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RADICAL MULTICULTURALISM AND WOMEN OF COLOR FEMINISMS

Multilingualism is the passionate desire to accept and understand our neighbor's language and to confront the massive leveling force of language continuously imposed by the West--yesterday with French, today with American English--with a multiplicity of languages and their comprehension. This practice of cultural creolization is not part of some vague humanism, which makes it permissible for us to become one with the next person. It establishes a cross-cultural relationship, in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, between histories that we know today in the Caribbean are interrelated. The civilization of cassava, sweet potato, pepper, and tobacco points to the future of this cross-cultural process; this is why it struggles to repossess the memory of its fragmented past.¹

--Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 1989

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters...Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. Difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged.²

--Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," 1984

At the very logical core of the movement towards radical multiculturalism and Women of Color feminisms is a shift from a logic of oppression to a logic of resistance. The very logic of oppression has enabled cultural and gender dominations to mask themselves as both multicultural and feminist. The multicultural mask is a version of monoculturalism that one could call

¹ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse* (Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 1989), p. 249.

² Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg: The Crossing Press, 1984), pp. 111-112.

"ornamental multiculturalism" (Lugones/Price 1995). The feminist mask is one that opposes a version of femininity that has been attributed only to women who, in terms of class, race, and sexuality, have been understood to be subordinate only to white bourgeois men. This feminism has been compliant with the subordination of all other women. Both the multicultural and the feminist masks share a logic of false universalization. The cultural hegemony that European powers achieved through colonialism was expressed as a conflation of culture and knowledge with European culture and knowledge. The subordination of those women tied only to white masculine power was conflated with the subordination of all women. The shift that radical multiculturalism and Women of Color feminisms enact is powerfully expressed by Glissant and Lorde, both of whom write from within a logic of resistance. After unmasking ornamental multiculturalism and white bourgeois feminisms as intrinsic to Western cultural hegemony, I will return to Lorde and Glissant, that is to resistance to that hegemony. Here I will not directly attend to the confrontation of linguistic domination in Glissant's passage, but to the articulation of the multiplicity of languages confronting the tongues imposed by the West. Similarly, I will not attend to the possible inclusion of resistant white feminisms and resistant white feminist voices, but to the resistances to inclusion in dominant feminisms by Women of Color feminists.

The feminist mask of oppression

Radical, structural (Lugones/Price), or polycentric (Shohat and Stam) multiculturalism is a radical response to the Eurocentrism that has accompanied the history of Western colonialism. Colonialism in early and late modernity was constituted both by a Eurocentrist conception of knowledge and culture and by the racialization of labor, of heterosexuality, and of gender.³ In the development of twentieth century feminisms, this connection between gender, class, heterosexuality as racialized was not made explicit. That feminism centered its struggle and its ways of knowing and theorizing against a characterization of women as fragile, weak in both body and mind, secluded in the private, and sexually passive. But it did not bring to consciousness that those characteristics only constructed white bourgeois womanhood. Indeed, beginning from that characterization, white bourgeois feminists theorized white womanhood as if all women were white.

It is part of their history that only they have counted as women so described in the West. Females excluded from that description were not just their subordinates. They were also understood to be animals in a sense that went further than the identification of white women with nature, infants, and small animals. They were understood as animals in the deep sense of "without gender,"

³ There is a lot of research that enables us to make this claim. Importantly, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), and Aihwa Ong, "The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia," in *American Ethnologist*, v15n1 (Feb 1988): pp. 28-42.

sexually marked as female, but without the characteristics of femininity.⁴ Erasing any history, including oral history, of the relation of white to non-white women, white feminism wrote white women large. Even though historically and contemporarily white bourgeois women knew perfectly well how to orient themselves in an organization of life that pitted them for very different treatment than non-white or working class women.⁵ White feminist struggle became one against the positions, roles, stereotypes, traits, desires imposed on white bourgeois women's subordination. No one else's gender oppression was countenanced. They understood women as inhabiting white bodies but did not bring that racial qualification to articulation or clear awareness. That is, they did not understand themselves in intersectional terms, at the intersection of race, gender, and other forceful marks of subjection or domination. Because they did not perceive these deep differences they did not see a need for creating coalitions. They presumed a sisterhood, a bond given with the subjection of the gender.

Historically, the characterization of white European women as fragile and sexually passive opposed them to non-white, colonized women, including women slaves, who were characterized along a gamut of sexual aggression and perversion, and as strong enough to do any sort of labor. The following description of slave women and of slave work in the U.S. South makes clear that African slave females were not considered fragile or weak:

First came, led by an old driver carrying a whip, forty of the largest and strongest women I ever saw together; they were all in a simple uniform dress of a bluish check stuff, the skirts reaching little below the knee; their legs and feet were bare; they carried themselves loftily, each having a hoe over the shoulder, and walking with a free, powerful swing, like chasseurs on the march. Behind came the cavalry, thirty strong, mostly men, but a few of them women, two of whom rode astride on the plow mules. A lean and vigilant white overseer, on a brisk pony, brought up the rear.

The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given to them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night.⁶

⁴ Elizabeth Spelman's interpretation of Aristotle's distinction between free men and women in the Greek polis and slave men and women suggests this claim. It is important to note that reducing women to nature or the natural is to collude with this racist reduction of colonized women. More than one Latin American thinker who decries eurocentrism relegates women to the sexual and the reproductive.

⁵ The deep distinction between white working class and non-white women can be glimpsed from the very different places they occupied in the evolutionary series referred to in Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially p. 4.

⁶ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), p. 111.

Patricia Hill Collins provides a clear sense of the dominant understanding of Black women as sexually aggressive and the genesis of that stereotype in slavery:

The image of Jezebel originated under slavery when Black women were portrayed as being, to use Jewelle Gomez' words, "sexually aggressive wet nurses" (Clarke et al. 1983, 99). Jezebel's function was to relegate all Black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by White men typically reported by Black slave women. (Davis 1981; D. White 1985). Jezebel served yet another function. If Black slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome. By suppressing the nurturing that African-American women might give their own children which would strengthen Black family networks, and by forcing Black women to work in the field, "wet nurse" White children, and emotionally nurture their White owners, slave owners effectively tied the controlling images of Jezebel and mammy to the economic exploitation inherent in the institution of slavery.⁷

But it is not just black slave women who were placed outside the scope of white bourgeois femininity. In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock (1995) as she tells us of Columbus' depiction of the earth as a woman's breast, evokes the "long tradition of male travel as an erotics of ravishment":

For centuries, the uncertain continents--Africa, the Americas, Asia--were figured in European lore as libidiously eroticized. Travelers' tales abounded with visions of the monstrous sexuality of far-off lands, where, as legend had it, men sported gigantic penises and women consorted with apes, feminized men's breasts flowed with milk and militarized women lopped theirs off.

Within this porno tropic tradition, women figured as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Folklore saw them, even more than the men, as given to a lascivious venery so promiscuous as to border on the bestial.⁸

McClintock describes the colonial scene depicted in a drawing (ca. 1575) in which Jan van der Straet "portrays the "discovery" of America as an eroticized encounter between a man and a woman."⁹

Roused from her sensual languor by the epic newcomer, the indigenous woman extends an inviting hand, insinuating sex and submission...Vespucci, the godlike arrival, is destined to inseminate her with his male seeds of civilization, fructify the wilderness and quell the riotous scenes of cannibalism in the background...The cannibals appear

⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 82.

⁸ McClintock, p. 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

to be female and are spit roasting a human leg.¹⁰

In the 19th century, McClintock tells us "sexual purity emerged as a controlling metaphor for racial, economic and political power." (47) With the development of evolutionary theory "anatomical criteria were sought for determining the relative position of races in the human series.":

The English middle-class male was placed at the pinnacle of evolutionary hierarchy. White English middle class women followed. Domestic workers, female miners and working class prostitutes were stationed on the threshold between the white and black races.¹¹

Yen Le Espiritu (1997) tells us that:

Representations of gender and sexuality figure strongly in the articulation of racism. Gender norms in the United States are premised upon the experiences of middle-class men and women of European origin. These Eurocentric-constructed gender norms form a backdrop of expectations for American men and women of color--expectations which racism often precludes meeting. In general, men of color are viewed not as the protector, but rather the aggressor--a threat to white women. And women of color are seen as over sexualized and thus undeserving of the social and sexual protection accorded to white middleclass women. For Asian American men and women, their exclusion from white-based cultural notions of the masculine and the feminine has taken seemingly contrasting forms: Asian men have been cast as both hypermasculine (the "Yellow Peril") and effeminate (the "model minority"); and Asian women have been rendered both superfeminine (the "China Doll") and castrating (the "Dragon Lady").¹²

Women of Color in the U.S. responded to this ignoring of the oppositional conceptions of non-white and white women inscribed historically in the economic, social and political organization of the society. That response has been complex. Here I want to focus on two unmaskings of white bourgeois feminisms as colluding with the oppression of Women of Color and as serving Western hegemony. It is important to note that as colonialism imposed Western culture on the colonized, the subordination of white bourgeois women that had been a crucial part of that culture became redrawn. Sexual passivity and purity became emphasized in the Victorian model of "true womanhood."

In the first unmasking, the concept of intersectionality is crucial. I will focus

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 26.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 50, 56.

¹² Yen Le Espiritu, "Race, class, and gender in Asian America," in *Making More Waves*, eds. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villaneuva, and Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 135.

primarily on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw when discussing the move to intersectionality. The first unmasking is still within the logic of oppression because race and gender are critically treated as categories of oppression.

I will argue for a second unmasking in which we move from the logic of intersectionality to the logic of fusion, intermeshing, coalescence. This logic is one of logical inseparability of race, class, sexuality, gender. While the logic of interconnection leaves the logic of categories intact, the logic of fusion corrupts it. I will focus on my own and Audre Lorde's work in enacting the second unmasking. Fusion or coalescence enables us to move fully into resistance.

First unmasking: intersectionality

White bourgeois feminists, ignoring the relation between their gender formation and the gender formation of non white women, understood the logic of 'women' categorially: there are only two genders, and 'woman' has a univocal meaning. As we saw above, white bourgeois women understood the particularities of the oppression of white bourgeois women as written into the very meaning of the category 'woman.'

The introduction of the logic of intersectionality has been crucial to an understanding of the situation of Women of Color in the U.S. The notion that oppressions intersect or interconnect is present in the work of many U.S. Women of Color feminists. To understand that oppressions intersect is to understand that there is a relation between the social situations of white women and the situations of Women of Color. Elsa Barkley Brown advises that:

We need to recognize not only differences but also the relational nature of those differences. Middle-class white women's lives are not just different from working-class white, black, and Latina women's lives, it is important to recognize that middle-class women live the lives they do precisely because working-class women live the lives they do. White women and women of color not only live different lives but white women live the lives they do in large part because women of color lives the ones they do.¹³

And, Yen Le Espiritu tells us that:

To recognize the interconnections of race, gender, and class is also to recognize that the conditions of our lives are connected to and shaped by the conditions of others' lives. Thus men are privileged precisely because women are not; and whites are advantaged precisely because people of color are disadvantaged. In other words, both people of color and white people live racially structured lives; both women's and men's lives are shaped by their gender; and all of our lives are influenced by the dictates of the patriarchal economy of U.S. society. But the intersections among these categories of oppression mean that there are also hierarchies among

¹³ Elsa Barkley Brown, "Polyrhythms and Improvisation," in *History Workshop*, issue 31 (Spring 1991), p. 86.

women, among men, and that some women hold cultural and economic power over certain groups of men.¹⁴

To understand the intersection of gender, class, sexual, and racial oppressions thus enables us to recognize the relation of power between white women and women of color. But it also enables us to actually see Women of Color under oppression, where the categorial understanding of 'woman' both in white feminism and in the dominant patriarchy hides their oppression. This is the crucial contribution of Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw makes clear that intersectionality is for her a "provisional concept" that engages the "dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories.":

By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable. While the primary intersections that I explore here are between race and gender, the concept can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color.¹⁵

Crenshaw addresses violence against women of color at the point of the law. She unveils that violence through the intersection of race and gender. If the very meaning of 'woman' excludes women of color, then 'violence against women' will be understood solely in the terms that affect white bourgeois women. If to compound the problem, racism is understood primarily "in terms of inequality between men,"¹⁶ neither intra-racial nor interracial violence against women of color can be countenanced:

"Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as "woman" or "person of color" as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling."¹⁷

Crenshaw understands race and gender as categories of oppression in the very logical terms assumed in the hegemonical mainstream: as logically separate from each other. She emphasizes the distinction between intersectionality and antiessentialism. The categories are real even if one can criticize them as essentialist. Racism and sexism exist. Crenshaw asserts that the categories are meaningful and have consequences.

Recognizing the categories of subjection does not take us far enough, because the

¹⁴ Espiritu, 140.

¹⁵ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," in *Critical Race Theory*, eds. Kimberle Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas (New York: The New Press, 1995), p. 378.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

problem is specifically political. The solution does not merely entail arguing for the multiplicity of identities or challenging essentialism generally. Any discourse about identity has to acknowledge how our identities are constructed through the intersection of multiple dimensions.

No conceptual critique of the essentialism characteristic of categorial thinking will erase the need to recognize the categories as real. The categories and categorial thinking are tools of oppression. Oppression cannot be erased conceptually. It is not a mistake to presuppose categories of oppression in understanding intersectionality. It is indeed necessary. For the phenomenon that is being explained is precisely the ignoring of multiplicity through categorial seeing that cannot countenance those who live at the intersection of more than one category of oppression. In Marx' theory of surplus value, he presupposes an excision between a person and his or her labor. This excision is fundamental to the logic of alienation. But that is not because he believes that the excision is true. Rather it is because he thinks it is a fundamental presupposition of capitalism and because capitalist power makes that excision real. Similarly, presupposing the categories of oppression to be separable, is to accept fundamental presuppositions of both racism and gender oppression. But the acceptance is for the purpose of superceding the separation.

Second unmasking: fusion

To name the categories of oppression and to identify their interconnections is also to explore, forge, and fortify cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-class alliances.¹⁸

--Espiritu, "Race, Class, and Gender in Asian American" 1997

Intersectionality provides a basis for reconceptualizing race as a coalition between women and men of color.¹⁹

--Crenshaw, *Mapping the Margins* 1995

Crenshaw, interested in the law and the legal situation of women of color under violence, stresses intersectionality to show how women of color are not seen precisely because the categories are not seen to intersect. Once one sees the intersection, one sees the violence. This is a radical move. But seeing the violence while trapped in its logic does not awaken one to resistance to it. Indeed, depending on one's location perceiving the violence may move one to promote it, or to resist it. It is part of our location as women who experience these violences that we resist them. Oppression does not exhaust the understanding of our location. Violence is met by some degree of opposition. It is because we have resisted the violence at the intersection of multiple oppressions that we understand the logic of resistance.

I want to move cautiously here, because the logic of the situation is complex. We

¹⁸ Espiritu, p. 141.

¹⁹ Crenshaw, p. 377.

are in a "now you see it, now you don't" logical quandary. It is a logical game of hide and seek. The logic of domination imposes a categorial conception of what is in fact a fusion or intermeshing of oppressions. The site of oppression can be understood as a superimposition of intersecting or interlocking and intermeshing or fused oppressions. The intersecting hides the fusion. That is, the intersecting hides the inseparability of oppressions. Gender and race, for example, do not intersect as separate and separable categories of oppression. Rather, gender oppression and race oppression impinge on people without any possibility of separation. That is why there are more than two genders. There is a multiplicity of genders. It is not that femininity and masculinity are two sets of characteristics that constitute "man" and "woman." Rather females racialized as non-white are not of the same gender as white females. This is by now an important consequence seen by Women of Color feminists, historians in particular.

But it is not as if the categories of dichotomized gender and race have no degree of reality. Indeed, the social order is ideologically categorially organized. That is why, for example, the violences done to non-white women cannot be seen at the point of the law. To note the interlocking or intersecting of oppressions is thus both an important resistant step against the logic of oppression that does not recognize the violences done at the site of the intersection. But it is also a possible trap. Crenshaw makes the provisional character of intersectionality clear. But when she moves to the claim that Women of Color is an intersectional identity or, with Espiritu, sees intersectionality as a move towards alliance or coalition, one needs to take the claims cautiously.

To say that oppressions intermesh is to say that no oppressing molds or reduces a person untouched by and separate from other oppressings that mold and reduce her. Oppressions interlock when the social mechanisms of oppression fragment the oppressed both as individuals and collectivities. Social fragmentation in its individual and collective inhabitations is the accomplishment of the interlocking of oppressions. Interlocking is conceptually possible only if oppressions are understood as separable, as discrete. The interlocking or intersection of oppressions is a mechanism of control, reduction, immobilization, disconnection (Lugones, 2003.) It is not merely an ideological mechanism, but the categorial training of human beings into homogenous fragments is grounded in a categorial mind frame. Interlocking is possible only if the inseparability of oppressions is disguised. Everywhere we turn we find the interlocking of oppressions disabling us from perceiving and resisting oppressions as intermeshed or fused.

Thus, resistance needs to both recognize intersectionality and resist that recognition through a superimposing of the recognition that oppressions intermesh. Otherwise, we see ourselves as fragmented beings, combined fragments of both white women and non-white men. And as we do that we begin to lose a sense of ourselves and our own situation. It is at that superimposed site that we resist. Resisting at the intersection of oppressions and at the intermeshing does not undo either. We inhabit both the reality constructed categorially and the reality of fusion. But we resist as different race-gender fusions than white women. Indeed, once the categories do not determine the possibilities, one can understand a great multiplicity of resistant race/gender

fusions.

The difference between Audre Lorde and Kimberlé Crenshaw lies precisely in the difference in the logic of their starting points. It is here that Lorde's "non-dominant differences" makes sense. And we can see why there is an impulse towards coalition within the logic of fusion. It is because each fusion is lived and understood relationally and one can appreciate whether or not the relation is conceived in categorical terms or in terms of fusion. Since the fusion is a resistance to multiple oppressions, one can also appreciate the ways in which others have conceived, given cultural form to, theorized, expressed, embodied, their resistance to multiple oppressions. One can also come to understand how and to what extent these resistances support or undermine each other. These are not just theorized, but lived possibilities. That is why we seek coalition.

When Lorde celebrates the interdependence of non-dominant differences, of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, she is celebrating what we create from within those different, yet non-dominant resistant circles within which we "make our faces," to evoke Gloria Anzaldúa's phrase.²⁰ Lorde is not celebrating a coalition that arises from a denial of power differentials, but one that arises from within resistances to power at all levels of oppression.

Resistant shift from Eurocentrism to Radical Multiculturalism

Resisting at the site of intersecting/fused oppressions creates resistant understandings of reality and of one's situation in it. Those resistant understandings have cultural significance in music, art, theory. Resistance is in part constituted by different knowledges. Monoculturalism and monolingualism express the Eurocentrism that has accompanied the history of Western colonialism. Colonial power has attempted to either appropriate or erase all knowledges it encountered. Eurocentric discourse has projected "a linear historical trajectory leading from the Middle East and Mesopotamia to classical Greece (constructed as 'pure,' 'western,' and 'democratic,') to Imperial Rome and then to the metropolitan capitals of Europe and the United States." (Shohat and Stam, 297) That historical line erased not only the cultures, knowledges, memories, and ways of those outside of it. It also erased the knowledges produced in resistance to its imposition through conquest, colonization, and enslavement. Those resistant knowledges, cultures, and histories have countered Eurocentric knowledge, including the Eurocentric understanding of the colonized. It has resisted colonial oppression, including the racialization of labor, gender, and sexuality. It should be clear from the argument so far that Western knowledges imposed on the colonized include both those that understood the colonized in categorical terms and white bourgeois feminist knowledges that uphold those categories. Thus what we see enacted is a double erasure but also a double resistance exercised at the point of power.

²⁰ Anzaldúa is, of course, invoking the Nahuatl tradition as she resistantly gathers from the memories of her own cultural tradition. That invoking is one that the colonization of memory is to have erased.

We can thus begin to see the common genesis of radical multiculturalism and Women of Color feminisms. It should be clear at this point that the knowledges that Women of Color create are among the knowledges constitutive of the multiculturalist position. I call the multiculturalism that I present here "radical" to contrast it with the versions of multiculturalism that have served as masks for Eurocentric monoculturalism.²¹ That disguise completes the erasure and colonization of memory of oppressed peoples by equating multicultural education with the study of cultures ignoring any relations of power between them and dismissing as biased and "political" any study of cultures of resistance. Monoculturalism also disguises itself as "ornamental multiculturalism." Characteristically and in complete coherence with monoculturalism, ornamental multiculturalism reduces all non Western cultures to ornaments to be enjoyed touristically.

Radical multiculturalism met significant opposition, containment, derision, and exclusion from "legitimate" knowledge by the intellectual right in the U.S. during the "culture wars." Multiculturalism as an intellectual movement emphasized the articulation of knowledge and power that centered European knowledges in an intellectual history that marginalized, discounted, erased, colonized all non Western and resistant knowledges and constructed particular conceptions of who could be a subject of knowledge. Multiculturalism was met during the "culture wars" in the U.S. with reaffirmations of Eurocentrism, justified as necessary to avoid the balkanization that was claimed would follow multiculturalism. As E.D. Hirsch claimed in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* the multiplicity of cultures "is threatening to rend our social fabric" as America is becoming a "tower of Babel," Allan Bloom reaffirmed the preeminence of Western Civilization in *The Closing of the American Mind*.²²

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam have provided what I consider to be the best theoretical description of radical multiculturalism. Challenging the margin/center divide, they call this form of radical multiculturalism "polycentric." In their words, polycentric multiculturalism "sees all cultural history in relation to social power." Because it resists both Eurocentrism and multiple oppressions, it recognizes that there is no possible equality of viewpoints. Rather "its affiliations are clearly with the underrepresented, the marginalized, and the oppressed." It "thinks and imagines from the margins," seeing the resistant oppressed "as active, generative participants at the very core of a shared, conflictual history." It thus grants to them an epistemological advantage as the resistant oppressed understand both the Eurocentric hegemony and resistance to it. The resistant marginalized "are familiar with both center and margins" and thus are ideally placed to "deconstruct" dominant or narrowly

²¹ E.D. Hirsch was among the cultural critics that charged radical multiculturalists with balkanizing America. He emphasized the need for cultural univocity. He claimed that "If we had to make a choice between the one and the many, most Americans would choose the principle of unity, since we cannot function as a nation without it." In E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston: Vintage, 1987), p. xiii.

²² See Takaki, p. 3.

national discourses." Because it rejects a unified, fixed, and essentialist concept of identities (or communities) as consolidated sets of practices, meanings, and experiences" and sees identities as multiple, unstable, historically situated, the products of ongoing differentiation and polymorphous identifications and pluralizations, polycentric multiculturalism goes beyond narrow definitions of identity politics. It opens the way for informed affiliation on the basis of shared social desires and identifications, affiliations that have to be forged. In the formation of these affiliations, "polycentric multiculturalism is reciprocal, dialogical. It sees all acts of verbal or cultural exchange as taking place not between essential discrete bounded individuals or cultures but rather between mutually permeable, changing individuals and communities.²³

Stam's and Shohat's account enacts the radical multiculturalist position as an intervention on Eurocentrism. If we think of the Self/Other binary as underlying both the progressive, unilinear understanding of history and the obscuring of relations of power that Shohat and Stam see as characteristic of Eurocentric discourses, then polycentric multiculturalism amounts to a challenge to Eurocentrism. The contrast suggests that in polycentric multiculturalism Shohat and Stam have articulated an epistemological political practice to displace the Self/Other binary constitutive of the Eurocentric discourse. In exercising that practice one perceives, listens, relates differently. The differences in perceiving, listening and relating, organize experience in resistance to the ordering imposed by a Eurocentrist epistemology.²⁴

Interrelated histories, multiple tongues, interdependence of mutual non-dominant differences

It is interesting that the intellectual conservatives charged multiculturalists with provoking a balkanization that would turn the U.S. into a tower of Babel. I want to address the issue of the production of a tower of Babel because I think it is at the core of the problem. The monocultural U.S. has marginalized resistant knowledges and in so doing has cognitively separated those who need to understand each other's resistance towards the dialogical formation of those "polymorphous affiliations" that Shohat and Stam include as constitutive of polycentric multiculturalism. It is in interdependence of non-dominant differences that those affiliations, those deep coalitions, can be forged. The institutionalization of monoculturalism has forced us to communicate with each other in the dominant cognitive modality and not just in the dominant tongue.

The US turned itself into a tower of Babel precisely through the institutionalization of a politics of monolingualism and monoculturalism. That politics relegated all languages but English and all non-Eurocentric ways of knowing to the private. It rendered illegal the public use of languages other than English through "English Only" laws in seventeen states. It also valorized and

²³ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Contested Histories: Eurocentrism, Multiculturalism, and the Media," in *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Theo Goldberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 300-301.

²⁴ See Maria Lugones, "Long and Wide Selves," forthcoming.

institutionalized cognitive attitudes that would render the knowing subject paralyzed in the face of a multiplicity of knowledges, languages, cultures, ways of life through requiring a monolingual, monological, and monocultural understanding of reality. Through both valorizing certainty, simplicity, and that form of agreement arrived at through compromise as fundamental attitudes in cognition and relegating all other knowledges to the realms of illegality or the private, it fragmented the society. Resistant knowledges were made inaccessible to each other except through strategies of resistance. Dialogue became monologue.

The cognitive attitudes do indeed kill in people the "passionate desire to accept and understand our neighbor's language" that Glissant places at the center of multilingualism. The cognitive attitudes require what Humberto Maturana considers necessary for the formation of a tower of Babel: killing in people to desire to communicate.²⁵ Thus, it is not multiculturalism that produces a tower of Babel, but institutionalized monoculturalism in all of its powerful dimensions.

The passionate desire to communicate across non-dominant differences "that establishes a cross-cultural relationship, in an egalitarian and unprecedented way, between histories that we know are interrelated" is fostered by cognitive attitudes that valorize open ended understanding, complexity, and uncertainty. (Lugones/Price, 123-126) This multiculturalist position prepares us to bridge the barriers among marginalized resistant knowledges. Cognitive conditions are among the conditions of coalitions among the resistant marginalized.

As Women of Color we need to emphasize intersectional subject positions and the superimposition of both intersecting and intermeshing oppressions as we work towards the formation of bridges that transform less complex resistant circles into polymorphous affiliations. That task calls us to bridge the communicative and cognitive barriers erected to keep us apart from each other through the institutionalization of cultural domination. We have seen why there is an impulse towards coalition in the logic of fusion. As we live as fusions resistant to multiple oppressions we can appreciate the ways in which others have conceived, given cultural form to, theorized, expressed, embodied, their resistance to multiple oppressions. That appreciation contributes and is deepened by a multiculturalist understanding. We have meant "Women of Color" as a coalitional identity, one that stands against monologisms, not as a racial descriptor. As a coalitional identity it is one seeking identifications that are multiple, unstable, historically situated, through complex dialogues from within the interdependence of non-dominant differences.

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Lugones, Maria. "Radical Multiculturalism and Women of Color Feminisms," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 13 no. 1 (Winter 2014): 68-80.

²⁵ See Maturana, Humberto R. *La democracia es una obra de arte*. (Colombia: Cooperativa Editorial Magisterio: Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Democracia Luis Carlos Galán, 1995).