

Ethnic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A Proposal*

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If you will consider the dualistic thinking which undergirds Western philosophical tradition, then it comes as a surprise to no one that the periodization of history is based on white male experiences as the sum of western civilization, especially the glorification of war and the celebration of unbridled “raw-power.” So, too, it is not surprising that Aristotelian logic and Cartesian metaphysics form the godhead for monocultural and unisexual education in U.S. society, which is at the least bisexual and multicultural. For a decade-and-a-half now, ethnic, minority, and women’s studies proponents have suggested that their purposes for existence were to challenge and change the *status quo*. But ethnic and minority studies people, for the most part, became parties to the evils of the academy rather than revolutionaries against them during the past fifteen years.

The first decade of ethnic studies has been characterized as one where there was no real vision; no theory for providing linkages within a framework of strategies for attaining “the prize” was developed because ethnic and minority studies proponents had no vision of what the prize ought to be.¹ The proponents of women’s studies have probably fared no better. Simple inclusion with dignity, especially absolute equality of opportunity, could have been a goal if there had been a group large enough with dedication to bring that ideal to fruition. But expediency and tangents demanded colored ethnic minority experts get their share of the “booty” before the barnyard door closed; thereby leaving us in a position of being told by “them” how much money was spent on “us” and then “they” pointed to the negative results. So, colored ethnic people began to heap injustices upon other colored ethnic people, and for some reason this “colored” oppression was supposed to be somewhat less reprehensible and odious than “white” exploitation. Now, there is surely something awry with the line of thinking which rationalizes that “the white man is just using the ‘token’ to do his dirty work,” and the reasons for complicity ought to be examined. This discussion, however, is not about the first fifteen years of ethnic studies in the academy. Let us look beyond what is really on the horizon and visualize hope—hope, for ethnic and minority people entangled in and blinded by the web of the nation’s

monocultural iconography (system of symbols).

Ricardo Valdéz and Gladys Howell have shown two problem areas with which ethnic studies proponents must be concerned in the decade ahead—unitary thinking and dwindling financial resources.² This brief presentation looks beyond the next decade as well. The purpose of this presentation is to look at what we must accomplish in ethnic and minority studies to ensure survival with passion and substance at the turn of the twenty-first century.

At a basic level we need to know who we are, i.e., we must have an intact identity. Although there are cynics who will only see identity as a point for derision, arguing instead for full inclusion in the nation's political economy, my choice is to discuss components of identity as a focal area in developing a methodology for ethnic studies. We need to develop a series of choices and alternatives which allow us to understand, as John Hatfield argues, that

We all share some things in common because we are interbreeding members of a single species, that we have *cultural identities* which divide us into local groups, we have *personalities* that are capable of transcending *biological* and *cultural* determinants.³

Engaging the components of identity can only emerge when there is some understanding that they exist. People involved in ethnic and minority studies must understand that identity is the core value in a multicultural society, for it is only after we understand who we are that we will have the courage to be all that we can be.⁴

Briefly, the three components of identity are: the biological, the socio/cultural, and the psycho/personal. The biological component of identity is the rooting of the individual's genealogical continuity (and it does not matter who the ancestors are); that is, each one of us is but a leaf on a branch of a tree so ancient that it predates the concept of time. Although some of us choose to ignore the importance of this component, the nuances are capable of allowing for a more creative and active engagement of our present circumstances and corresponding relationships. In other words, an adequate understanding of the biological component of identity is significant for mental health. Only after we begin to *accept* people such as Susan B. Anthony, Frederick Douglass, Chief Joseph, and Sojourner Truth as our own biological ancestors will we understand who we are as a people and as individuals.

The focus on the socio/cultural component of identity attempts to make some sense of what is social and what is cultural—important for individuals to understand the manner by which they fit into groups, but equally important for them to understand how they are the creators of those groups. As is easily understood, fitting and creating are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the interactions of fitting and creating (the essence of our contradictory lives) can provide data for focusing the socio/cultural component of identity—the matter of racism/color and sexism in the United States make the socio/cultural component of

identity extremely complex, too difficult to exorcise in this brief span of time. But we ought to recognize that racism and sexism are inextricably linked in our environment.

Finally, the psycho/personal component of identity, which has been identified as the ego-self, makes present time of paramount importance. The ego-self is primarily responsible for all the “paper-chasing” and “hoop-hurling” paces we put ourselves through to be what “they” want “us” to be. The ego-self is the least manageable component of identity, for it is too difficult to “objectify.” Managing the ego-self, however, is important for allowing the biological and socio/cultural to reach fruition.

The thumbnail sketch of identity components provides an elementary methodological approach for confirming our identities as individuals. Such an approach makes the individual the subject matter of individual-oriented ethnic studies in a broadly organic sense. So, engaging the components of identity can grow and develop methodologically as we understand that engaging them is an on-going and ever-emerging process—a process which cannot be captured and fixed by the scientific method and statistical analysis.

In order for us to be clear in our focus, we must have a process which transcends the masculinist and “Anglo conformist position of the academy”; we must be willing to re-tool and hone our evaluative skills, for we must know who our enemies are before we can confront them with a sense of purpose and mission. A simple re-tooling can be the understanding of how “identity” is crucial to the development of individuals; a more complex re-tooling necessarily involves an understanding of what shackles us psychically, physically, and emotionally, and we need a vehicle which moves us forward to our goal of liberation through a revolutionary education—the promise of the 1970s. Indeed a complex re-tooling forces us to understand our plights in this country and how they are linked and related to international crises—crises that exist in large measure because of our silence. In this context, I am referring specifically to the plight of people in El Salvador, Haiti, South Africa, Lebanon, and other places such as northeast India and the United States.

If the purpose of ethnic and minority studies is to develop multiculturalist and non-sexist education as a liberating experience for people, then we must agree with Paulo Freire’s maxim. He wrote: “Education is always for the liberation or for the ‘domestication’ of people, for their humanization or their dehumanization, no matter whether educators are conscious of this or not.”⁵ But we must get beyond the maxim to make progress. We must understand and make it understood that mis-education is inherently destructive; and it will become readily apparent to anyone who tries that attempting to correct the “compulsory mis-educated” is nearly an impossible task—that is, nonetheless, the continuing task before those of us who want ethnic studies to thrive rather than merely survive.

Ultimately, the purpose of ethnic studies is to invest people with the

power to act and change, power to assume direction for their own lives and to alter the prevailing societal structure so we can all share in what is justly ours.⁶ There are few people willing to share in the idealism of the previous statement, but committed persons are needed who are willing to struggle for a liberating educational process.

If you can agree that the product of the standard educational process is monocultural and masculinist (regardless of ethnicity or sexual preference), then you can possibly help develop a procedure for a liberating multicultural educational process which includes a variety of educated people with emerging options by way of ethnic studies. *Any ethnic or minority studies program existing for less than the creative empowerment of individuals should be abolished!*

If the 1980s and 1990s for ethnic studies is to have significant meaning at the turn of the twenty-first century, then personnel associated with the programs must begin to use “traditional disciplines” without becoming entrapped by their methodologies. Ethnic studies, as an area of enquiry, should be approached as an art form, because our goals are better served when we focus on real issues of liberation which confront us on a daily basis (we can profitably learn from poets regarding this matter of daily liberation as a segment of the whole).

As an artistic endeavor, ethnic studies can stand as the linking point for disciplines in the same sense that medical practitioners use the biological and technological sciences for engaging in healing. We must necessarily understand that focusing on academic scholarship alone is not enough. Our methodologies must be active. Our methods must clearly show, for example, that our acceptance of the status of “minority” too often makes us minorities. And our studies must continually include community folk, disciplinarians, students, and others in the processes and procedures for discovering means and methods to break the shackles which bind. At our best, we are addressing questions of human values, and we must continually confront individuals who stand as captains of institutions to develop an understanding of “self” and allowing others to enhance themselves. Although I am aware that systemic and unyielding institutional structures will thwart every possible effort, I recognize that people, not institutions, will make a better way of life possible—at least for me; linking with others is important in this context.

The vibrant and healthy ethnic studies programs entering the twenty-first century will be those encompassing certain radical directions in the 1980s and 1990s. The following are minimal: reducing dependence on male Euroamerican studies in colored faces; questioning societal priests, especially ourselves; restructuring institutions at every turn to reflect who we really are in this nation; involving individuals in the processes of liberation through dynamic consciousness; and a continuing willingness to accept and project the goals and promises of liberation studies to hesitant audiences.

The focus for ethnic studies must be seen in terms of a mission in the

academy and broader institutional and cultural contexts. We must persist in spite of naysayers, for a liberating educational process should enhance the political economy, socio/cultural development, and psycho/personal health.

Intent gets translated into *action* by people who have programs committed to goals. The goals for ethnic studies during the 1980s and 1990s should include the following:

1. Developing self-growth within and among students, faculty, and staff as a way of life that allows for change in an ever-changing society;
2. Helping to develop the skills suitable for a person's particular lifestyle after leaving the academy;
3. Demonstrating that *learning the rules* is not the same as selling the soul;
4. Exploring with any individual ethnic heritage as part of the learning process—allowing differences to be positive and creative forces (disciplined exploration);
5. Being concerned with the knowledge, sensitivity, and understanding of culture constructs and groups (from all directions);
6. Laying bare the nature of sexism and racism and the means for combatting their oppressive natures;
7. Fostering sensitivities to alternative social and cultural perspectives for those people interested in “being professional”; and perhaps most important;
8. Meeting the relevant needs of individuals and members of broader communities and societies that are often overlooked by preexisting conceptual and structural models.

In meeting the enumerated goals, the educational process must be a living and relevant experience in the present (which knows the past and designs for the future) and one that continues beyond the academy—not only for professional attainment but for an education which sustains a sense of personal integrity.

We must refuse participation in our own oppression with a muted voice and inaction. Therefore, in an attempt to imbue a zest for learning ethnic studies in the academy, consciousness must be expanded to include the wedding of identity to new perspectives of feeling, experience, and knowledge. To ensure dynamic survival in the twenty-first century, ethnic studies must be “An insurrection to the habitual methods of the masculinist, monocultural ratiocination.”⁸ The future is not a waiting game.

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Notes

¹Charles C. Irby. "One Decade and the Politics of Ethnic Studies: Focus for the Future." *Explorations In Ethnic Studies*. Vol. 3, No. 2 (July, 1980) 3-10.

²Ricardo Valdés. "¿Déjenme Hablar por Mi Raza!" (Let Me Speak for My People). *NAIES Newsletter*. Vol. 7, No. 1 (May, 1982) 26-28; and Gladys Howell. "The Challenge for Ethnic Studies Ahead." *NAIES Newsletter*. Vol. 6, No. 1 (May, 1981) 27-28.

³John T. Hatfield. "Components of Identity." Unpublished Mss. (Pomona: California State Polytechnic University, Ethnic Studies Department, 1975) 1.

⁴This non-scientific and unquantified statement is based on reports on suicides per year in this country. Additional evidence comes from the numbers of mental health workers dealing with clients each year.

⁵Paulo Freire. "Showing a Man How to Name the World." Quoted from *The Ethnic Studies Departmental Working Paper XIX*. (Pomona: California State Polytechnic University, 1978) 19.

⁶Helen MacLam. "'Power to the People': Ethnic Studies as an Enabling Force." *NAIES Newsletter*. Vol. 4, No. 2 (October, 1979) 26.

⁷Vine Deloria, Jr. "Institutional Racism." *Explorations In Ethnic Studies*. Vol. 5, No. 1 (January, 1982) 40-68.

⁸Letitia Bonner, Ilesia Jones, Laura Martin, Victor Santa Cruz, and Tracy Weatherspoon. "What is Ethnic Studies?" Unpublished Mss. (Pomona: California State Polytechnic University, Ethnic and Women's Studies Department) 2.