



Chapitre de livre

2006

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How to cite

MADSEN, Deborah Lea. Multicultural Futures: Cultural Diversity and the Desire of Belonging. In: Transitions: Race, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change. Wallinger, H. (Ed.). Vienna : LT Verlag, 2006.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:87718>

Published in *Transitions: Race, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change*, ed. Hanna Wallinger (Vienna & Muenster: LT Verlag, 2006), pp. 92-107.

Multicultural Futures: Cultural Diversity and the Desire of Belonging

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My primary subject is the idea of “belonging,” explored in the twin contexts of multiculturalism and American exceptionalism. I propose to offer four variations on this theme: some “high” and some “low.” I want to start relatively “low” with relations among my key concepts (belonging, multiculturalism and exceptionalism) and American popular culture. Specifically, I want to discuss the recent X-Men movies. Posters advertising the second movie featured the tagline: “The time has come for those who are different to stand united” – a play on the individual versus collective and personal versus political that is reminiscent of Civil Rights slogans. This sentiment is resonant of the climate of civil rights struggle which coincided with the first appearance of the Marvel comics.



The first X-Men comic was published in 1963, at a time when the Civil Rights Movement was beginning to gain momentum and make inroads into American society.

Let me explain that I don't see X-men as an allegory of exceptionalism or multiculturalism; rather, I see the debates that were current at the time of the publication of the first X-Men comic – and particularly debates arising from the Civil Rights movement – taken up and explored in some of these comic-strip adventures. The comic-strip form offers a “safe” environment in which to explore issues that are not represented as explicitly pertaining to race but instead are formulated in terms of “difference.”

The plots of the recent movies are framed by a Congressional debate concerning “the mutant problem”: for which we may substitute “the race problem” or “the Negro problem.” In the same way that the issue of race in the United States has been conceptualized as fundamentally a white person’s problem of white supremacy and white privilege so “the mutant problem” is represented as fundamentally a human problem. In both cases, however, the issues are framed as constituting a problem for those who are “different.” The X-Men movies self-consciously emphasize the understanding that it is human hostility towards those who are different that generates the complications of the movie’s narrative. Opposing responses to this human hostility are represented by the characters of Charles Xavier, on the one hand, and Magneto, on the other. Xavier’s dream is to bring about the peaceful co-existence of mutants and humans. His nemesis is Magneto, a powerful mutant and child survivor of Auschwitz, where his family is shown to have perished. Magneto is convinced that mutants, or “homo superior” as he calls them, will be the next persecuted minority and he perceives relations with humans in terms of war. At one stage in the comic-strip adventures, Magneto accepts from the UN a separate nation for mutants, Genosha, which is targeted by Sentinels, androids created for the sole purpose of destroying what is perceived by humans as “the mutant menace.” After Genosha is destroyed and every mutant living there is killed, Magneto devotes his energies to pursuing the destruction of humanity: he becomes the fascism that persecuted him as a child. Where Magneto represents cultural nationalism and separatism, Xavier represents multiculturalism; the US government represents a complex position: the US provides the powerbase for organized military opposition to the threat posed by mutants but the US also hosts – is the home of -- these superhuman beings.

It is important that the mutants are seen as *humans* who happen to possess exceptional abilities. This is emphasized in the movies where the humanity of the characters is represented through their appearance. Take the example of Iceman: his comic-strip figure is emphatically non-realistic but in the movie he looks like an average white middle-class teenager – this is the character who, in the movie, is never once called by his “X-Men” name. He is referred to always as Bobby (or Robert) Drew. It is in his house that a number of mutants take refuge and Bobby finds that he must at last confide to his parents that he is a mutant. They know that he attends a school for gifted children and Bobby's mother tells Rogue, unnecessarily, “We thought Bobby was gifted” – “Bobby *is* gifted,” Rogue replies. The construction of mutant-ness as a gift or a curse, a threat or a promise, is dramatized during this encounter, in the course of which Bobby's mother asks him sympathetically, “Have you ever tried NOT being a mutant?” We could easily substitute “gay” for “mutant”... “Have you ever tried NOT being gay?” Mutant-ness, like homosexuality, is an invisible difference, unlike race which is made visible on the body. It is a personal characteristic that relates significantly to an idea I will explore in detail below: the ideal of personal authenticity, of being able to live one’s life as one’s “authentic” self.

The exploration in the X-Men comics and movies is not specifically concerned with race but with responses to difference: toleration, genocide, “passing,” etc. This

attention to difference intersects with the idea of American exceptionalism in interesting ways: exceptionalism is a system of cultural belief predicated upon the idea that the America is a nation distinct from all others, possessing a singular national identity and destiny. Of course the race of super-humans, the genetic mutations that represent a leap in human evolution, is American. At the same time, America in its role as “God's police” and the keepers of global order must combat this threat. In the first X-Men movie the heroes save humanity from Magneto's plan to transform everyone into mutants by beaming a mutating ray from the Statue of Liberty. The potential victims, the leaders of all the world's nations, are gathered on Ellis Island – so we have the whole world compressed symbolically adjacent to the icon of American freedom and democracy. In the second movie, the President has been frightened by an abortive personal attack, by a mutant, into taking action against all mutants. The X-Men must convince him that the superhuman abilities of these mutants personifies American power and is a benefit to humanity rather than a threat. The point I wish to make is that the X-Men represent debates about the management of social and racial diversity within the context of America's exceptional democratic system.

Let me now turn to recent theoretical speculation about the nature of multiculturalism (which will also allow me to set out some of my terminology) but not before acknowledging that multiculturalism exists as an inescapable demographic fact – perhaps the most important fact of our time – as well as a philosophical concept, that intersects in complex (and controversial) ways with such ideas as individualism, liberalism and democracy.

These two understandings of multiculturalism affect us in distinct but related ways: we look to strategies whereby culture may reflect *demographics*: so educational curricula, for example, may be modified to take account of the ethnic and cultural profile of students receiving that education. Multiculturalists then argue for the reform of racial and cultural inequalities within existing institutions (through affirmative action or reverse discrimination programs, etc) to bring those institutions into line with the recognition of the multiethnic and multiracial character of the US. In this respect, multiculturalism is primarily a policy response to social diversity. Multiculturalism as a policy arose historically within the context of the Canadian separatism movement of the 1960s (the term was used in the Royal Commission Report of 1965) and represented an accommodation of the various demands made by each of the stakeholders in the debate. Multicultural policy seeks to promote participation in and access to the resources of society – both tangible and intangible – by ethnic and cultural minority groups. Multiculturalism as “access” raises the issue of individual as opposed to collective rights of access – for example, recently in Britain the issue has been debated in relation to access to higher education by non-English-speaking members of society. I say “members of society” because – like so much related to multiculturalism – the issue of how one constitutes the “multicultures” is debated. Are we talking about the ethnic and cultural identity of citizens specifically or more broadly about the diverse ethnic and cultural groups found within the borders of a nation state? The authors of the 1995 UNESCO report “Multiculturalism: A Policy Response to Diversity” have conceptualized this issue into a useful distinction between the “Political” nation which is created by voluntary acts of adhesion (i.e. the acquisition of citizenship) and the “Ethnic” nation which is received from the past by the whole community. In the US, multiculturalism is thought in terms of civic rights and responsibilities that are guaranteed under the law. All *citizens* are assured of their rights as individuals regardless of their ethnic origins but these rights are not

guaranteed collectively to individuals as members of minority groups. I will come back to this dynamic between individual and collective rights.

First, let me return to the idea of multiculturalism as a reform movement. The restriction of multiculturalism to modifications of existing social institutions leads us very quickly to the category of multiculturalism that Stanley Fish has wittily (and now famously) termed “Boutique Multiculturalism.” I want to take a few minutes to review what Fish has to say about this before developing the connection between diversity and “rights”. Fish’s 1997 essay, “Boutique Multiculturalism or Why Liberals are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech,” develops a distinction between “boutique” and “strong” multiculturalism. He defines the former as follows:

Boutique multiculturalism is characterized by its superficial or cosmetic relationship to the objects of its affection. Boutique multiculturalists admire or appreciate or enjoy or sympathize with or (at the very least) ‘recognize the legitimacy of’ the traditions of cultures other than their own; but boutique multiculturalists will always stop short of approving other cultures at the point where some value at their center generates an act that offends against the canons of civilized decency as they have been either declared or assumed (p. 378).

Fish’s “boutiquer,” as he calls this category of theoretical personage, patronizes (Fish’s pun) ethnic restaurants and enjoys ethnic music but “he will be uneasy about affirmative action and downright hostile to an africanist curriculum” (378). This variety of multiculturalism is so weak that it barely registers on the spectrum of multiculturalist positions but it does mark an extreme or end-point. Less weak is Daniel O’Neill’s “weak multiculturalism” which he describes in the following terms:

weak multiculturalists do not argue for differential citizenship rights, but seek a range of different goals. In the USA, these have included for example, expanding the academic curriculum to reflect more fully the contributions of minorities (p. 220).

Here we have the reformist multiculturalist who seeks to transform social institutions into a more accurate reflection of demographic reality. Against this O’Neill sets the “strong” multiculturalist who will defend “differential (or special) citizenship rights for multicultural groups based on their culture” (220). O’Neill’s strong multiculturalist is not unlike Stanley Fish’s. Fish defines strong multiculturalism as valuing “difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive.” He goes on,

Whereas the boutique multiculturalist will accord a superficial respect to cultures other than his own, a respect he will withdraw when he finds the practices of a culture irrational or inhumane, a strong multiculturalist will want to accord a *deep* respect to all cultures at their core, for he believes that each has the right to form its own identity and nourish its own sense of what is rational and humane. For the strong multiculturalist the first principle is not rationality or some other supracultural universal, but tolerance (Fish’s emphasis, 382).

Now when Fish refers to strong multiculturalism he is drawing on the influential work of Charles Taylor and specifically Taylor's 1992 essay "The Politics of Recognition."

Taylor sees tolerance of difference as a fundamental characteristic of multiculturalism in a democratic society. In a democracy, all citizens share fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right to cultural traditions. The majority is placed under a moral obligation to ensure that minorities are protected from the pressures of marginalization and assimilation. But the obligation of the majority goes further than this. Because social recognition, recognition by "significant others," is essential to the dialogical constitution of identity, positive social recognition is a fundamental need. Note that here "rights" give way to "needs." Misrecognition reflects back to individuals demeaning or contemptible or otherwise distorted self-images. Positive recognition is a need that counters negative social images (such as racial stereotypes) and helps to overcome the self-deprecatory images that marginalized individuals would internalize. Taylor is drawing on Frantz Fanon, obviously, in this formulation of the impact of negative social images on self-perception. In order for all citizens to be equal, all must be treated with equal respect. Difference must not only be tolerated but in fact must be valued for its own sake.

The valuing of difference for its own sake is taken up by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his response to Taylor's essay. Appiah begins by acknowledging the seeming contradiction of a situation where we value individuals because they embody some collective category of identity, because they are authentically Black or Jewish or gay. He asks, "If what matters about me is my individual and authentic self, why is so much contemporary talk of identity about large categories – gender, ethnicity, nationality, 'race,' sexuality – that seem so far from individual?" (149). Taylor traces the ideal of authenticity to the Romantic philosophers, specifically Herder's proposition that each individual has his or her own original way in which to be human. Taylor draws out the moral significance of this idea as he explains:

There is a certain way of being human that is *my* way. I am called upon to live my life in this way, and not in imitation of anyone else's life. But this notion gives a new importance to being true to myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life; I miss what being human is for *me* (p. 30, Appiah's emphasis).

But as Appiah notes, Taylor omits from his formulation the contestatory or anti-conventional dimension of Romantic authenticity which requires that individuals rebel against the social institutions that would impose upon them a false identity. The dialogic constitution of identity that grounds Taylor's "politics of recognition" is not only a dialogue between individuals but also a dynamic shaped by social institutions and collective categories of being. Appiah gives his own experience as an example: a gay Black man who is shaped not only by African-American society, culture and religion but also centrally by American society and institutions. The impact of these external shaping influences is conceptualized not as a mechanism for uncovering an authentic self, a core of true being, that has been obscured by discrimination; rather, Appiah uses the concept of "life-scripts" among which we are free to choose although we are not free to choose the options available to us. "We make up selves from a tool kit of options made available by our culture and society" (155). Taylor's "politics of recognition" becomes, in these

terms, a dialogic interplay of life-scripts which compel the valuing of difference for its own sake. Appiah explains:

An African-American after the Black Power movement takes the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a nigger, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive Black life-scripts. In these life-scripts, being a Negro is recoded as being Black, and this requires, among other things, refusing to assimilate to white norms of speech and behavior. And if one is to be Black in a society that is racist then one has to deal constantly with assaults on one's dignity. In this context, insisting on the right to live a dignified life will not be enough. It will not even be enough to require being treated with equal dignity despite being Black, for that will require a concession that being Black counts naturally or to some degree against one's dignity. And so one will end up asking to be respected *as a Black* (p. 161, Appiah's emphasis).

Appiah argues that precisely the same case applies to gays and other minorities. It is here that we find “strong multiculturalism” coming into play with the demand for differential citizenship rights, described by Daniel O'Neill and Stanley Fish, which I mentioned earlier. The reform efforts of “weak” multiculturalists, designed to bring about an absence of discrimination, an ethnically and culturally “blind” society – in short, to level the social playing field – give way to a demand not for neutrality but a demand for active protection and preservation of difference. Society is being required not simply to protect the right of individuals to live “authentically” but to take steps to ensure the preservation of communities defined by their difference. We might think of the Macau tribe of the Pacific Northwest which was granted in the late 1990s permission to engage in a traditional whale-hunt, despite the moratorium on whaling. Taylor gives the example of ethnic francophone communities in Quebec who have claimed the right to insist that their children and the children of immigrants (but not the children of Anglophones) be educated in French, in order to preserve the ethnic community. Appiah objects to this concept of differential collective rights on the grounds that the consequence is a prescriptive life-script for the individuals of these minority communities. Rather than enlarging the possibilities for self-determination, rather than increasing the stock of ways in which one can be Quebecois or Macau or gay or Black, such differential citizenship rights when applied to the collective reduce the possibilities for social recognition. The state may intervene on behalf of difference but the consequence is a homogenizing of cultural difference, transforming the politics of recognition into what Appiah calls “the politics of compulsion” (163). Such differential treatment too-closely identifies the body (the racial or sexual body) with political recognition. Appiah argues for strategies that would identify the personal with the political in ways that are “not too tightly scripted” (163).

II

I would like here to turn to a fairly recent literary text that explores some of these same issues: Gish Jen's *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996), which deals with a Chinese-

American family and their American-born children. The narrative opens with the Chang's move to suburban Scarshill. From the outset, this suburban space is given a racial character as an affluent Jewish suburb. But the Changs believe that they belong there, as the narrator observes, "For they're the New Jews, after all, a model minority and Great American Success. They know they belong in the promised land" (3).

Much of the comedy of the ensuing narrative arises from the fact that they both belong and yet do not belong. As "Orientals" in a Jewish community, the Changs enjoy a novelty value, which the narrator likens to being "permanent exchange students" (6). When a Japanese boy temporarily joins Mona's class, she is selected to escort him around and ensure he learns what to do. In fact, Sherman awakens Mona's ethnic consciousness by asking questions she has never thought of before. Take the following exchange, for instance:

[Sherman asks] Does she like it here? 'Of course I like it here, I was born here,' Mona says. Is Mona Jewish? 'Jewish!' She laughs. 'Oy!' Is she American? 'Sure I'm American,' Mona says. 'Everybody who's born here is American, and also some people who convert from what they were before. You could become American.' But he says no, he could never. 'Sure you could,' Mona says. 'You only have to learn some rules and speeches.'

'But I Japanese.'

'You could become American anyway,' Mona says. 'Like I *could* become Jewish, if I wanted to. I'd just have to switch, that's all' (14).

This notion of "switching" becomes a major theme of the narrative, as Jen proposes an ethnic identity that is without essence, an American identity based on life-scripts. Within the Chang family, the parents seek to assimilate; Helen explains that she has raised her children to be Westernized, not even to speak Chinese, so they may become truly American – not Jewish. But here is the crux of their problem: as Mona points out, to be American is to be whatever one chooses to be. "'Jewish is American,' Mona says. 'American means being whatever you want, and I happen to pick being Jewish'" (49). It emerges that Mona is not alone in her ethnic "switching": her friend Eloise Ingle switches between being Jewish and WASP; Mona knows some Jewish boys who want to be Black and adopt what they can of African-American culture; and her eventual husband Seth Mandel goes through a phase where he lives in a teepee in his mother's backyard.

The sense of disjunction between a collective American identity and a particular American ethnic identity is strongest for the generation of American-born children, the contemporaries of Mona and Callie, who define themselves as "American" but experience their lives in ethnic terms as Chinese or Chinese American or Jewish or Black. These ethnic designations, however, are experienced as cultural artifacts, in terms of what one wears, what one eats, how one speaks, or the manners one adopts in relation to other ethnic groups. Jen represents ethnicity as being without "essence"; rather, ethnicity is a choice, a choice among ethnic life-scripts translated into patterns of commodification and consumption. The freedom to commodify and to consume ethnic identity is repeated throughout the narrative as the essence of what it means to be American.

What is emphasized is the desire to belong and to know where one belongs. Confronted with an exhibition of Chinese portraiture where the clothes worn by the

figures are the most significant elements of the composition, Mona reflects that, “she understood what mattered most to the people in the pictures as if it still mattered most to her: not that the world would know them for themselves – they would never dare to dream of any such thing – but only that they might know that they belonged, and where” (123).

It is perhaps the need to belong that is satisfied by the mythology of American exceptionalism. The collective American identity described by exceptionalism is based not on linguistic or racial or even geographical difference but by a commitment to the values with which America is identified – and paramount among these are freedom and democracy. Exceptionalism allows marginal individuals to define themselves as American in so far as they claim a personal commitment to freedom and democracy commensurate with America’s “exceptional” commitment to these values. In these terms, the supreme irony of Gish Jen’s novel arises when Ralph and Helen Chang, who have tried so hard to assimilate and to raise their children as American – by *not* teaching them Chinese, by *not* living in Chinatown – betray their failure to assimilate by falling foul of racial discrimination legislation. Ralph will not promote Alfred the black cook, not because Alfred is black but because Alfred is not Chinese. Ralph retains a feudal understanding of relations with his employees, which his daughters find embarrassing but which Alfred finds constitute grounds for legal action. It is the failure to commit themselves to the basic structures and values of American democracy that reveals the extent to which Ralph and Helen remain Chinese. Exceptionalism permits individuals like the Changs to retain everything of their Chinese cultural inheritance that is not in conflict with the values of American democracy. So Mona can become Jewish and still be American; Callie can strive to become “authentically” Chinese and still be American. So long as they pursue these ethnic identities within the constraints imposed by American democratic values, their multiculturalism is not in contradiction with American exceptionalism – it exemplifies it!

III

Let me turn briefly to the case of a Chicana writer, Gloria Anzaldúa, who is concerned to address not the authentic co-existence of distinct “American” life-scripts but to critique what it means to be an “authentic” American. The Anglo-American subject positions inscribed by exceptionalist rhetoric are the object of her critique. She uses exceptionalist rhetoric to subvert the narratives of manifest destiny and the errand into the wilderness that justify and legitimate American exceptionalism. In her narratives, the values of progress, civilization, divinity, election (versus preterition) are turned upside down as she uses them to claim an alternative national and subjective identity. A poem that demonstrates Anzaldúa’s assault on the binary logic that supports the exceptionalist narrative of American progress and United States expansionism is “We Call Them Greasers.” Set in the period after the end of the Mexican American War, this poem deals with the destruction of a traditional village in the southwest by a powerful white rancher. In this poem, Anzaldúa uses the binary oppositions between center and margin, colonizer and colonized, masculine and feminine, civilization and nature, to deconstruct the official history of American westward expansion.

Anzaldúa’s adoption of the voice of the colonizer radically disrupts the representation of the exceptionalist enterprise. The title of the poem announces that this

poem, written by a woman of color, articulates through the point of view of a white man the racial values of United States exceptionalism (using the abusive term “greasers”). The story of western settlement, which is based upon the concepts of virgin territory, the civilizing mission, and Anglo-American exceptionalism, is still told by the Anglo-American voice but the story is appropriated for a Chicana historical perspective. Anzaldúa tells the story as a part of the Mexican history of annexation, dispossession, and colonization. She balances Anglo-American and Chicana perspectives such that the poem tells two stories at once: a story of colonial dispossession and a story of the westward advance of American civilization. The poem then articulates what Paul de Man called an “aporia” – an irresolvable contradiction between two logical positions. The poem is American and it is Mexican, both; one cannot be resolved into the other to form a neat resolution. Instead, the poem represents the instability of the Chicana subject who is neither Anglo-American nor Mexican but is both and more. Anzaldúa does not attempt to resolve this contradiction; the contradiction itself is an expression of her *mestiza* consciousness.

Throughout her writings, Anzaldúa does not sustain this deconstructive stance in relation to the values of American exceptionalism. Although she does subvert and critique the construction of a singular American identity through the exceptionalist paradigm, she also reintroduces an alternative set of binary values that promote an American identity grounded in the Native claim to ethnic authenticity. This claim is grounded in a unique indigenous relation to the land, to which Anzaldúa adds a significant gender dimension. The land is feminized and spiritualized in her representation. The poem which opens the piece “The Homeland, Aztlán”, concludes with the declaration:

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
 The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
 To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance,
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
 was Indian always
 and is.
 And will be again. (p. 3)

Anzaldúa contrasts the constructed US-Mexican border (the wire fence) with the seamlessness of the natural landscape; she contrasts the white man with the female deity Yemaya who contests his creation of the border. She also contrasts the recent history of the Texas border territory with the ahistorical character of the Indian land. Thus she creates a series of oppositions between nature and spirit, masculine and feminine, present and future, Anglo-American and indigenous. But unlike the poem “We Call them Greasers,” where these oppositions are deconstructed and remain in an irreconcilable condition of uncertainty (a rhetorical *aporia*) the oppositions mobilized in “The Homeland, Aztlán” are reconciled in the spiritual, moral, and historical ascendancy of the feminine principle. And this femininity is identified with Anzaldúa’s ethnicity. She makes an appeal to the intuitive knowledge of national identity through the female deity believed to inhabit the land. Her identification with the goddess is conflated with her

identification with the land to form a national identification as “American.” As she writes later in the collection, *Borderlands/La Frontera*: “My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s history of resistance” (p. 21) and again, “*La cultura chicana* identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish)” (p. 30). In this way, Anzaldúa establishes a new form of essentialism as the basis for her American authenticity. Rather than the white man, it is the Indian or indigenous woman who represents authentic American subjectivity. The indigene is the authentic American; the settler-colonist is a “pretender” (in all its meanings). Thus, on the one hand Anzaldúa’s work contests the binary logic that underlies American exceptionalist rhetoric but on the other hand she instantiates a new regime of ethnic essentialism, based upon the very binaries she would destroy.

IV

For Gish Jen, American exceptionalism allows a choice of ethnic “life scripts”; for Gloria Anzaldúa, American exceptionalism defines a “false America” that masks brute force, though in defining her essentialist “belonging” to America she falls back upon the foundational concept of exceptionalism. With this opposition between essentialism and hybridity in mind, I want to conclude with a very recent controversy that brings into focus some of these issues. The Miss Universe beauty pageant, screened by NBC in June this year, featured a special award for “the delegate who displayed her country’s pride and spirit best in costume.” Miss USA, Shandi Finnessey, appeared wearing a body-length war-bonnet style costume. She also wore straps studded with circular metal medallions – and very little else.



The imitation headdress was perceived as an insult by Native American tribal groups; Tex Hall, the President of the National Congress of American Indians, condemned the costume and demanded an apology of NBC and Donald Trump who owns the pageant. Hall was particularly offended that a woman should be seen wearing a war-bonnet which is reserved only for men.

The controversy focuses then upon the question of who has the right to wear “authentic” costumes. A photograph of the Women's War Bonnet Society quickly circulated to contradict Tex Hall's claim that this headdress is only for men though the counter-claim was also quickly made that these women photographed here belong to tribes that traditionally use the war-bonnet. To the objection that Miss Oklahoma 1940, Martyne Woods, wore a war-bonnet as part of her traditional costume came the response that she belonged to the eastern woodland Choctaw tribe and so is also “inauthentic.” The struggle to identify “authentic” people who might qualify to wear this “authentic” costume places in question just what it is that the costume is doing in this representation of identity. What is being “recognized” here? In one of the official photographs of Miss USA, it is significant that the image of her disembodied face appears projected against the US flag. She is shown in three-quarter profile, with her blonde hair cascading down to her shoulders. Here she is the all-American girl, identified by her bodily characteristics with the “Political” nation. But she is also the same woman who wears *faux* Native American regalia. She is performing a kind of cultural authenticity that relates to the “Political” nation rather than to her bodily ethnic identification. She chooses Native America in the way that Gish Jen's Mona chooses Judaism – and by choosing they demonstrate their “Americanness.”

This pluralism, which is more a kind of performativity, can be seen also in the photograph of Cher, which features on the cover of her 1973 album *Half-Breed*. I use the word “performative” because the knowing choice of ethnic identification (as opposed to the unearthing of some core of personal identity), the voluntary act of adhesion, requires action – the performance of that identification.



Cher's performance differs from Miss USA's in that she is identifying with her "Americanness" in relation to a negative life-script: " We weren't accepted and I felt ashamed / Nineteen I left them, tell me who's to blame / My life since then has been from man to man / But I can't run away from what I am." Now, we can simply see Cher's Native costuming as a cynical marketing strategy but even in such terms it is curious to find this identification with a negative life-script, with an image that represents absence: the inability to belong or to discover one's "Americanness." This makes the example interesting to me. It seems to point to the fact that not only the indigenous or ethnic American experiences hybrid subjectivity. Cher as Cherilyn and Cher as the anonymous Cherokee half-breed each alike represents the dynamic of belonging and not-belonging characteristic of American cultural identity.

So in conclusion let me return to the beginning to question the "Multicultural Futures" of my title. It seems to me that the dynamic between hybrid or pluralistic and essentialist conceptions of "Americanness" is inescapable. One can be many things and still be "American" but one cannot be simply *anything*. This limit on what is possible is imposed not by some idea of "authenticity" but by the values of American exceptionalism. Exceptionalism offers a framework within which the "Political" nation is constituted by voluntary acts of allegiance. But that to which the self is allied is an abstraction, an ideal, which promises belonging but indefinitely defers the moment of identification. The reality of the "Ethnic" nation and the ideal of the "Political" nation are incommensurate except through the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. To me, this is why exceptionalism remains such a compelling cultural narrative, shaping all our multicultural futures.

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