each presents devalued cultures that historically have been silenced or marginalized in the rush to develop and expand Euro-American capital interests.

The incorporation of historically silenced voices into this collection (which it must be said is an excellent anthology, obviously thoughtfully collected, full of fine literary texts) indicates that the power behind the term “multicultural” is not its reliance on simplistic notions of plurality and diversity. This forms a neoconservative position in which the multicultural can be appropriated as the logical extension of the Melting Pot. All Americans are different equally. Hence the clichéd move taken by a number of conservatives like Dinesh D'Souza and Lynne Cheney who bemoan the ostensible “fact” that the rush to political correctness limits personal freedoms and makes p.c. a new McCarthyism. Real “diversity,” they argue, means that everybody—from WASPs on down—should function on a level playing field. This vision of a colorless, classless, sexless world represents the type of ahistoricity and easy revisionary politics for which postmodernism—a reactionary postmodernism—is rightly attacked.

“Multicultural,” when used to designate devalued cultures, inserts a historical consciousness into discussions about cultural representation. It serves to reconnect the present to the past, but in a critical way that highlights absence and dispossession. These absences and disposessions are replicated in the institution of culture according to master narratives invoking “great traditions” and “universality.” In this respect, the multicultural engages with postmodernism in ways that challenge institutionalized notions of culture, knowledge, and tradition. Houston Baker has observed: “Fixity is a function of power. Those who maintain place, who decide what takes place and dictate what has taken place, are power brokers of the traditional. The ‘placeless,’ by contrast, are translators of the non-traditional… Their lineage is fluid, nomadic,
transitional” (202). Baker makes an exceedingly important observation. Simultaneously, we want to keep in mind that the “placeless” multicultural are “non-traditional” only from a central hegemonic perspective. Multiculturalism negotiates with other traditions; it employs and deploys discredited traditions as part of a strategy of survival and resistance. Multiculturalism does not simply involve the recuperation of “lost” traditions in order to prove the richness and diversity of “America,” as the framers of the introduction to Braided Lives suggest. Rather, multiculturalism interrogates which traditions are valorized and by whom, which are devalued and by whom, which serve to empower marginalized peoples, which serve even further to disempower, which traditions provide strength, how traditions provide agency, when traditions provide knowledge. Thus, when one engages with issues of cultural power and the politics of signification and scrutinizes the ideas of history and tradition, the constellations of multiculturalism and postmodernism inevitably intersect and overlap.

3. Traveling Jones

Historically, the two-way dispersal of information and knowledge in a post-WWII context marks the double emergence of multiculturalism and postmodernism. This double emergence became most apparent in the realm of the university. It was in the university of the 1960s where knowledge produced both by the colonized (nationalist agendas, civil rights reform, third world marxist praxis) and the colonizers (universal humanism, individualism, military-industrial technology) converged. Moreover, it was in the university that trenchant social and political demands—the Civil Rights Movement, postcolonial national liberations, internal nationalisms claimed by various racial and ethnic groups—found their most powerful voices and greatest legitimation in the United States. The university structures responded to student and faculty demands that discredited forms of “other” knowledge must be incorporated into educational institutions. Hence the establishment of “special” programs: women’s studies, Afro-American programs, Chicano studies, Native American studies, Asian American studies.

The same historical conditions that impelled universities to-
ward inclusion defined the larger cultural terrain—of which the university is but one manifestation—called the postmodern. Andreas Huyssen suggests that the postmodern forms a critically pluralistic cultural site:

It was especially the art, writing, film making and criticism of women and minority artists with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture. (27)

This fragmentation of the cultural scene beginning in the 1960s allowed Picasso's African masks to no longer stand as silent witnesses to the master's craft. They could now speak. One might argue that Huyssen too easily elides demographic diversity with genuine institutionalized cultural transformation. However, his argument is compelling. In the construction of postmodernism, the colonized, refusing silence gave voice to the knowledge and experience not only long absent from the halls of museums and universities but which, quite literally, built those halls. From this perspective, it is impossible to talk about either postmodernism or multiculturalism as if their rejection of institutional culture were entirely discrete events.

However, it is equally impossible to talk about either as if they were perfectly harmonious. Theorizing about multiculturalism leads inevitably to problems of domination and hermeticism. Multiculturalism tends to be forged outside the ivy walls of academe. Theory tends within those walls to turn in on itself. Edward Said is correct to note: "Left to its own specialists and acolytes, so to speak, theory tends to have walls erected around itself . . ." ("Traveling" 247). There is no getting around the fact that most critical theory is an elitist and exclusive project meant to address, as Said notes, the three thousand academic workers harvesting in ever smaller fields of intellectual engagement. This does not preclude the potential uses of theory, however:
To measure the distance between theory then and now, there and here, to record the encounter of theory with resistances to it, to move skeptically in the broader political world where such things as the humanities or the great classics ought to be seen as small provinces of the human venture, to map the territory covered by all the techniques of dissemination, communication, and interpretation, to preserve some modest (perhaps shrinking) belief in noncoercive human community: if these are not imperatives, they do at least seem to be attractive alternatives. And what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives? ("Traveling" 247)

Toward this end, theories of postmodernity and the multicultural provide powerful tools by which to explore the expanding limits of each other. Each project ultimately seeks to walk skeptically in the broader political world of contemporary American culture. The goal, then, in crossing postmodernism and multiculturalism is to employ theory as a generalizing practice, "to make us see' connections, homologies, similarities, and isomorphisms among disconnected and disparate realities. . . . In this sense, then, the capacity of theory to generalize and travel among constituencies can have a positive and progressive impact on the constituencies themselves, each of which is enabled to look beyond its immediate area or zone" (Radhakrishnan, "Culture" 17). Theory constructs bridges (problematic, "abstract," elite, "intellectual") across which cultural critics move as they articulate a critical vocabulary by which to understand the expanded field of "the Americas."

In this regard, I propose a migratory sensibility. What proves to be a metaphorical notion in the poststructural (a Deleuze-Guattarian "deteriorialization") can be used to trace the relationships between postmodernism (a cultural condition connected to, though not identifiable with, poststructuralism) and the multicultural (a cultural identity premised upon a history of voluntary or enforced migrations). Rather than allow the term "migration" to remain metaphorical, therefore, an astute critic would insist upon the fact of deteriorialization as a historically grounded, painful, and often coerced dislocation. This dislocation can enact another form of deteriorialization—the dissolution of ordering systems
valued by Deleuze and Guattari. These dislocations result from political and economic disruptions solicited and supported by the very centers of empire—Europe and the United States—in which the turmoil over multiculturalism erupts. The term “migration,” therefore, marks the nexus where economic, social, linguistic, political, theoretical, discursive fractures converge.

A migratory reading in order to move across this treacherous terrain of literal rupture suggests a strategy of continual negotiation. The landscape permits only tentative articulations. No firm foothold ensues. Lisa Lowe, in articulating the discursive field of Asian American identity, notes that Peter Wang’s film A Great Wall performs a filmic “migration” by “shuttling between the various cultural spaces; we are left, by the end of the movie, with a sense of culture as dynamic and open, the result of a continual process of visiting and revisiting a plurality of cultural sites” (39). The term “migration” here—while evoking a history of actual displacement and economic exploitation—again becomes a metaphor characterizing the movement between fixed cultural sites. The different cultural spaces among which Wang’s film moves seem—by Lowe’s description—to exist as static sites. The description does not highlight the interpenetrability of these different cultural sites, an interpenetrability that forms the openness and dynamism of culture. (Only the film and Lowe’s discussion of the film as cultural objects convey a sense of that dynamism.) Despite these minor limitations, Lowe’s use of “migration” does help articulate a cultural identity—in this case Chinese American—that moves in ways elsewhere called postmodern: “we might consider as a possible model for the ongoing construction of ethnic identity the migratory process suggested by Wang’s filming technique and emplotment: we might conceive of the making and practice of Asian American culture as nomadic, unsettled, taking place in the travel between cultural sites and in the multivocality of heterogeneous and conflicting positions” (39). This heterogeneity arises not merely from undifferentiated “difference.” The multivocality that marks a migratory process arises from conflicting systems of signification. These significations emerge from the crossing of contestatory discourses, contradictory positions. What can a Chicano do when the forms of knowledge passed along at home—folklore, legend, ballad, spirituality—are discredited from a socially dominant perspective? Yet
that dominant social perspective forms one which informs identity construction as well. One reaction is to deny the discredited knowledge—as Richard Rodriguez does in his much-publicized *Hunger of Memory*. Another reaction is to embrace all that is nondominant, a move that sometimes results in an unexamined nativism. The multicultural, as I propose it, resides in the tension between these two poles. The result is a multiplicity of identities, a perpetual movement among numerous subject positions. None forms a fully privileged realm.

4. Settlements

As I previously suggested, multiculturalism has been an academic player primarily in the already very tired game of curricular reform. I insert this topic not simply as an example of equine flagellation. Rather, debates over the curriculum are always about power. They revolve around the control of cultural reproduction: who is to be the gatekeeper of knowledge, who to determine what concerns characterize that national body? One element of resistance among the various decentered subjectivities of our postmodern and multicultural worlds centers on the re-examination of the idea of tradition. Unlike the impression left by the media and the hype surrounding curricular reform, it is not proponents of multiculturalism who clamor for the destruction of the canon. The perceived threat to academic rigor, the much publicized loss of “tradition” and “reason” wrongly and even purposely associated with multiculturalism, proves little more than a smoke screen. This screen covers an anxiety over a perceived loss of cultural control.

Multiculturalism cannot seek to negate “tradition” or “the canon” since it cannot deny—on the contrary, tries to foreground—preconstituted social contradictions. Rather than decry canonical literary forms—a move, one might note, associated with the now canonized historical avant-garde—multicultural artists often embrace and transform and intervene in the canon. In addition—as evidenced by the constant return to forms of folk knowledge, oral literature, legend, and myth as literary precursor and inspiration—multicultural artists bring to the cultural field other traditions and canons heretofore absent from institutional study.
All this is not to say multiculturalism does not question (the metaphor is often “explode”) the canon. It does so, however, only as it lives at the rupture—of histories, of cultures, of social and aesthetic practices—with which it cannot do away. Rather than bury, exile, or fire the canon, the multicultural critic seeks out the discontinuities made evident through its deployment within institutionalized academic spaces. Rather than deny the centrality of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton (or Eliot, Pound, Stein)—those great figures in the pantheon of “English” literature that burn brightest in the constellation of Anglo-American literary tradition—the multicultural critic scrutinizes their prominence. Why are they prominent? How does this preclude multicultural literature from gaining a foothold in the canon? What type of dialogue is being created between canonical and multicultural literatures?

Curricular controversy is just one site where issues of the postmodern and the multicultural clearly converge. Postmodern suspicion of master narratives and empty tradition provides the multicultural with ammunition as it seeks out the discontinuities—historical, aesthetic, linguistic, institutional—inherent in the controversy.

From the other side, the multicultural provides an insight into the critical potential of postmodernism. Postmodernism, several critics note, is plagued by its seeming inability to offer a position beyond the diffused and defused webs of social organization. In the slippery ground of the postmodern, no Archimedean point exists from which to construct an effective critical discourse. While multiculturalism does not offer a purely Other space, its compromised and interpenetrated position does allow for a historically inscribed space which is not like this one. The multicultural explores ways that enable forms of agency and identity within a decentered world. It points toward a resistant postmodernism already at hand.

The dissolution of self from Self marked within the postmodern as the “death of the subject” stands within the multicultural as a (always-already present) form of alienation. The decentralized subject finds its perfect and painful analogue in the decentered migrant displaced by economic and/or political violence. Alienation is not a condition unique to multicultural subjects, as the Chicano critic and poet Rafael Jesús González observes: “The question
of identity, the desire for integration of the self, the preoccupation with recovering a sense of ontological potency is a theme that runs through all 20th century [modernist] Western poetry” (130). The Chicano as multicultural member of contemporary society stands at the alienating but familiar rupture between industrialization and human value. The Chicano as an example of the multicultural stands in this alienated landscape with a difference: “What is interesting about Chicano poetry is not its preoccupation with alienation as such, but that it is so conscious of it, that it so clearly links alienation with cultural dislocation” (130). The migratory experience— the negotiated journey of agency, the quest for justice, the reconfiguration of community and family— reveals strategies for empowerment with which the rest of the postmodern socius might do well to catch up. The troubled histories of economic displacement and political persecution that haunt the migrations of Mexicans and others to this country provide a glimpse into strategies of survival in which decentered subjectivity is not replaced with a simplistic paradigm of origin or tradition. Rather, a highly dynamic and fluid form of social organization, cultural affirmation, and personal identification emerges.5

Those critics interested in multicultural issues who dismiss postmodernism as a “white problem” err in one of two ways. By refusing to theorize multicultural issues within the postmodern space of the university, they deny their own assigned position in the institution— their “unavoidable starting point” as Gayatri Spivak articulates in “Theory in the Margin.” Thus they wield power blindly. Or, conversely, they posit their position as beyond the institution— banishing themselves to a margin that “as such is wholly other”— and so deny academic power altogether.

Either position prevents them from capitalizing on Lyotard’s observation: “To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it” (xxiv). The conditions of postmodernity and the exigencies of the multicultural can function symbiotically if the concerns of those historically configured as other, alien, marginal are inserted into this ruptured cultural space. The power of this relationship is readily evident in the unease demonstrated by the Hilton Kramers, the Allan Blooms, the Roger Kimballs of academia. It is no
wonder they feel under siege. Needless to say, these defenders of
culture seem to invest their energies so fully in keeping the hordes
at bay that they (willfully?) forget some important truths. Their
treasured "culture" has only ascended its privileged throne thanks
to a very dirty history of armed confrontation, warfare, economic
imperialism, and colonial exploitation. Their defense rests on the
separation of the best that is thought and known from the rest of
the dirty world. This rationale masks what Walter Benjamin's the-
eses on history reveal so brilliantly: "There is no document of civili-
ization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism"
(256). The canon debate comes down to this: who serves a political
master more—those who assert Benjamin's observation or those
who deny it?

The multicultural within the institutional space of the acad-
emy seeks to reveal the barbarity implicit in the cultural documents
encased and replicated by the university. More importantly, schol-
ars working within multicultural fields help to reveal not just the
discontinuities present in the institutional creation and preserva-
tion of culture. They present configurations of power and knowl-
dge based in marginal communities and histories. They explore
realms of justice and morality constructed locally, specifically, often
in opposition to master narratives. They work within the larger
cultural movement that rejects master narratives of Western Cul-
ture in order to give voice to (among others) the illegitimate
knowledges of the multicultural. Here the trajectories of postmod-
ernism and multiculturalism most clearly converge.

5. Dispersal

Yet no sooner do they meet than they again seem to diverge.
For the postmodern dissolution of the subject—a fact viewed as
either inevitable (à la Jameson) or desirable (à la Baudrillard)—
runs counter to the desires expressed by the multicultural. In the
margin, subjectivity is a condition still staunchly to be sought.6
Postmodernism, if it is understood as a poststructural position, fails
to allow for the construction of self-identity. In his discussion of the
postmodern condition, Lyotard claims, for example: "The narra-
tive function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers,
its great voyages, its great goal" (xxiv). He slides from the dismissal of *grands récits* (a useful move for advocating the multicultural) to a questioning of agency *in toto* (a move not so useful). His conflation of postmodernism and poststructuralism marks the weakness of his definition. As Radhakrishnan underscores:

> post-structuralist thought perpetuates itself on the guarantee that no "break" (Althusser) is possible with the past even though its initial intentional trajectory was precisely to make visible this very "break," valorize it *qua* "break," and proceed towards a different and differential creation. Post-structuralist intentionality thus desiccates itself, allegorizes this desiccation, and offers this allegorically perennial revolution as the most appropriate defense against the reproduction of such categories and structures as Self, Subject, Identity, etc. ("Feminist" 190)

Radhakrishnan’s critique of poststructuralism underscores Huys- sen’s observation that “French theory provides us primarily with an archeology of modernity, a theory of modernism at the stage of its exhaustion” (40). The endless subversion of metanarratives within certain forms of poststructuralism has led—as critics from Seyla Ben-Habib to Christopher Norris have noted—to an endless playfulness, a polysemic perversity in which agency and empowerment can only be judged by their performative power. Lyotard’s devaluation of all narrative functions *en masse*—his refusal of a break that would allow for a privileged social/political/cultural creation—represents an allegorization of his refusal of grand narratives. Multicultural texts are the products of a discontinuous history marked by an asymmetrical relationship to power. Exploited and dispossessed, the multicultural within history reveals the breaks—the contradictions, the limitations, the barbarity—of master narratives, and this in order to “proceed towards a different and differential creation.”

Lyotard’s work exemplifies the most pernicious poststructuralist traits—ahistoricity and decontextualization. On the one hand, the grand narratives he is so quick to dismiss still stimulate the cultural, social, political systems which define and regulate our lives at almost every level. On the other, these master narratives do not represent all narratives. Micronarratives, migratory readings,
articulations of the local perpetually divide and reproduce themselves. These narratives must, if postmodernism is to save itself, be given privilege. While "justice" and "liberation" may be terms linked to metanarratives, the construction of these terms within particular localities and among people who have not received justice or achieved liberation is a process that will continue.

The narratives that seek to enact justice proceed, fully aware of, but not hamstrung by, the knowledge that the Enlightenment project may at times manifest itself in cancerous eruptions of blind inhumanity, violent upheaval, and spiritual desecration. Nations and cultures still struggle for freedom from colonial and neocolonial denigration and exploitation; the disempowered still try to articulate an affirmative identity of the self and of agency; the dispossessed still hope for a more equitable distribution of food and funds.

Postmodernism—in order to be resistant, critical, and finally compatible with multicultural issues—cannot dismiss notions of narration, subjectivity, agency. These subjects must be subject to scrutiny, contextualization, and reconceptualization within a postmodern multicultural space. The problem for the postmodern critic, as Huyssen argues, is "to redefine the possibilities of critique in postmodern terms rather than relegating them to oblivion" (9). However, what we understand the Self to be cannot be dismissed as a nostalgic ideological construction employed to perpetuate capitalism.

One critical trajectory Huyssen traces, intersecting both postmodern and multicultural terrains, follows the construction of subjectivity, especially in terms of cultural formation. The self-assertion of minority cultures and their emergence into public consciousness, for example, have helped collapse the strict modernist separation of high and low culture: "such rigorous segregation simply does not make much sense within a given minority culture which has always existed outside in the shadow of the dominant culture" (23). In the 1960s, "minorities" and "marginals" finally entered into the consciousness of the university and other cultural institutions. The repercussions of this entrance are still with us.

We see, for instance, the emergence of nationalisms among both the inner and outer colonized—minority groups in the
United States and nationalist movement groups throughout the world—in the postmodern 1960s. We see the formation of academic fields created within and against academic and other institutions in the 1970s. We see an increase in the numbers of professionals and intellectuals of color in the 1980s. None of these phenomena is without its contradictions, dislocations, and ruptures: genealogies which are as conflicted and potentially violent as any other. We can agree with Huyssen, however, that “to reject the validity of the question Who is writing? or Who is speaking? is simply no longer a radical position in 1984 [let alone now]. It merely duplicates on the level of aesthetics and theory what capitalism as a system of exchange relations produces tendentially in everyday life: the denial of subjectivity in the very process of its construction” (44).

To reposition subjectivity within theoretical discourses—especially those focusing on the postmodern—remains an obviously complex matter. At one extreme, we find a Jamesonian postmodernity populated by subjects in a corporate, collectivized, postindividualistic age. This conceptualization leaves slight room for those constituencies which, like multicultural groups, have historically led collectivized (and marginalized) lives. At another extreme stands the poststructural position that subjectivity represents a constructed, ideologically infused text. This offers little to the historically disempowered who posit a sense of agency as an empowering rather than a repressive act. When performed by those (inner and outer) colonized or postcolonized groups who have been denied individuality, representation, subjectivity, and agency, the reclamation of a self proves a resistant act. The emancipatory potential of that perpetual demystification machine—poststructuralism—as well as liberal humanism’s empowering notion of individuality and agency, changes when applied to those who have suffered the greatest violence spawned by the expansionist policies of European Enlightenment.

6. Locality

One area in which issues of agency and empowerment play themselves out resides in the field of politics. Given the decentral-
ization and fragmentation of the postmodern condition, how can political agency prove effective? On what principles does a political movement base itself? Having given up on master narratives like revolution, liberation, Marxism, how can political action occur?

Jameson argues that the type of local politics available within the postmodern precludes any real political engagement. From Jameson's Marxist position, politics can work only when coordinating local and global struggles for a transfiguration of the here-and-now. The purely local cannot successfully challenge that which forms the global dimension—economics. By focusing on the micropolitics of the local—the politics of postmodernity—we are left with a politics marked by a willed euphoria of some metaphysical permanent revolution. This euphoria, from Jameson's view, is a compensation formation for our times when genuine or "totalizing" politics are no longer possible.

Jameson does offer some slight consolation. It will be "politically productive" and "a modest form of genuine politics" to attend to such things as the waning of a visible global dimension, the ideological resistance to the concept of totality, the shearing away of such apparent abstractions as the economic system and social totality (Postmodernism 330).

This sort of "secondary" or "minority" politics may indeed prove to be the political legacy of postmodernism, but not exactly as Jameson envisions it. The challenge posed by the postmodern is to employ the legitimate concerns of the local in reshaping the global without reproducing forms of discursive violence. How to move from local concern to global change without, for instance, reinscribing the marginal? Boaventura de Sousa Santos observes that postmodern knowledge "favors the near to the detriment of the real. To be pragmatic is to approach reality from [William] James's 'last things,' that is, from consequences, and the shorter the distance between acts and consequences, the greater the accuracy of the judgment on validity" (100). In other words, the total can be at hand. The ethics of a self practiced in solidarity with others lends a legitimacy to immediate political struggle and action. In this sense (among others) postmodern knowledge can be understood as "local." Modernist foundationalist epistemologies, to borrow Rorty's term, cease to function.

Postmodern knowledge—local, proximate—while not totaliz-
ing, is, Santos argues, total: “The localism involved is the localism of context, not the localism of static spaces and immemorial traditions. It is an internationalist localism, without a solid genius loci . . .” (100). Postmodern knowledge works at the interstices of paradigms, negotiates through (historical, cultural, economic) contexts. The specificity of the local does not preclude connections to larger systems of social organization. The local and its politics need not remain superficially “local.” Not a politics of populism, politics of the local represents a politics of rhizomic resistance.

Thus Wahneema Lubiano scrutinizes David Harvey’s invocation of the 1960s “revolutionary” slogan—“Think globally. Act locally.” This scrutiny emerges from the concern over what precisely a politics of rhizomic resistance may signify. A multicultural postmodern political practice of the local, Lubiano finally admonishes, “in cultural resistance terms, might require some lack of sureness, confidence, some awareness of what Spivak [in *The Post-Colonial Critic*] calls ‘vulnerability’ (18), or, to paraphrase Foster [in *The Anti-Aesthetic*] a willingness to recognize that a representation may ‘mean’ differently in place, in moment, and in particular minds” (159). A multicultural postmodernism foregrounds the localism of context, the specificity of devalued knowledges and histories repressed by the hegemonic “political unconscious,” and the potential for the local to achieve some significant and lasting social change.

From Jameson’s view, however, there is no escaping the need for a global (class-bound) vision of politics. To describe the longing for class politics of some older type as simply some “nostalgia,” he notes, “is about as adequate as to characterize the body’s hunger, before dinner, as a ‘nostalgia for food’” (*Postmodernism* 331). We might admire the metaphor but remain suspicious of its point.

Jameson incessantly privileges class over race as a site upon which to contest discourses of oppression. In “Periodizing the 60s,” he argues that the merger of the AFL and CIO in 1955 formed a fundamental “condition of possibility” for the unleashing of the new social and political dynamics of the 60s by forcing the demands made by blacks, women and other minorities out of the classical institutions of an older working-class politics. Thus “liberated” from social class and released to find new
modes of social and political expression, their concerns could only focus on the local rather than global. (181)

Kicked out of the global political arena, the marginal are left to squabble among local issues that preclude any genuine systemic transformation.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos allows us a somewhat different view of this historical development. He argues that “the relative weakening of class practices and of class politics has been compensated for by the emergence of new agonistic spaces that propose new social postmaterialist and political agendas (peace, ecology, sexual and racial equality) to be acted out by new insurgent groups and social movements” (97). He goes on to note that the discovery that capitalism produces classes, and “that classes are the organizing matrix of social transformation” was a nineteenth-century discovery: “The twentieth century enters the historical scene only when it discovers that capitalism also produces racial and sexual differences and that these can also be nodal points for social struggles” (97). The multicultural provides critical insight into the processes by which racial and ethnic others can form and have formed “nodal points for social struggle.” Santos’s position offers a vision of politics beyond class, one which moves away from a showdown between a powerful master discourse (Marxism) and a contradictory or negating discourse (radical locality). Politics of locality do not seek to overthrow a Marxist revolutionary project with another master narrative. Rather, the narrative of locality functions to supplement other narratives, other political configurations.

7. Migration

Multiculturalism can form a discourse which, as it critiques violence, precludes the violence of replication. To be an effective discourse, it cannot propose the substitution of one master discourse for another. Homi Bhabha, therefore, argues for a supplementary minority position. Bhabha seeks to articulate agency and empowerment for the marginal couched not in terms of overthrowing (and so replicating) or capturing (and therefore em-
ploying) the powers of the state: “Insinuating itself into the terms of reference of the dominant discourse, the supplementary antagonizes the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity” (306). The multicultural critic must be aware of avoiding the processes that replicate, reflect, reproduce the tyranny of globalizing discourses even as they are combated.

Hence the significance of negotiation as a technique associated with the migratory. The point becomes not to deny the potentiality of postmodern thought for multicultural issues, nor to erase one’s position as a compromised critic of dominant culture, nor to negate multiculturalism’s ability to speak to and with and through postmodernism. Rather—caught between the rock of practice and the hard place of theory—one might want to attempt a series of negotiations that wed a contractual sense of power and a navigational sense of journey. A migratory reading wends between the Scylla of the local and the Charybdis of the total, between the devil that historical and cultural specificity can be and the deep murky seas of essentialization and homogeneity. This rough passage, Linda Hutcheon suggests, is “inside yet outside, inscribing yet contesting, complicitous yet critical” (158). A complicitous critique, the migratory represents a model by which difficult cultural and political terrain can be successfully traversed. More to the point, the migratory also evokes within its discursive strategies the same process of negotiation undertaken by migrant groups caught between poverty and repression in their homelands and cultural dislocation and oppressive marginalization in the centers of power to which they flee.

A practice already implicit in the multicultural condition becomes the necessary element for deploying multicultural issues within a postmodern cultural space: continuous critical negotiation, an endless engagement with contradictory positions. These engagements seek neither to refute nor overthrow particular historically inscribed concepts. Instead, they attempt “to engage with the ‘anterior’ space of the sign that structures the symbolic language of alternative, antagonistic cultural practices” (Bhabha 313). This engagement takes the form of a type of genealogy, the tracing of the discontinuous region of multicultural subjectivity, the retelling of stories otherwise forgotten. To form a resistant practice across the fields of the multicultural and the postmodern involves
a process that discovers or recovers the discredited histories of
groups circumscribed by regimes of repressive discursive practices.

This proposal does not posit a clear field of cultural play. It is
more like a heavily guarded borderland, a potential threat at every
step. There stands at one point the poststructuralist valuing of dif-
ference as a dissociated and ahistorical quality bearing no rele-
vance to the actual histories of those constructed as racially or sex-
ually different. At another point, there stands the suspicion of
postmodernity as a new, subsuming, and repressive master narra-
tive sacrificing historical and cultural specificity for a project of
elite self-interest. Again at another position, one finds those who
would privilege class at every turn over race as a compelling cata-
lyst for social and political change. Compound these issues with
the postcolonial valuation of such modern notions as “nation” and
“agency”; add a fear of the homogenization of difference; join this
to the problematic dismissal of narrative as a compelling and pow-
erful force. We are left with a terrain scarred by discursive and
political rupture.

Yet this should not deter us from explaining and exploiting
the potentialities inherent in a crossing of sympathetic—though
not synonymous—intellectual projects. Theories of the postmod-
ern form an academic discourse by which to interject multicultural
issues into the boardrooms and backrooms (let alone classrooms)
of institutionalized educational systems. George Yúdice, in his essay
“Marginality and the Ethics of Survival,” persuasively concludes
that intellectuals “need not speak for others, but we are responsible
for a ‘self-forming activity’ that can in no way be ethical if we do not
act against the ‘disappearance’ of oppressed subjects” (230). Though academics cannot always speak to economically, racially,
politically oppressed peoples at home and abroad, we can speak
about and against their dangerous and denigrated positions. An en-
gagement of the multicultural with the postmodern acts, finally, as a
self-conscious and self-critical move against disappearance.

Notes

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ings and helpful suggestions.
1. Suleiman refers to the crossing of feminism with postmodernism in this quote. She herself notes that the same argument can be made “for the alliance between postmodernism and the Third World minorities or Afro-American writers, male and female” (127).

2. Foster’s introduction to The Anti-Aesthetic argues for a critical postmodernism that stands in contradistinction to a neoconservative antimodernism. Habermas in his well-known “Modernity—An Incomplete Project” like Foster argues that postmodernism represents a neoconservative reaction against modernism, but implies that any critical postmodernism is really another turn in the modernist project. Huyssen in “Mapping the Postmodern” seeks to articulate those modalities where postmodernism finds its most powerful critical focus—among green, women, and minority movements.

3. “The 60s was, then, the period in which all these ‘natives’ [minorities, women, etc.] became human beings, and this internally as well as externally: those inner colonized of the first world—‘minorities,’ marginals, and women—fully as much as its external subjects and official ‘natives.’ All these ‘natives’ of gender, race, etc.—new social and political categories—are related to a crisis in the more universal category of social class, the institutions through which a real class politics expressed itself” (Jameson, “Periodizing” 181). As a descriptive statement, Jameson is correct. However, later in this essay I will critique his all too easy conflation of race and class politics.

4. In “Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community,” Said suggests that academic publishers function upon the same market principles as publishers of cookbooks, exercise manuals, and others in “a very long series of unnecessary books” (3). He goes on to argue for interference across academic and other disciplines as a means of intervening in the safe reproduction of specialized knowledge. I would argue that this is an articulation of a resistant postmodern and multicultural strategy.

5. For a fascinating discussion of an example of this dynamic process of identity construction, see Roger Rouse’s “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism.” His article studies the migration patterns of residents from Aguililla, Mexico, who take up simultaneous residence in Redwood City, California: “the resulting contradictions have not come simply from persistence of past forms amid contemporary adjustments or from involvement in distinct lifeworlds within the United States. Rather, they reflect the fact that Aguilillans see their current lives and future possibilities as involving simultaneous engagements in places associated with markedly different forms of experience” (14).

6. Here Elizabeth Fox-Genovese’s much cited observation proves apt: “From the perspective of those previously excluded from the cultural elite, the death of the subject or the death of the author seems somewhat premature. Surely it is no coincidence that the Western white male elite proclaimed the death of the subject at precisely the moment at which it might have had to share that status with women and peoples of other races and classes who were beginning to challenge its supremacy” (134).

Works Cited

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