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Two Varieties of Cultural Essentialism in Multicultural Education

Cultural essentialism turns on the belief that members of a given group possess core characteristics that are both foundational to their identity and largely unalterable. This paper will explore the two most prominent varieties of cultural essentialism found in the multicultural education literature today and examine their implications for instituting a multiculturalist agenda in the United States. The first form, called here primordialist-essentialism (PE), links members of a cultural group to an ancestral origin, insisting on cultural transference and purity. The second variation, labeled situationalist-essentialism (SE), is less tied to notions of a mythical origin but still maintains that one's cultural core, solidified at an early age, determines how one interacts with the world and is of both fundamental and life-long significance.¹ Rather than challenge the philosophical underpinnings of essentialist arguments, this paper provides an immanent critique of both varieties of essentialism as they apply to the education of minority students and the multiculturalist agenda that is pluralistic, democratic and committed to social justice.

¹ Other interpretations of culture, most notably of a constructivist-instrumentalist nature, have also influenced multicultural education. This paper represents one piece of a larger research project in which I explore different conceptions of culture in the field and provide an alternative interpretation of culture based on philosophical hermeneutic insights.

Historical Precedents

Throughout much of the history of the United States, the justification for the exclusion, mistreatment, or even wholesale destruction of different cultural groups has often reflected essentialist logic couched in the philosophical, religious, and/or scientific languages of each period and place.² Early forms of discrimination in colonial British America were based on the belief among white settlers in the superiority of the Protestant faith and Anglo-Saxon culture. By the mid-19th century, the rise of scientific racialism, the expulsion of native Indians from their lands and the hardening of lines with respect to slavery all contributed to the view that natural and rigid divisions exist between the races. It is no small irony that theories laden with racialist-essentialist logic were often employed as a foil to religious dogma and superstition. In order to wrest science from the grip of Christianity, phrenologists, evolutionists, anthropologists, eugenicists and psychometricians sought to provide a firmer basis for the categorization of human beings according to various theories of racial or geographic determinism. Polygenesis theories, of which Thomas Jefferson was an early advocate, attained some popularity in the mid-1800s when prominent scientists such as Louis Agassiz and Samuel Morton challenged the authority of the Bible by positing that the various races did not come from one source but from multiple origins and thereby represent different species of human beings. Detailed charts of men and skull sizes, personality types and intelligence scores, psychological and criminal statistics, all contributed to the prevailing tendency in American society to sort peoples into essentialist taxonomies ranked according to their conformity with an Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal.

² For a detailed analysis of the nature of racism and discrimination in the 19th and 20th centuries, see: Adams, D. W. (1995). *Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875–1928*. Kansas City: University Press of Kansas; Ewen, E. (2006). *Typecasting: On the Arts & Sciences of Human Inequality*. New York: Seven Stories Press; Haller, J. S. (1970). The Species Problem: Nineteenth-Century Concepts of Racial Inferiority in the Origin of Man Controversy. *American Anthropologist*, 72(6), 1319–1329; Horsman, R. (1975). Scientific Racism and the American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century. *American Quarterly*, 27(2), 152–168; McLoughlin, W. G. W. H. C., Jr. (1989). “The First Man was Red” Cherokee Responses to the Debate Over Indian Origins 1760–1860. *American Quarterly*, 41(2), 243–264.

While scientific trends of the 19th century and early 20th century strengthened racial typecasting, religious justifications for the separation of the races also reinforced essentialist categories. Though often at odds, scientific and religious forms of essentialism espousing racial segregation functioned side by side in American academia and popular culture. In the 1965 *Lovings v. Commonwealth* case the presiding judge was certainly not alone in believing that Virginia's anti-miscegenation laws should be preserved on religious grounds. He argued:

[The] Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.³

Essentialism was also utilized to justify the exclusion of white minority groups. Turn of the century opponents of South and East European immigration such as Prescott Hall relied on a number of essentialist and pseudo-essentialist theories to exclude non-Teutonic peoples from American society. According to Hall, education would fail to assimilate poor Catholic and Jewish immigrants not only because schools influence only a small fraction of the lives of these children but also because eugenics had shown that heredity was a much stronger factor than environment. Citing Agassiz, Humboldt and Darwin, Hall argued that miscegenation of the races would dilute the American race stock and weaken the moral, intellectual and physical fabric of America.⁴

At the turn of the century, a progressive counter-movement opposed to exclusion and its race-based essentialism gained in popularity. A number of philanthropists and scholars argued *contra* Hall that environment has a significant impact on the formation of culture and thus minorities could be integrated into the great Melting Pot of American democracy. The impact of this countervailing sentiment led, with devastating results, to the boarding school movement for Native American children and, more successfully, to Americanization programs developed for immigrants during the interwar period. Assimilation through

³ Pascoe, P. (1996). Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of "Race" in Twentieth Century America. *The Journal of American History*, 83(1).

⁴ Hall, P. F. (1921). Immigration and the World War. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 93, 192.

education did not however mean that minority groups were to receive the quality education enjoyed by elite circles. With few exceptions, early champions of assimilation advocated for them a vocational education that served the economic desiderata of the nation.

Since the Civil Rights movement and the racial desegregation of schools in the United States, the dominant trend in American educational policy has reflected an integrationist agenda that seeks not only to ensure minorities full participation of American public life but also to create a united, colorblind society based on what many critics argue are middle-class Eurocentric values. Given our essentialist heritage, it is not surprising that in recent times essentialism has been employed to defend the cultural integrity of minority groups threatened by this Melting Pot ideal. While separatist defensive strategies are by no means new, the rise to prominence of identity politics along with a renewed attack from many quarters against all forms of Eurocentrism has encouraged some educational scholars to employ essentialist theories of culture to justify the separate treatment of oppressed cultural groups.

Yet it would be a mistake to equate our past essentialisms with the cultural essentialism of today. While essentialist logic provided white leaders with the means for justifying their dominance over members of racial minority groups, essentialist-minded multiculturalists today promote a “cultural pluralism without hierarchy,”⁵ rejecting an educational system bent on wholesale assimilation for one that is more culturally congruent with the experiences and values of minority students. Radical members of this group insist that differences between cultures are so great that separate ethnic-centered schools or classrooms are necessary. Others, basing their arguments on a weaker form of essentialism, encourage the intermingling of cultures in a multicultural classroom where due respect is afforded to the cultural backgrounds of all students. The goals of these moderate essentialists are in some respects more ambitious. Not only do they intend to protect the cultural integrity of minority students, but they also hope to institute a progressive agenda that challenges all forms of discrimination and encourages cross-cultural understanding and cooperation. Let us begin our investigation of these two varieties with the radical essentialism of Afrocentrism.

⁵ Asante, M. (1991). Multiculturalism: An Exchange. *American Scholar*, 60(2).

Primordialist Essentialism: The Case of Molefi Kete Asante

Afrocentrism is a socio-political movement that has gained notable attention in the United States since its emergence in the late 1980s. One of the aims of this movement is to provide African-Americans with an Afrocentric education that grounds African-American students in their own cultural values and traditions. Citing the deep and continual presence of racism, the lack of attention to people of color in the curriculum, and a general ignorance of African American culture among white teachers, Afrocentrists believe that the current public school system de-centers African-Americans causing irreparable psychological and cultural harm. Underlying their arguments is a “primordialist-essentialist” (PE) interpretation of culture with three components – a myth of origin, the delineation of core characteristics usually drawn in opposition to those of another group, and a communitarian inspired insistence on group-purity. This interpretation is provided clearly in the work of the leading proponent of Afrocentrism, Molefi Kete Asante.

Myth of Origin

The belief that the cultural core uniting members of a particular ethnic group stretches back to a distant, yet identifiable, age of cultural purity and greatness is perhaps the most distinctive component of PE. Asante’s conception of cultural identity is rooted in the claim that the “core of [one’s] collective being,” or what he calls elsewhere a person’s “center,” can be traced to one’s continent of origin.⁶ African-Americans are aligned with their center to the degree that they connect with their African lineage stretching back to the distant civilizations of ancient Egypt and Nubia.⁷ Not only do African Americans and Africans possess common historical experience, they share a spiritual connection to their ethnic origins as well. Though this connection has yet to be fully acknowledged within the African American community, Asante argues that spiritual continuity exists nevertheless.⁸

It is unclear whether the ontological line linking African-Americans to their African past is racially-biologically derived. Asante is quick to

⁶ Asante, M. (1992). *Afrocentricity* (2nd ed.). New Jersey: African World Press.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 65, 70.

dismiss race as a social construction and has argued that since Afrocentricity is not “based on biological determinism,” anyone can acquire an Afrocentric perspective.⁹ “The Afrocentric idea,” he writes, “is beyond decolonizing the mind. Blackness is more than a biological fact; indeed, it is more than color; it functions as a commitment to a historical project that places the African person back on center and, as such, it becomes an escape to sanity.”¹⁰ At the same time, by drawing cultural borders according to the continent of ancestral origin and by insisting with Martin Bernal and others¹¹ that the ancient Egyptians were all black-skinned, Asante’s essentialism does not fully escape the biological-racial matrix that has almost always been part and parcel of essentialism in America.

It is indicative of his position that he approvingly refers to the work of Michael Bradley who espouses a geographical determinism that turns on its head the racist theories employed by slavery apologists of the 19th century. Bradley’s polygenesis theory not only revisits the claim that Africans and Europeans are at root different species of men, but it also underscores an essentialist ideology that hinges on such differences. According to Bradley’s thesis, which is only a “tenuous [and] barely defensible” attempt to explain the origin of Europeans’ unparalleled aggression, the harsh European climate and higher degrees of sexual dimorphism between men and women created a type of human who draws borders (sexually, racially, and temporally) and shows aggression towards outsiders.¹² Asante does not appear to go this far, but he does emphasize the incommensurable gap between Afrocentric and Eurocentric worldviews.

Formation of Group Character

The delineation of cultural borders, usually in juxtaposition with a cultural foil, is a necessary component of PE. Asante’s characterization of Afrocentricity reflects this tendency. Although he describes

⁹ Asante, M. (1990). *Kemet, Afrocentricity and Knowledge*. Trenton: African World Press.

¹⁰ Asante, M. K. (1987). *The Afrocentric idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

¹¹ Bernal, M. (1987). *Black Athena: the Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press; Diop, C. A. (1974). *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1st ed.). New York: L. Hill.

¹² Bradley, M. (1991). *The Iceman Inheritance: Prehistoric Sources of Western Man’s Racism, Sexism and Aggression*. New York: Kayode Publications LTD.

some African attributes without reference to a European other, the core of Afrocentricity depends on the following binary oppositions between Afrocentric and Eurocentric mindsets.¹³

<i>Eurocentricity</i>	<i>Afrocentricity</i>
Separates Art & Morality	Harmonizes Art & Morality
Individualist	Collectivist
Ethnocentric	Pluralistic
Materialistic	Personalistic
Linear thinking	Circular thinking
Disconnects from Past	Cultivates link to past
Bias of categorization	<i>Sudic</i> ideal of harmony

The incommensurability of the two cultures runs so deep, argues Asante, that Eurocentric modes of analysis, e.g. phenomenology and structuralism, cannot grasp the true essence of Afrocentricity.

The incommensurability of the two cultures has serious implications for education. Jerome Schiele has argued that since Afrocentricity is ontologically, cosmologically, epistemologically and axiologically oppositional to Eurocentrism, reforming the educational system to reflect an Afrocentric position would require replacing *in toto* the current Eurocentric framework with one that cultivates a holistic, collectivist, subjectivist, and spiritual Afrocentric worldview.¹⁴ Though Schiele is confident that the main features of Afrocentricity can be effectively integrated into higher education, it is unclear given the diametrically opposed paradigms how such reforms might be applied successfully to our multi-ethnic schools.

Cultural Purity

A drive for cultural purity based on a communitarian conflation of the individual's good with that of his or her ascribed cultural group underlies the PE outlook. The insistence on cultural purity in a society of multiple cultures gives new meaning to "cultural pluralism," as mem-

¹³ Asante, *Afrocentricity*.

¹⁴ Schiele, J. (1994). Afrocentricity: Implications for Higher Education. *Journal of Black Studies*, 25(2), 160.

bers of different cultural worlds exist side by side without deep cultural interpenetration and overlap.

That Asante privileges cultural purity over hybridity is clear from his statements on the nature of Afrocentricity. “The Afrocentrist,” he writes “studies every thought, action, behavior and value, and if it cannot be found in our culture or in our history, it is dispensed with quickly.”¹⁵ The “minimum requirement for mental resurrection” of the African American community is that the “black madonnas” in black Christian churches give way to new symbols arising out of the lives of Isis, Yaa Asantewaa, and Nzingha.”¹⁶ In response to Anthony Appiah’s critique of Afrocentrism, Asante writes, “one must choose to speak from one place, as one can only speak from one place at a time. Appiah chooses, in his article attacking Afrocentricity, to speak and write as if he is white.”¹⁷ That Appiah (who is of both English and Ghanaian ancestry) must choose to speak from one place embodied within one cultural framework is indicative of Asante’s cultural Puritanism. An identity forged out of multiple cultural sources can only lead to the psychological dislocation of the individual.

Asante’s image of multicultural society as an archipelago of isolated cultures is showcased in his educational tract, “The Afrocentric Idea in Education.” His “centric” vision of multicultural education based on the PE notion of culture is laid out in a series of claims:

- *The aim of education is to initiate the student into a cultural group.*
“Education is fundamentally a social phenomenon whose ultimate purpose is to socialize the learner; to send a child to school is to prepare that child to become part of a social group.”
- *Educators should practice a “centric” pedagogy.*
“[C]entricity refers to the perspective that involves locating students within the context of their own cultural references so that they can relate socially and psychologically to other cultural perspectives.”

¹⁵ Asante, *Afrocentricity*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁷ Asante, M. (1999). *The Painful Demise of Eurocentrism: An Afrocentric Response to Critics*. New Jersey: Africa World Press, 78.

- *Since African-Americans belong within the confines of African culture and traditions, they must be educated from the framework of Afrocentricity.*
“Afrocentricity is a frame of reference wherein phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person...In education this means that teachers provide students the opportunity to study the world and its people, concepts, and history from an African world view.”
- *An integrationist education is most often a masked Eurocentric education.*
“A truly authentic multicultural education, therefore, must be based upon the Afrocentric initiative. If this step is skipped, multicultural curricula, as they are increasingly being defined by White “resisters”...will evolve without any substantive infusion of African American content, and the African American child will continue to be lost in the Eurocentric framework of education.”¹⁸

Despite Asante’s emphasis on cultural centeredness, he claims to avoid ethnocentrism by insisting that no cultural perspective is superior to any other and that all people profit from acquiring different cultural perspectives. “Education,” writes Asante, “ought to be a bridge between separate cultural islands through the sharing of ideas and values.”¹⁹ Yet Asante’s form of cultural pluralism promotes only a detached respect for different cultures without the risk of deep personal investment.²⁰ One is an inhabitant of a specific cultural island and merely a tourist in others. The transformative potential of cross-cultural contact is thus effectively blocked; societies should be multicultural, individuals clearly should not. But not all essentialist-minded multiculturalists reach such extreme segregationist conclusions.

Situationalist-Essentialism: The Case of Geneva Gay

Geneva Gay is one of the most prominent multicultural education scholars in the United States. Her textbook, *Culturally Responsive Teaching*, is widely used in teacher education programs throughout the country as an exemplar of the multiculturalist approach. In line with the gen-

¹⁸ Asante, M. (1991). The Afrocentric Idea in Education. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 60(2), 171–172.

¹⁹ Asante, M. (2003). *Erasing Racism*. New York: Prometheus Books, 250.

²⁰ Gutman, A. (1987). *Democratic Education*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

eral progressivism of multicultural education, Gay's educational work is designed to challenge all forms of discrimination and replace the Eurocentric hegemony of our schools with a pluralist ideology that embraces cultural diversity as a "persistent, vitalizing force in our personal and civic lives."²¹ For those multiculturalists who do not find Asante's segregationist vision to be viable, Gay's culturally responsive approach promises to offer teachers a way to provide students with "high degrees of ethnic affiliation" the skills necessary to effectively interact with members of the dominant culture while leaving fully intact their cultural identities. Underscoring this approach is a conception of culture informed by what I call *situationalist-essentialism* (SE). This conception of culture shares with PE the view that one's culture core is foundational to one's identity but differs in both the source and cross-cultural potential of that foundation.

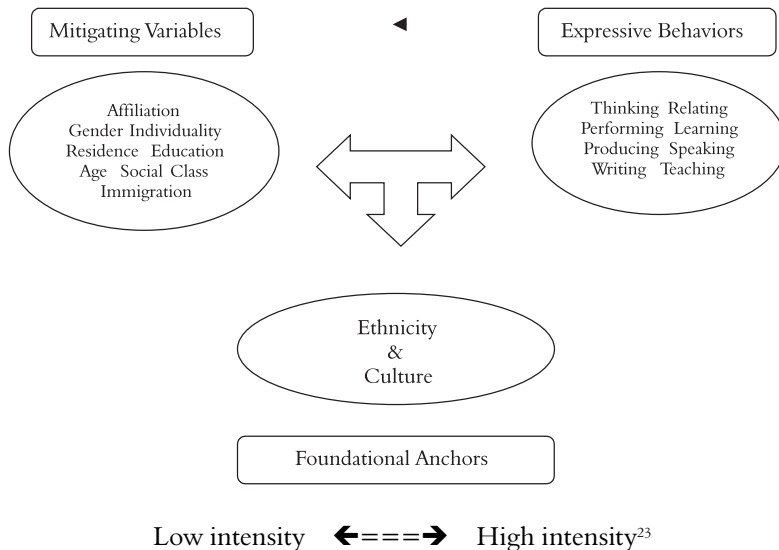
Cultural Anchors

On the surface, Gay's essentialism appears to be of the primordialist ilk. Gay makes explicit the ontological basis of her approach to multicultural education through her description of the "core or modal characteristics" of human beings. "Ethnicity and culture," she argues, "are the foundational anchors of all other behaviors."²² Though these anchors function in triadic concert with what she refers to as "Mitigating Variables" and "Expressive Behaviors," and though various individuals exhibit varying intensities of cultural and ethnic affiliation, culture and ethnicity represent the core of one's identity. (*Figure 1*)

Gay's stated holism further underscores the significance of one's cultural core and the irreparable harm caused by assimilation. Since one's "race, culture, ethnicity, individuality, and intellectuality" are "inseparably interrelated," all aspects must be taken into consideration in the "redesign of education for cultural diversity." The teacher must therefore infuse the curriculum with the experiences and contributions of minorities, challenge Eurocentric hegemony, and attain knowledge about and respect for the cultural backgrounds of their students.

²¹ Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press, 14.
²² *Ibid.*, 10.

Figure 1



Early Socialization

Gay's cultural core, the basis of our understanding of self and world, is not however tied to some mythical source or continent of origin. Gay believes that cultural cores emerge in the process of early socialization.

By the time the children begin their formal school career at 5 years of age, they already have internalized rules and procedures for acquiring knowledge and demonstrating their skills. These cognitive processing protocols are learned from their *cultural socialization*. They may be refined and elaborated over time, even superseded on occasion for the performance of certain tasks. But the core of these *culturally influenced* rules and procedures continues to anchor how individuals process intellectual challenges for the rest of their lives.²⁴ [Italics added]

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

Individuals need not be raised in the cultural heritage of their ancestors to become “centered” persons. On the contrary, the foundational anchor that “*determines* how we think, believe, and behave”²⁵ can be forged by a variety of traditions and customs of various origins. Thus Gay is careful in her writings to insist on both the flexibility of and internal variance within cultures. Learning styles, she reminds teachers, are only “patterns of cognitive processing generally exhibited by members of an ethnic group, and...cultural characteristics are descriptions of value configurations and propensities, or inclinations, of ethnic groups. They are not descriptions of individual behavior”²⁶ “Culture,” she writes, “like any other social or biological organism, is multidimensional and continually changing.”²⁷ Though individuals with purer cultural identities (i.e. socialization from one cultural tradition) remain, for better or worse, the primary focus of her approach to multicultural education, the rationale behind such emphasis is neither to encourage nor to discourage ethnic purity. While still emphasizing the centrality of one’s cultural core, Gay thus commits herself to respect the whole spectrum of student cultural backgrounds (including those hybrid in nature) as the font from which all learning takes place.

Cross-cultural Potential

Because Gay’s SE does not commit her to defend mythical origins, a *priori* core characteristics, or cultural purity, her culturally responsive approach to teaching can be applied more easily to a multicultural setting. There need not be rigid cultural categories pointing to the incommensurability of cultures, nor need there be an either/or choice between worldviews. This flexibility is further underscored by her focus on procedure (communication and learning styles) over cultural content (established traditions and customs.) To teach in a culturally responsive manner is first and foremost to understand how to interact with students of different cultural backgrounds and assumptions. Such a strategy allows for an integrated vision of cultural pluralism where members of different cultural groups interact on equal footing in the common public

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

²⁶ Gay, G. (2001). Multicultural Preparation and Teacher Effectiveness in Desegregated Schools. *Theory Into Practice*, 17(2), 149–156.

²⁷ Gay, CRT, 10.

sphere. Through mixed pedagogical methods, Gay believes that students can maintain their cultural loyalties and gain from cross-cultural understanding and cooperation.

Despite these differences, however, both strong and weak essentialist interpretations of culture lead in practice to at least three aporias that reinforce segregationist tendencies and threaten the multiculturalist ideals of cultural pluralism and equity for all: a harmful resistance to cultural critique, the artificial creation of cultural islands and a reductionist view of social life.

Resistance to Cultural Critique

An essentialist conception of culture not only entails defending the widely accepted, though perhaps not widely observed, practice that teachers respect and work from the cultural background of their students, it also requires teachers to abandon pedagogic practices that directly challenge a student's cultural core. While this may not pose problems in a culturally homogeneous classroom where both means and aims conform to the cultural norms of students and teachers alike, such a condition represents a serious handicap in multicultural settings because it inhibits learning experiences that emerge from perplexity, critical reflection, and authentic dialogue. Without the possibility of challenging beliefs, education becomes either indistinguishable from indoctrination or reduced to an insipid vocational training.

Asante's primordialism is clear on this account. The prospect for cross-cultural dialogue and critique in a multiethnic classroom is severely hampered if we accept his standpoint epistemology (which renders the truth or falsity of a knowledge claim dependant on the cultural center of the knower), his view that the purpose of education is to "socialize the learner [into] a social group," and his dismissal of the current educational system as a product of a "Eurocentric hegemonism." If we believe that there are no universal standards to which one can appeal in resolving cultural differences and that the conceptual frameworks commonly employed for critique, e.g. positivism, structuralism and deconstruction, are irredeemably tainted with Eurocentric bias, then it would seem that teachers can play at best only a peripheral role in the education of students of other cultural backgrounds. By such logic, the basic pedagogic strategy of encouraging students to reflect critically on their own cultural assumptions leads too easily to cultural displacement.

Gay's weaker essentialism produces similar results, though for somewhat different reasons. "Race, culture, ethnicity, individuality and intellectuality of students" argues Gay, "are inseparably interrelated" and the "insights gleaned" from understanding each aspect must become "the driving force for the redesign of education for cultural diversity."²⁸ Rather than encouraging students to transcend their ethnic identities and cultural foundations or to "double deal" by being "at once highly ethnically affiliated and academically achieving," teachers should create an environment in which students can "achieve academically, ethnically, culturally, and socially simultaneously without any of these abilities interfering with the others."²⁹ This complicates critical dialogue between teachers and students of differing cultural backgrounds as it seems to reduce education in a multiethnic setting to the acquisition of knowledge and skills untainted by culture.

The motivation behind Gay's opposition to cultural critique may be attributed in part to the ambiguity of the "culturally-congruent" approach itself. As Eamon Callan has argued, culturally responsive strategies are at once "consistent with multiculturalism and with a zealous cultural monism."³⁰ After all, one can employ culturally responsive pedagogical tactics to encourage minority students down the path of eventual assimilation. Gay's focus on culturally congruent instructional strategies and communication styles make her vulnerable to such a charge, especially since her arguments are often couched in a pragmatic language that can be construed as, if not totally espousing, at least leaving open, the possibility of cultural assimilation. Take, for instance, the ambivalence in Gay's claim that the purpose of analyzing communication styles is to identify:

(1) habitual discourse features of ethnically diverse students; (2) conflictual and complementary points among these discourse styles; (3) how, or if, conflictual points are negotiated by students; and (4) features of the students' discourse patterns that are problematic for the teacher. The results can be used to pinpoint and prioritize specific places to begin interventions for change.³¹

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

³⁰ Callan, E. (2005). The Ethics of Assimilation. *Ethics*, 115 (April), 487.

³¹ Gay, *CRT*, 110.

It thus behooves Gay to clarify the direction in which “interventions for change” should proceed in a way that distances her from those who would use such strategies for assimilation. This she does, both clearly and consistently, by identifying “mainstream ethnocentrism and hegemony” as the “greatest obstacle to culturally responsive teaching,”³² insisting that “school success” should not compromise or constrain students’ “ethnic identity and cultural affiliation,” and aligning herself with ethnic-centered programs that cultivate ethnic self-pride. In doing so, however, Gay must implicitly assume rigid boundaries between cultures, boundaries that teachers should not expect students to cross without inflicting harm on their ethnic affiliations.

Maintaining dogmatic adherence to such a position is as untenable as it is inconsistent with her progressive agenda. Untenable, because given Gay’s holism there is a direct link between culture and education that makes at least some interference inevitable. The mere exposure to a multicultural education classroom – regardless of the teacher’s pedagogical methods – is enough to compromise the cultural and ethnic achievement of students with “high ethnic and cultural affiliations.” In other words, culturally heterogeneous schools, even those based firmly on multicultural education principles, simply cannot avoid entanglement in cross-cultural critique. Gay’s weak essentialism coupled with her holism must therefore ultimately insist upon segregation.

A suspension of cultural critique in the classroom is also at odds with Gay’s progressive agenda as it prevents teachers from criticizing the harmful cultural practices of their students. As Spinner-Halev has noted, since “most cultures are patriarchal, many are racist, and few are egalitarian,” a multicultural approach that treats assimilation as a “dirty word” and simultaneously is “predicated on democratic values like equality and respect for cultural diversity” might find that “much cultural diversity isn’t worthy of respect.”³³ Because Gay would certainly not advocate affording equal respect to *all* forms of cultural diversity, her essentialism – if it is to be consistently maintained – must ultimately drive her to the messy terrain of distinguishing core (inviolable) from secondary (alterable) aspects of each culture. Navigating through this terrain is exceedingly difficult if one seeks simultaneously to respect all cultures equally

³² *Ibid.*, 208.

³³ Spinner-Halev, J. (2000). *Surviving Diversity Religion and Democratic Citizenship*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 131.

(as the bedrock of their member's identities) and promote progressive reforms that inevitably challenge some of the cultural norms and practices allegedly so integral to students with strong ethnic affiliations.

Archipelago of Cultures

While the conceptualization of cultures serves an important heuristic function in education, delineating borders according to an essentialist interpretation of culture unduly naturalizes divisions between peoples and encourages practitioners to espouse a "cultural conservatism" that reifies cultural groups into static, isolated "cultural bubbles."³⁴ Cultures become fragile museum pieces that must be preserved at all costs, while cross-cultural overlap and borrowing are treated as the symptom and cause of cultural dissolution. If authentic cross-cultural dialogue leads inevitably to the colonization of one cultural framework over all others, then both weak and strong forms of essentialism ultimately encourage segregation.

Asante's work provides a clear example of this logic. Since children must first be centered within their own cultural framework before learning to appreciate other cultural frameworks, and since various cultural frameworks are in many important respects incommensurable, then developing culturally appropriate curriculum and instruction in a multicultural classroom is an impossible task. Furthermore, if education is cultural socialization, we cannot avoid the inevitable entanglement in cultural critique and conflict that would occur in our integrated schools. From a PE perspective, such entanglement is intolerable. One cannot be oneself, writes Afrocentrist Ama Mazama, if "one lives on borrowed cultural terms and/or when one apprehends reality through another group's center."³⁵ This danger has not escaped the attention of Afrocentrist Jerome Schiele, who believes that the current educational system in the United States continues to lure African American students away from their own African traditions towards the path of Eurocentric subjugation. This recent "subtle, diffused and almost benign" method of

³⁴ McCarty, L. P. (1993). Out of Isolation: Philosophy, Hermeneutics, Multiculturalism. In *Philosophy of Education* (pp. 56–64). Urbana.

³⁵ Mazama, A. (2001). The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definitions. *Journal of Black Studies*, 31(4), 397–398.

Eurocentric domination is considered by Schiele to be, in many respects, more insidious than the blatant racism of the past.³⁶

Gay's weaker essentialism is better equipped to resist such segregationist implications. Unlike Asante, Gay does not need to defend the cultural borders of specific cultural groups. Rather than engage in debate about where to draw the line and who should draw it, Gay leaves the commonly accepted divisions between cultures largely intact. She also vacillates between encouraging a view of cultural affiliation and cross-cultural interaction that acknowledges the diverse and flexible variations within cultures, and reinforcing the fixed foundations of culture so as to protect them against foreign intrusion. Nevertheless, the nature of her culturally congruent approach strengthens, and in part relies on, rigid delineations of cultural borders. While her exclusive focus on students with high cultural and ethnic affiliations is understandable given that these students are most likely to suffer from culturally incongruent teaching practices, such a focus also serves to highlight cultural differences in a way that privileges cultural divisions over commonalities.

Take for instance the ambiguity in Gay's treatment of the relationship between language and culture; "Culture is the rule-governing system that defines the forms, functions, and content of communication,"³⁷ while language is a reflection of a cultural system and the "means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied."³⁸ Gay relies on the Whorf-Sapir thesis to accentuate the centrality of language and its deep interconnection to culture. Language is not "simply a 'mechanical' instrumental tool for transmitting information;" rather, human beings are "very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society."³⁹ Taken to the extreme, translation across languages and by extension cultures is made impossible. "The worlds in which different societies live," writes Sapir, "are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached."⁴⁰

³⁶ Schiele, J. (2002). Mutations of Eurocentric Domination and Their Implications for African American Resistance. *Journal of Black Studies*, 32(4), 439–463.

³⁷ Gay, *CRT*, 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴⁰ Sapir, E. (1949). *Culture, Language and Personality: Selected Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Where exactly Gay stands in relation to this “culture as island” perspective depends on how language is interpreted. If she interprets language to include not only one’s native language but also a more universally inclusive linguisticity, then one can understand how language can be in a sense bound and yet ultimately open-ended. One can acknowledge the deep and powerful link between a student’s cultural identity and native language without tying the student’s future cultural identities to such a link. On the other hand, reducing a person’s cultural-linguistic possibilities to those encompassed by one’s native tongue and its limited set of communication styles, can lead to the false construction of distinct, isolated, linguistic-cultural worlds that Davidson convincingly criticizes in his “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme.”⁴¹ It also encourages practitioners to construct rigid cultural categories of students according to their native language or dialect and the corresponding traditions, values and customs that speaking such a language necessarily entails.

That Gay does not appear to come to a definite conclusion on this issue is clear in her examination of the Oakland controversy over the use of Ebonics (Black English) in schools. Gay’s task is complicated by the Janus-faced nature of her aims: she must simultaneously preserve the inviolability of Ebonics as the core of highly cultural and ethnically affiliated African Americans identities while drawing these students out of their cultural isolation through instruction in code-switching and the acquisition of mainstream cultural capital. With some speculation on my part, Gay might try to reconcile these two aims and maintain her essentialist claims described above by reaffirming Ebonics’ (permanent) position at the core of many African-American identities – which can be said to have already been largely set at an early age – and treating code-switching (the ability to interact in two cultures) and the acquisition of cultural capital as secondary, more instrumental appendages that do not impinge on the ethno-cultural core of the student. In this way, highly ethnically affiliated African American students can acquire the means to function successfully in mainstream society without having to alter their ethnic identities.

If this is an accurate description of Gay’s position, then we can reduce her argument to two central claims. The first is that one’s mother tongue represents the core of one’s identity. Not only is the incorporation

⁴¹ Davidson, D. (1985). On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme. In C. West (Ed.), *Post-Analytic Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University.

of Ebonics in the classroom an effective way to teach African-Americans with strong cultural identities, but failing to do so could have disastrous results. She quotes Robert Williams, the African-American activist who coined the term Ebonics, as saying: "My language is me. It is an extension of my being, my essence. It is a reflection and badge of my culture. Criticism of my language is essentially a direct attack on my self-esteem and cultural identity."⁴² Her second claim, that instructing children in code-switching and the acquisition of cultural capital does not impinge on one's core ethno-cultural identity, is evident in the way in which Gay separates "academic achievement" from other aspects of cultural achievement and assumes that both teachers and students can acquire knowledge and communication competencies of different cultures without having to adopt wholesale another cultural framework. Gay thereby avoids segregation by defending an essentialist approach to education that allows for cross-cultural interaction and borrowings without doing harm to students' cultural core.

Given Gay's holism, it is doubtful whether such a position can be maintained while maintaining a robust conception of educational experience and transformation. Because she ties our linguisticity, and its inextricable relationship to culture and identity, to that of a specific language, Gay reinforces the "culture as island" perspective in which one's cultural identity is permanently moored, in a static and bound fashion, to a specific language or dialect. In doing so, she must reject the view that one's identity, manifested through language, not only continually changes but can also extend beyond the boundaries of one language (and ethnicity). Gay suggests that language acquisition is not a zero-sum game; one need not give up one's native language *in toto* to make room for another's. Yet, what are we to make of such language acquisition? Is it simply an add-on skill that one acquires without changing one's cultural identity? In implying the affirmative, Gay renounces the transformational potential of education. Her interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis thus succumbs to a linguistic determinism that binds one's cultural identity within the web of a specific language and structure.

Gay is thus caught in a paradox. If she insists that the core of one's cultural identity is fixed at an early age, and is thus inextricably bound to one's mother-tongue, then she can be accused of drawing intolerant-

⁴² Gay, *CRT*, 86.

bly rigid cultural borders between individuals. At the same time, if she denies this link between first language and identity, Gay must acknowledge that acquiring mainstream cultural capital and the capacity to code-switch, far from serving merely as tools, will also have an appreciable impact on the cultural identity of students. One need not call the impact of such acquisitions “assimilation,” but clearly the “cultural and ethnic foundational anchors” of such students will undergo change. The problem can be stated another way; in limiting our linguisticity to a specific language it is not so much that Gay overestimates the significance of one’s mother-tongue on the formation of one’s identity – a significance which is obviously paramount for the vast majority of Americans – but rather, that she underestimates the transformational effect that acquiring a new language has on one’s identity. In so doing, she also ignores the grey middle area between cultural extremes where the majority of students might be said to reside. Though her position is not strictly a segregationist one, she cannot avoid such implications without renouncing her holism and reducing teaching to a bland peddling of skills.

Ethnic Reductionism

A daunting challenge facing essentialists is to defend the “ethnic” criteria by which they separate peoples in a society marked by deep contradictions and complexities. By mapping groups according to essentialist ethnic-cultural categories, scholars must ignore, or at least downplay, other cultural factors that are as, if not more, salient in people’s everyday life.

Asante’s bi-polar categorization of Afrocentricity and Eurocentricity underscores his extreme reductionist approach. Not only does he fail to do justice to the internal complexity of both cultural frameworks, often presenting them as simplified coherent wholes rather than cultural complexes that draw values, beliefs, and orientations from a variety of cultural, religious, and geographical sources, but he also downplays the overlap between Afrocentric and Eurocentric frameworks and ignores almost entirely other cultural frameworks. For instance, the rigid characteristics Asante attributes to the Eurocentric mindset, e.g., individualism, positivism, and materialism, masks others of European pedigree that reflect collectivist, relativist, and idealist sentiments. His commitment to binary oppositions further distorts social reality. By claiming

that Africans are critically aware, he must likewise insist that Europeans have never been able to reflect critically on their own perspectives.⁴³

A similar reductionism occurs in his characterization of Afrocentricity. As one scholar has quipped, “The African continent harbours one fourth of the world’s nearly six thousand languages. Can the cultures expressed in these languages develop but a single model for harmony?”⁴⁴ In order to fit leading black intellectuals, artists, political activists, and scientists into his rigid Afrocentric model, he must construct a purity scale according to which individuals and their contributions can be judged. Du Bois’s training at a German university imposed a Eurocentric framework on his thought that limited his contributions to the black community and prevented him from achieving his natural potential as a man of African ancestry. While Asante excuses Du Bois for envisioning “integration as the ultimate solution” to American racism, he is less forgiving of contemporary black intellectuals who exhibit a Eurocentric “slave mentality” when an Afrocentric perspective is so readily at hand.⁴⁵ This view encourages practitioners to overstate the incompatibility of cultural frameworks and ignore the extent to which cultural overlap and borrowing have cultivated healthy identities of mixed cultural heritage.

Gay’s SE interpretation of culture avoids many of the extreme forms of reductionism that plague primordialists. For one, individuals with a mixed heritage do not face the same problem of mixed loyalties as they would by Asante’s puritanical logic. Moreover, Gay is not compelled to state categorically where one culture ends and another begins. There are no inherent values, beliefs and behaviors that belong to one culture or another. At the same time, her focus on highly ethnically and culturally affiliated students leads to a reductive emphasis on ethnicity at the expense of other societal factors equally worthy of pedagogical attention. Not only does such reductionism encourage multiculturalists to focus too narrowly on inequalities between ethnic groups, thereby ignoring other forms of discrimination, but it also prevents teachers from adequately addressing culturally sanctioned forms of discrimination within ethnic communities. If the only culture that can be criticized for its oppressive practices is the dominant European-American culture, then

⁴³ Asante, *Afrocentricity*.

⁴⁴ Verharen, C. C. (2000). Molefi Asante and an Afrocentric Curriculum. *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, 24(4).

⁴⁵ Asante, *Painful Demise of Eurocentrism*.

the only students who truly benefit from critical self-reflection in the classroom with regard to the legitimacy of their own beliefs and practices are members of the dominant culture. Yet if we are to agree with Henry Giroux that one of the “defining principles of any democracy” is the continual necessity to “rejuvenate itself by constantly reexamining the strengths and limits of its traditions” then something is amiss if such practices are not expected from all members of our democracy.⁴⁶

Gay might add that critique of minority cultures in the classroom too often serves to reinforce the cultural biases of the teacher – biases all too frequently containing racist undertones – rather than encourage healthy dialogue about self, culture, and society. Historically, teachers have played the dubious role of bearers of “American” culture, often singling out and identifying as deviant the cultural practices of minority students that fall outside the norm. Gay is justifiably suspicious of pedagogical approaches that fall back easily into such unreflective ethnocentrism. At the same time, treating ethnic minority students with benign neglect, as if the need to engage in self-reflective and critical dialogue does not also apply to them, not only impedes their educational potential but also prevents practitioners from exploring the full spectrum of political, cultural and social challenges facing our society today.

This is not of course Gay’s intention. Not only does Gay emphasize the importance of placing high demands on students of color, but critique stands as one of the centerpieces of her progressive agenda. Yet in order to secure a place for such social and political critique, Gay must stray far from her original holistic approach and interpret her own theories with tactical acumen. Finding a balance between her essentialist claims and activist agenda has led her to construct unwieldy and somewhat arbitrary categories. She writes, “Although males and females express their cultural heritage in somewhat different ways, this is due more to their engendered socialization than to their being more or less culturally affiliated because of their gender”.⁴⁷ By drawing the distinction between “engendered socialization” and “cultural affiliation” Gay constructs a separate space for gender equity as a legitimate pedagogical pursuit. Her argument is that since one’s gendered role is not tied directly to one’s ethnicity (nor apparently to one’s early socialization),

⁴⁶ Giroux, H. (1994). *Insurgent Multiculturalism and the Promise of Pedagogy*. In *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge: Blackwell.

⁴⁷ Gay, *CRT*, 11.

teachers are free to criticize gender discrimination when they confront it. But how does such a division square with her holism? Is it possible to isolate gender socialization from one's cultural-ethnic socialization?

Gay's own approach suggests not. When Gay addresses the issue of gender inequality in her research, she focuses exclusively on either gender inequality within the confines of the dominant culture or ways in which teachers discriminate against students of specific ethnicities. Multicultural education practitioners get very little help, however, in determining how to address gender discrimination sanctioned by members of minority cultures. This is admittedly not her focus, yet the privileging of ethnicity encourages such benign neglect when practitioners apply her theories in practice.

Conclusion

Leaving unchallenged the ontological assumptions of essentialism, I argue that both weak and strong essentialist interpretations of culture either leads to an intolerable separatism or reduces education to the mere acquisition of skills without the promise of genuine cross-cultural dialogue and meaningful exploration of alternative life options. Multiculturalists must therefore look to non-essentialist interpretations of culture to defend a multiculturalist agenda that is pluralistic, democratic and committed to social justice. While it is not in the scope of this paper to provide such an interpretation, I am optimistic that one can interpret culture in a way that acknowledges both the advantages of cultural diversity and the transformational power of education, as well as highlights the centrality of one's cultural background without creating rigid cultural categories or restricting students to a particular cultural orientation or worldview.