

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

School of Public Affairs • University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742 • 301-405-4753

Multiculturalism and Cultural Authenticity

Recent years have seen the emergence of two inter-related trends in our cultural politics. First, there has been a call for multiculturalism: for greater diversity in artistic and educational offerings, for a broadening of the spectrum of society's interest beyond the activities and experiences of dead or living white males. Thus, students demand courses in black, Hispanic, and women's studies; children's librarians clamor for more books about Native American and Asian youth; viewers of all races protest if their stories are not told on television's nightly news and prime-time sitcoms. Second, there has been an insistence that those offering representations of previously unrepresented groups be themselves members of the group in question — that courses in black studies be taught by black faculty, books about Native American youth be written by Native American writers, and reporters covering the Hispanic community be of Hispanic descent. It is this second and more controversial requirement that I wish to submit to examination here.

The thesis that interests me is what I will call the authenticity thesis. The authenticity thesis maintains that the individuals representing the experiences of group A should (generally or even always) be members of group A. The thesis can be put forward in both a broad and a narrow form. In the narrow form, it applies when group A is what we may call a victim group, a group that has previously suffered and currently continues to suffer from oppression and discrimination — e.g., blacks, Native Americans, women.

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In the broader form, it applies to any group A, whatever its history or status. Of course, we will not be able to apply the authenticity thesis without having some clear notion of what defines the boundaries of the group in question and what legitimates claims of membership in it, problems I shall touch upon in closing.

There has been an insistence that those offering representations of previously unrepresented groups be themselves members of the group in question.

Why should individuals representing or discussing the experiences of group A be A's rather than B's? We may identify four possible arguments here. The first two, the Argument from Opportunity and the Argument from Ownership, focus on the expressive claims of A-group members — the view that they are uniquely entitled to provide representations of their own experiences. The next two arguments examine the interests of the audience for representations of A-group experiences: the Argument from Accuracy focuses on the general audience, made up of both A's and B's; the Argument from Solidarity focuses on the narrower A audience. I shall discuss each of these in turn, with the aim of demonstrating that together they offer at best qualified support for the authenticity thesis. In closing, I shall suggest why concerns about authenticity are nonetheless difficult to dismiss, and observe how a more expansive conception of group identity might begin to address them.

The Argument from Opportunity

In some cases, where a B is selected for a job that involves the discussion or representation of A-group experiences, this means that some A is rejected for the position in question. In hiring a male professor for an open position in women's studies, a university turns away all the competing female applicants. The director who notoriously cast a Caucasian actor in the role of a Eurasian pimp in his production of *Miss Saigon* denied that role to aspiring Eurasian actors. When women face such keen prejudice in much of academia, why hire a man to teach in a women's studies department? When roles for Eurasian actors are so sparse, why give the one meaty Eurasian role to a Caucasian? So the first argument for the authenticity thesis is that its violation constitutes a denial of crucial opportunities to members of group A. If A's cannot get jobs for which their identity or experiences as A-group members would seem to make them especially suitable, what jobs *can* they get?

Where it is applicable, the Argument from Opportunity seems fairly compelling — as in the *Miss Saigon* example — but it applies in only a limited range of cases. It defends only the narrow version of the authenticity thesis, where A is a victim group whose members face severely limited opportunities elsewhere. And it applies only when some fixed position is to be awarded within a competitive framework, where by choosing one person, I am passing over another. Many applications of the authenticity thesis are not naturally viewed in this way. The white man who writes a novel about a black woman need not be viewed as thereby silencing or stifling black female voices; the editor who accepts that novel for publication may not have received any competing publishable novel from a black female author for that season's list. Objections to violations of the authenticity thesis cannot all be cashed out in terms of the value we assign to equal opportunity.

Its limited scope aside, the greatest danger in the Argument from Opportunity is that it may appear, rightly or wrongly, to reinforce the authenticity thesis not just in its narrow version, but in the broader one as well. And in its broader form, the authenticity thesis works on balance to limit rather than to expand opportunities for members of victim groups. If the activities and experiences of any group should be represented only by members of that group, then the majority of opportunities for representation will continue to go to dominant-group members. If the bulk of the curriculum concerns dead white males and only (dying) white males are seen as entitled to teach in those areas, this ensures that only a handful of non-white-males can find employment in the university. Now, if this is our model, it does seem that, on equal opportunity grounds, the remaining opportunities should go to non-white-males. But the model itself should be challenged, on equal opportunity grounds. Actors of color will get more roles through non-traditional casting across color lines than through color-bound casting. Black and Hispanic scholars will teach and publish more widely if we permit all scholars to join voices in examining all subjects with equal freedom. Moreover, even if multiculturalism gives rise to a theater with a more diverse repertoire, or to a curriculum in which the works and lives of dead white males are no longer dominant, the authenticity thesis may still unacceptably limit the opportunities of women and minorities if it reinforces expectations that they will confine themselves to exploring the activities of the victim group to which they belong.

The Argument from Ownership

A related argument for the authenticity thesis proceeds from the claim that A-group activities and experiences are in some way the *property* of A-group mem-

bers, so that members of other groups who seek to imitate or represent those experiences are guilty of a kind of expropriation. Thus, many Native American leaders decry New Age adoption of Native American religious practices as the last in a long series of thefts: first, the whites took the land, then the buffalo, and now, in the gravest assault of all, Indian spirituality. Likewise, when a white author retells indigenous folktales, or writes fiction portraying indigenous life, this may seem a species of plagiarism, of profiting from stories that are not one's own. It is one thing for me to write a novel about my life; it is another thing for *you* to write a novel about my life.

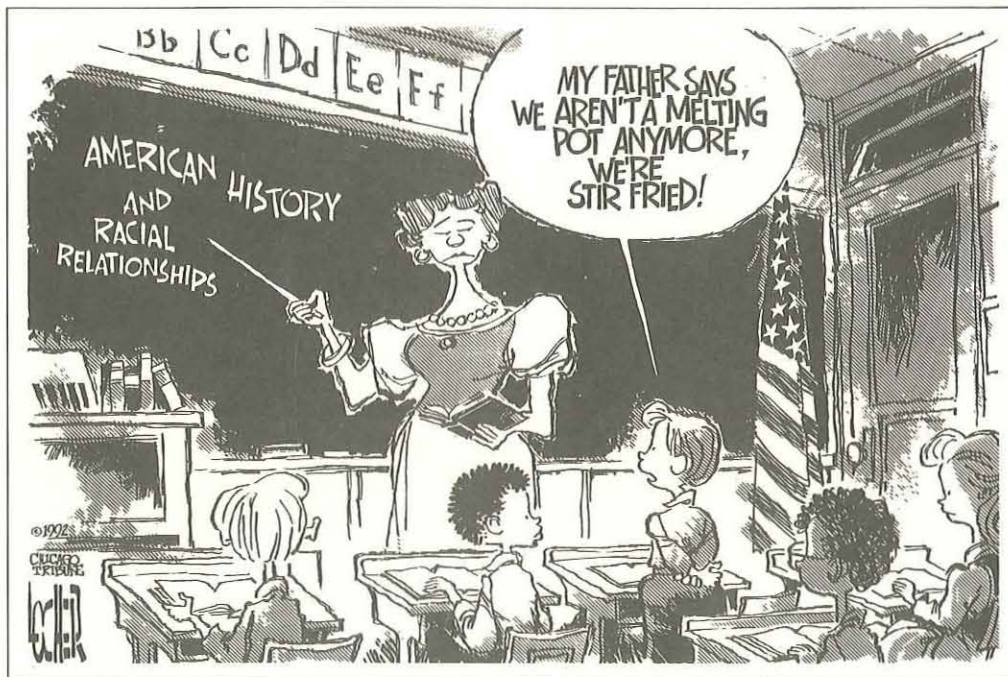
It is not clear, however, that stories, or spirituality, or, in its totality, a culture, are the kinds of things that *can* be owned; I can copyright sentences, paragraphs, and pages, but not plots, themes, or truths. Furthermore, my retelling of your stories or my imitation of your rituals does not violate your right or opportunity to perform them as well. In this sense, I can make your experience my own, without its thereby ceasing to be yours.

In part, however, the charge against B's appropriating A's stories, spirituality, and culture arises precisely because in many cases B himself seems to be treating these as property — as *his* property, as a commodity that can be bought and sold for a profit, for *his* profit, in a marketplace that continues to exploit and improv-

erish A. Sharing in someone's spirituality is one thing; trafficking in it is another. We may feel that no one should be making a profit off certain experiences; and where profit from A's experience is appropriate, it should be A who reaps it, not B. In the Native American example, these concerns are heightened by instances of outright fraud, as when shopkeepers falsely claim that trinkets manufactured in Taiwan are the "authentic" products of Native American artisans.

Sometimes, what sound like simple assertions of ownership actually reflect worries about the misrepresentation or distortion of certain beliefs and practices. In other words, the Argument from Ownership may look for support to the Arguments from Accuracy and Solidarity, which I discuss below. For example, the *New York Times* recently interviewed an Osage professor of theology who argued that whereas Indian spirituality focuses on the larger community, New Age adaptations are "centered on the self, a sort of Western individualism run amok." "The danger," this professor explained, "is that these mutations of spirituality will make their way back into the Indian world." If this were to happen, then the attempts of others to make Indian experience their own *would* attenuate Native Americans' hold on that experience, their capacity to safeguard and perpetuate it.

Nonetheless, where a B-group member represents an A-group experience respectfully and conscientiously,



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rather than opportunistically, it seems that the Argument from Ownership in its strongest form will fail to apply.

The Argument from Accuracy

Perhaps the argument invoked most often to defend the authenticity thesis is that members of group A simply do the best job representing the experiences of group A, that "it takes one to know one," that you have to be a member of group A to *get it right*. This argument focuses on group A membership as an epistemological requirement for knowledge about group A. Thus understood, the argument defends the authenticity thesis in both its broad and narrow versions: whatever kind of group we consider, dominant or victim, its experiences will be discussed most accurately and knowledgeably by its own members.

The first thing to note about the Argument from Accuracy is that it is an empirical and not a normative argument. It does not say that only members of group A have the *right* to talk about group A; it merely claims that representations of A by A's will be more accurate than representations of A by B's.

Now, accuracy is not an all-or-nothing affair, and the Argument from Accuracy can best be understood as pointing to a *likely* difference in the *degree* of accuracy of representation. It does not maintain that *no* B can know *anything* at all about A's, but only that A's are better placed to gather accurate information about A-group experiences and to submit these to more penetrating analysis and interpretation. This generalization is bolstered by commonsense appeals to the need for firsthand experience of one's subject; it posits limits to the powers of imagination, in comparison with the vitality and immediacy of "real life."

As an empirical argument, the Argument from Accuracy is subject to empirical evaluation. One possible test here might be some form of controlled experiment. For example, we might take novels about black life and experience written by both black and white authors and submit them, in a blind screening, to a panel of black readers. If the black readers succeeded in identifying the race of the author, by noting systematic inaccuracies in presentation, this would provide some support for the Argument from Accuracy; if they could not detect any telltale traces of the author's racial background, the Argument from Accuracy would be undermined. One can certainly point anecdotally both to striking examples of whites getting the black experience wrong (blackface minstrel shows) and of their getting it right (Bruce Brooks's recent young-adult novel *The Moves Make the Man*, acclaimed by many black librarians). Our conclusion here would seem to be that it is *possible* for B's to do a good job representing the experiences of A's — but perhaps sufficiently unlikely that the Argument from Accuracy pro-

vides good reason to uphold the authenticity thesis as a cautionary standard.

Some defenders of the authenticity thesis would go further and maintain that no B can ever (really) know about A's, any more than an A can ever (really) know about B's. One trouble with this claim is that it may overestimate the extent to which A's or B's know themselves; that is, it ignores our capacity for evasiveness, partiality, and self-deception. That which we have failed to recognize in ourselves is sometimes visible to outsiders. Even though they are bound to approach us with biases of their own, we gain from seeing ourselves as others see us, as well as from gazing into our own inner mirrors.

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The Argument from Solidarity

The final argument also focuses on the audience for representations of A-group experiences, but now specifically on the A audience. It asserts that the interests of A's as an audience for material about their own lives and culture go beyond an interest in merely receiving an accurate representation of these. The provision and reception of such representations is one way to create or foster a sense of community among A's, and thus it is important that A's can band together, with some exclusivity, to provide and receive them.

In this way, a women's studies course serves as more than just another academic offering in a university's curriculum, on a par with mathematics and geology; it is also a protected space where women may engage in a shared journey toward awareness of their own personal and social identities. Thus, female students may feel cheated and betrayed if they arrive on the first day of class to find a male professor, or even male students, in the class.

The Argument from Solidarity, like the Argument from Opportunity, seems to provide significant support for the authenticity thesis, but, again, only within certain limits. Group solidarity is arguably most important for victim groups — it seems to have far less (perhaps even negative?) value for dominant ones — and so the Argument from Solidarity supports the authenticity thesis only in its narrow version. Even among victim groups, solidarity may not be a value of *overriding* importance; in many contexts it may be secondary to some other value. University seminars, for example, serve many functions, only one of which

might be to provide the occasion for an identity-forming experience. Moreover, not every representation of group-A activities works as a crucible for the formation of group identity; this effect may be muted, for example, when individuals experience a representation in isolation from each other, as readers engage books in essentially private rather than shared space.

Finally, we might want to encourage a vision of the possibility of forms of social solidarity that cross fixed racial, gender, and ethnic boundaries. It is important to belong to some community; it is less important, and perhaps ultimately undesirable, that these communities be defined solely in racial, gender, and ethnic terms.

Larger Identities

Whatever the force of these four arguments in favor of the authenticity thesis, one may feel that they fail to capture something of the sheer unseemliness of a member of group B waltzing into a room, waving his A-ish syllabus or novel or painting, having the nerve to think that he can successfully discuss or represent the experience of group A.

In our initial negative response to such nervy B's, we may hear first an echo of the Argument from Accuracy. Given the daunting magnitude of the task in question — to step outside the boundaries of your own group and accurately and sympathetically represent the character of another's group — how *dare* you think you have gotten it right? But if our response above to the Argument from Accuracy is a good one, some members of B *will* get the A-group experience right, even if most will not. I believe it was Dizzy Dean who said that braggin's only when you ain't got nothing to back it up. If a white male author purports to have created a vivid, vital, black female character, and actually has done it — well, more power to him.

And yet . . . it seems that there is still something troubling about a member of group B trying to tell a member of group A what it is like to be an A — when B takes upon himself the superior role of teacher, adviser, consciousness-raiser, and so forth. I find myself drawn here to challenge B's standing to speak to A on the subject of A-ness. I am tempted to say that B has no *right* to speak to A about A-ness, that there are subjects that are simply closed to those who have not — actually, not imaginatively — experienced the necessary initiation. If a victim group is characterized in part by its shared sufferings, then those who have never felt any wounds have no business holding forth on the general subject of scars.

But while this objection strikes an emotional chord, I think it fails to stand up to closer scrutiny. While it may be arrogantly inappropriate for a B to claim that he fully understands the scope and depth of the sufferings of A, it remains the case, if our reply to the

Argument from Accuracy holds true, that he may be able to provide accurate accounts of and enlightening commentary on A-group experiences. Ten or twenty years of intense scholarly study may give a professor some claim to be able to educate students even on topics closer to their historical experience than to his own.

Finally, one may want to say to the white man toiling importantly away on his wrenching novel about a black woman dying while giving birth to her eleventh child: Write your own story! And many would say the same thing to the black woman writing her novel about a white man. We may be drawn to the general authenticity thesis in part because we believe that people should not try to pretend to be something they are not. Why try to tell someone else's story, when your own story is right there, staring you in the face? I once had a male friend whom I found rather pathetic in his attempts to be one of our group of women, in his yearning identification with everything female. His girlish giggle was particularly irritating. Oh, just give up and admit you're a boy!

But the principle that each of us should tell our own story cannot entail that this story must be the story of our own gender or race or ethnic group. It may seem naive at this moment to assert the existence of relations and commonalities that cut across these divisions; yet the effort to identify the experiences and qualities we share may well be an urgent cultural task in its own right. True, the authenticity thesis receives some qualified support from the Argument from Opportunity, the Argument from Ownership, the Argument from Accuracy, and the Argument from Solidarity. But finally, the thesis is not compelling as a response to our current cultural conflicts. For the more we make good on the hope that our authentic identity can transcend our physically and socially assigned group characteristics — the more the authenticity thesis in the end proves to be false — the better off we, as individuals and as a society, will be.

— Claudia Mills

Claudia Mills is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Colorado at Boulder and the founding editor of the *Report from the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Sources: Dirk Johnson, "Spiritual Seekers Borrow Indians' Ways," *The New York Times* (Dec. 27, 1993); Dirk Johnson, "Indians Complain of Religious and Cultural Theft," *The New York Times* (June 12, 1993).