

# Reclaiming Identity

*Realist Theory  
and the  
Predicament of  
Postmodernism*

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# Racial Authenticity and White Separatism

## *The Future of Racial Program Housing on College Campuses*

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Although most institutions of higher education have made substantial progress in establishing racial democracy in regard to educational opportunity, it is arguably the case that this goal has not been fully achieved. Students of color on our predominantly white campuses are routinely the targets of racial abuse and discrimination in both social and educational settings.<sup>1</sup> Systematic social exclusion (e.g., from fraternities and sorori-

1. Numerous reports from students, faculty, and administrators confirm that racial tensions and racist violence continue to plague American colleges and universities. The *New York Times* reports that colleges have found race to be a frequent cause of friction between roommates and that racism is typically veiled. For example, parents call housing directors and say that the roommate "listens to rap and [our] daughter doesn't like that" (August 10, 1997, A53). At the University of California at Irvine a student faced trial on federal civil rights charges alleging that he sent an e-mail message to sixty Asian American students, threatening to kill them if they did not leave campus (*Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 1997); at Boston College hundreds of students "expressed pain and anger in the wake of racist incidents on campus, and what they felt was an inadequate response by the administration. . . . [A] Black student told of being shunned by a college staff member when she sought to ask a question" (*Boston Globe*, April 30, 1997); the *Christian Science Monitor* reported that students at the University of North Texas, the University of Mississippi, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill are all addressing racist incidents with conversation and negotiation, in contrast to the demonstrations typical in the 1960s and 1970s (November 21, 1996, 1); at Arizona State University an English professor gave her students racist and misogynist jokes to show students how words create action (*Arizona Republic*, February 22, 1996, A12); the Oscar-nominated director Frances Reid made a film entitled *Skin Deep* about racism among college students at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, UC Berkeley, and Texas A&M (*San Francisco Chronicle*, January 15, 1996); Central Missouri State University experienced a "near riot" in the wake of the 1992

ties), presumptive queries regarding hair, clothing, personal anatomy, food, religion, and so on, and insidious institutional tendencies to discourage students from pursuing math and science are common experiences for many Latino, Native American, Asian American, and African American students.<sup>2</sup> Far less frequently, but still with alarming regularity, students of color are the victims of racial violence, in the form of either anonymous harassment (e.g., phone and mail abuse) or outright physical or verbal assaults. While students of color on historically white campuses are often seen as fully responsible for racial segregation there, a more careful analysis allows us to see that the significantly larger white student population is systematically engaged in separating itself from the activities of students of color.<sup>3</sup> This news should come as no surprise to those who acknowledge that college and university campuses are not miraculously immune to the patterns of racial violence, injustice, and white normativity that are entrenched in contemporary U.S. society.

In this political climate, the idea of race-based student housing, a practice of intentional racial segregation that would be categorically rejected

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verdict exonerating white police officers in their brutal assault on Rodney King, and a racial separatist aroused awareness of racism on campus (*Kansas City Star*, April 25, 1996, 6); at Indiana University the predominantly Jewish ZBT fraternity "chose to have pledges pretend they were all Black men and sent them out looking for pornography, items resembling drug paraphernalia, and articles that offended student and faculty minority and women's groups" (*Indianapolis Star*, October 27, 1997, B1); at Purdue University a report on race relations indicated that students of color reported discrimination, but university officials denied any racial bias (*Indianapolis Star*, September 10, 1997, B1); hate crimes against Asian American students campaigning against California's anti-affirmative action initiative included harassing phone calls and property vandalism (*Newsday*, September 10, 1997); as part of President Bill Clinton's initiatives on race, U.S. Secretary of Energy Federico Pena conducted a forum at San Diego State University where he heard that "despite growing diversity at SDSU students of color find it hard to feel part of the mainstream" (*San Diego Union Tribune*, December 6, 1997, B1).

2. Obviously, these examples vary significantly depending on racial identity; Asians and Asian Americans, for example, are not typically discouraged from studying math and science. However, racist myths about the "natural disposition" of Asians and Asian Americans to math and science can be equally destructive to the process of intellectual development. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that "Black students in advanced classes are subconsciously perceived by white classmates as out of place" and that University of Chicago professor Jawanza Kunjufu claims that white people's "perceptions and understanding of Black culture are so monolithic that they can't believe a Black would be in the math club" (February 22, 1998, A1).

3. Consider that whereas black, Latino, and Asian students routinely live in overwhelmingly white dormitories, sit at dining tables with all whites, play on white-dominated sports teams, attend parties that are mostly white, and so on, rarely do white students venture into predominantly black, Latino, or Asian spaces (dances and lectures sponsored by student racial solidarity organizations, dining tables of mostly black or Latino students, etc.). For further documentation, see Beverly Daniel Tatum's "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*"

as racist in society at large, has become one of the more controversial strategies adopted by historically white institutions attempting to create racial democracy. African American students living in Brown University's African American-identified Harambee House claim not only that the living environment "feels more like home" but also that living with other students who have experienced the violence of racism helps them to keep their focus on academic work.<sup>4</sup> There is strong evidence that African American students earn higher grades when they are living in African American dormitories.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, program houses offer students of color the opportunity to empower themselves through the development of political identities.<sup>6</sup> A Chickasaw Indian student who lived in Cornell University's Akwe:kon House claimed that the program house helped her to recognize and survive the hegemony of whiteness at Cornell.<sup>7</sup> Students of color at Brown, Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania, Duke, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley have testified similarly. Finally, apart from issues of identity and politics, many college officials recognize that the inherent stresses of academic life are more severe for students of color attending institutions that are overwhelmingly white.<sup>8</sup>

Predictably, demands for program housing have been contentious.<sup>9</sup> Cornell's program houses have been the subject of numerous legal actions

4. See *Washington Post*, March 6, 1994, A1.

5. See *Washington Post*, March 6, 1994, A1.

6. When she was a senior at Cornell University living in the (African American) Ujaama House, Dana Miller argued that the administration's attempt to dismantle the program houses was actually an effort "to socialize students into a [racially] homogeneous group based upon the generic [white] Cornellian" (*New York Times*, May 6, 1996, B5).

7. *New York Times*, April 20, 1994, B13.

8. Cornell has increased its student of color population from 19 to 25 percent of the entire student body. Duke, UC Berkeley, Brown, and Middlebury have also successfully attracted more talented students of color through a variety of campus and curricular initiatives that include race- and ethnic-based dormitories.

Pointing out that black and Latino students have higher college dropout rates than whites, the president of the United Negro College Fund, William H. Gray III, has urged colleges and universities to do everything in their power to help students of color survive racially hostile campus communities; in response to criticism of race-based student housing he suggested that instead of asking why are "Black students separating from whites at white college campuses, we should be asking what is wrong with white America and its institutions that Blacks don't feel welcome" (*Washington Post*, March 6, 1994, A1).

9. In April 1969 black students at Cornell University occupied the Student Union in protest of various racist policies of the university administration. The first race-based dormitory at Cornell, Ujaama House, opened in 1971 as a result of that protest. In the ensuing twenty-seven-year existence of program houses at Cornell, twenty-three annual reports have been inconclusive on the overall benefits to the university community of program houses.

at both the state and the federal level, all contending that the dormitories violate civil rights statutes. While recent state and federal decisions have confirmed their legality,<sup>10</sup> the criticisms that such housing is a capitulation to racial separatists, that it is a facile attempt to buy racial peace, that it further segregates already racially polarized campuses, and that it defies the finding of *Brown v. Board of Education*, ought to lead us to question seriously the wisdom of lending our support to program housing.

Nonetheless, in this chapter I am interested in exploring how we can support the creation of residential communities that move beyond the persistently intractable antinomy of diversity versus community. In fact, I am going to argue that we should preserve racial program housing on our campuses and that we should work to establish such housing at our home institutions if it is not already available.<sup>11</sup> We teachers have the opportunity to stand in solidarity with our students, who call for program houses on the basis of politicized racial identities. Furthermore, I will suggest that by forging connections between our efforts to establish intellectual and cultural diversity, we can improve the learning environment for students of color and begin to confront white student separatism.

While the political components of racial identity are fundamental to this discussion, equally central is the epistemic status of racial identity. Thus I will argue that a realist theory of identity allows us to grasp that racially defined communities provide not only for the affective needs of the so-called target-group of students but also for the epistemic needs of a racially diverse university community. Indeed, advocating the creation and support of racial program housing requires that we strain our understanding of both diversity and community in order to hold out the possibility of creating the unlikely humanist alliances we seek in a residential academic community.

#### THE LOGIC OF RACISM: SELF-SEGREGATION, EPISTEMOLOGY, AND POLITICAL POWER

The strength of the opposition to racial program housing is formidable, in both the public intellectual sphere and in specialized academic dis-

10. In September 1996 the U.S. Department of Education ruled that Cornell University is not in violation of federal civil rights statutes by maintaining dormitories that attract mostly students of color. In 1995 the New York State Department of Education dismissed a similar complaint (*New York Times*, September 24, 1996, B2).

11. At some colleges and universities (e.g., Hamilton College and Harvard University) administrators have quietly changed student housing policies to either phase out or entirely do away with existing racial program houses.

course. Shelby Steele argues strenuously against institutional capitulation to black students' demands for program houses. He claims that the politics of difference is troubling because it grounds assertions of worth and power on difference alone. Steele maintains that the decision of (mostly white) college presidents, deans, and faculty to support black dorms, black fraternities, black yearbooks, and black student unions is not going to address the fact that "black students have the highest dropout rate and the lowest grade point average of any group in American universities" (181). Essentially, for Steele, race is an "unprincipled source of power" (182), and "when Blackness (and femaleness) become power, then white maleness is also sanctioned as power" (183). Moreover, he claims that "when difference is celebrated . . . people must think in terms of difference, they must find meaning in difference, and this meaning comes from an endless process of contrasting one's group with other groups" (183).

However, taking seriously the view that self-segregation of students of color re-creates racist social structures does not automatically entail rejecting all forms of self-segregation. Actions that appear to acquiesce in the logic of racism may also produce progressive outcomes. Of special interest here are the epistemic consequences of sustaining a diversity of racial communities of meaning, which may very well mitigate the apparent complicity of racial program housing with certain aspects of racist logic.

Without reverting to theoretically and politically troublesome versions of standpoint epistemology (whether Marxist, feminist, or something else), I would like to suggest that we consider the epistemic functions, and value, of racial identity. It is possible to chart identifiable relationships between cultural identity—in this case racial identity—and the production of knowledge. I want to be extremely clear that I am *not* suggesting that there is a determinate or one-to-one correspondence between any given racial identity and a given set of epistemic claims. Instead, I am operating on the view that racial identities can be sources of both objective knowledge and mystification. However, I am approaching this discussion with the view that cultural identities provide us with what Satya P. Mohanty calls "fields of moral inquiry" (*Literary Theory* 240). That is, cultural identities enable us to have a certain experience of the world, which, though invariably resistant to essentialist definition, is undeniably distinct from many other culturally based experiences of the world. For example, Cornel West has written extensively about an identifiably black cultural value of returning service to one's home community. Acknowledging that such a racially defined community value should be engaged critically, West points out that black colleges were "hegemonic

among the Black elite" and that the "ethic of service" was reinforced for young black students every Sunday "with the important business of chapel" where congregants were encouraged to "give service to the race" (hooks and West, "Breaking Bread" 101). I am not arguing that this cultural value on service is unique to black communities, or universal among black people;<sup>12</sup> however, viewing this ethic of service as embedded in black histories of struggle demonstrates its specificity as a racially defined value.<sup>13</sup> Culturally, black traditions of returning the benefits gained as individuals to one's home community generate an ethical framework that might organize the approach a young student takes to her education and thus the use to which she puts that education.<sup>14</sup>

Therefore, the view I am defending is that cultural identities serve an invaluable epistemic function in the process of developing ethical judgments. The maintenance of racially defined communities is central to the continued presence of culturally specific fields of moral inquiry. On this view, various strategies of self-segregation become defensible not merely in political terms but also in epistemic and ethical terms. An honest assessment of the political and epistemic consequences of self-segregation in recent U.S. history demonstrates that many of the advances gained by people of color were accomplished through self-segregation. For example, the U.S. civil rights movement offers compelling evidence of the protection of racial identity through self-segregation, and of the attendant epistemic function of racial identity. The civil rights movement was never universally black, but the center of organizing remained decisively situated within black communities and institutions (i.e., churches,

12. Diaspora Jewish communities tend to place an enormously high value on education. Now, while this certainly does not mean that all Jews value education, or that only Jewish cultures value education so highly, this prioritizing of education above many other important goals toward which a family or community might dedicate itself does in many ways establish a field of moral inquiry that is identifiably Jewish. This Jewish Diaspora identity may very well be an intangible theoretical construction. But it does, nonetheless, enable people within that cultural framework to have a given experience of the world. Importantly, that culturally Jewish experience of the world can serve as an ethical framework from which individuals approach the social world. So, when faced with the necessity to make decisions about the allocation of finite resources, a Diaspora Jewish identity may establish the ethical priority of responsiveness to educational needs over other pressing social programs.

13. For further discussion, see West, *Prophetic Fragments*, esp. 3-13; and "Martin Luther King, Jr."

14. Incidentally, such a culturally specific attitude toward education may necessarily compete with another culturally specific attitude, typically associated with the children of ruling-class Americans who view the purpose of education in terms of legitimizing one's proper place in corporate leadership, preserving family fortunes (often to the exclusion of community wealth), and generating individual economic growth under capitalism.

schools, civic groups, etc.). Pivotal organizations such as the Niagara Movement, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party, and the United Negro College Fund all developed through purposeful and deliberate strategies of black self-segregation. The success of even the NAACP and the Southern Poverty Law Center, whose early leadership was dominated by white progressive lawyers, ultimately relied on the organizational structure of black churches in the South.<sup>15</sup> Highly organized black churches provided the organizational structure necessary to the creation and existence of both integrationist (e.g., NAACP, Southern Poverty Law Center) and separatist (e.g., SNCC, SCLC, Black Panther Party) civil rights groups. This historical evidence thereby demonstrates that Steele's categorical rejection of all forms of self-segregation as entirely "unprincipled source[s] of power" belies the positive aspects of self-segregation, and ultimately of racial specificity. To claim that there is no inherent worth in racial identity, that calling attention to racial markers can only facilitate discrimination, is to claim that there is no positive relation between the meaning of an individual's life and the racial group or groups to which she belongs. Moreover, to take such a stance is to reject wholesale the view that social locations have epistemic consequences.

Underlying this view is the assumption that for people of color, racial specificity is the occasion only for victimization.<sup>16</sup> If this were the case, then of course it would be unconscionable to advocate race-based dormitories on our already racially polarized campuses. Despite this opposition, it is my view that racial identity, racial specificity, and determined racial self-segregation all have the potential to effect positive outcomes, both political and epistemic. It is arguably the case that black people working in the civil rights movement, black people who were fully enmeshed in black communities of meaning, were able to generate analyses of racial oppression and strategies for achieving racial justice (in part) because of their social location.

I want to be careful here to emphasize that I am not asserting that experience of an oppressed racial identity generates any sort of automatic

15. Aldon D. Morris's extensive study, *The Origin of the Civil Rights Movement*, demonstrates convincingly that black churches proved to be the center of civil rights organizing.

16. Consider the racist white pride and white power militia movements in the United States.



epistemic privilege or guaranteed objectivity. Following Satya Mohanty (*Literary Theory*), Paula M. L. Moya ("Postmodernism, 'Realism'"), Linda Alcoff, and many other feminist and progressive theorists, I am maintaining the view that "experience is epistemically indispensable but never epistemically sufficient" (Alcoff, "Elimination of Experience") for producing what Sandra Harding terms "strong objectivity." At the same time, the understanding of political power does seem to be at least partially contingent on the experience of political struggle against oppression. Perhaps most famously asserted by Marx, people who are at one and the same time both *oppressed by* and *central to* the continued existence of an economic, social, or political system have a unique opportunity to understand and analyze that system. There are epistemic consequences to the experience of social subordination, and although these consequences are not universally progressive, it is nonetheless evident that an accurate account of social power remains incomplete without the inclusion of analyses from oppressed people. So, in academic terms, a comprehensive understanding of one's discipline is imperiled by a failure to consider the views, criticisms, and contributions of those who have been oppressed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, on a residential university campus where students and teachers are engaged in learning not only about their chosen field of study but also about how to live ethically, epistemic diversity is imperative.

Far too often, though, these concrete details of racial identity and racist history lead white people to conclude that Latina existence, for example, is nothing more than a litany of material privation, emotional distress, and social inferiority. Such a conclusion is further justification for the view that self-segregation by people of color is just as immoral as Jim Crow-style white separatism. I would like to suggest, however, that from the immorality of racist segregation, one need not conclude that mandated universal racial integration in all aspects of public life is a necessary condition for achieving racial justice. In fact, one of the enduring hallmarks of white supremacy in the United States is the legal or practical proscription of religious services, linguistic codes, schools, political parties, and social organizations that exclude white people by signifying

17. I take as a foregone conclusion that the racist oppression of black, Latino, Native American, and Asian people by white people in the United States (and by the United States acting in other nations) is sufficiently evidenced by the histories of genocide, race hatred, and land theft. While the contemporary conditions of racist oppression in the United States certainly differ dramatically from the civil rights era, people of color in general make less money, have fewer and inferior educational and employment opportunities, are imprisoned at a higher rate, and suffer more from environmental and occupational illnesses such as asthma and lead poisoning than their white counterparts.

nonwhite racial identity. Laws that barred enslaved black people from worshipping together without white sanction, that mandated compulsory education for Native American children in white-run residential schools, and that forbid Latino children to speak Spanish in public schools are evidence of this recent history. This racist legacy is given contemporary expression in a variety of social and legal practices. In June 1998 Californians passed a voter initiative banning all bilingual education in public schools. In both urban and suburban communities in the Northeast, any group of young black or Latino men in shopping malls, on street corners, or in cars is routinely subject to police harassment and arrest for suspicion of so-called gang or drug activity. In the rural South, the late 1990s have seen a dramatic resurgence in the racist crime of burning black churches.

So we see that while white supremacist politics have consistently attempted to prevent the *self*-segregation of people of color, in many cases it is this very *self*-segregation that has been at the center of resistance to oppression, and thus the creation of racial justice and racial democracy. The analysis of racial oppression and the formation of strategies for achieving political justice are contingent on communities of meaning that are racially identified. Thus anyone concerned with the long-range goal of securing broad-based freedom and autonomy should be committed to the continued existence of racially defined communities on the grounds that different racial identities provide people with different experiences of the world. If we are to have a hope of effectively interpreting the world we need to draw on all epistemic resources. The preservation of racially defined communities of meaning secures the continued diversity of interpretations of the social world, thereby providing a richer array of knowledges from which to construct social, political, aesthetic, spiritual, and scientific accounts of our experience. Given that the most general function of the university is to provide an arena in which people may search for the truth, nowhere is this epistemic diversity more necessary than on our university campuses.

Of course, it is crucial here to distinguish between *self*-segregation and *imposed* segregation, since of course the *imposed* segregation of people of color by whites (in housing, education, transportation, marriage, employment, military service, etc.) is and has been a primary strategy of racist legal, economic, and political practice. But the deliberate and purposeful self-segregation of people of color proceeds from a different motivation and has produced different outcomes. This racist practice of denying people of color the legitimate right to worship, learn, and associate with

one another and without white interference should, at the very least, urge us to take pause as we examine one of the most recent manifestations of such denial: the widespread attack on racial program dormitories.

It is from this perspective that I object to the view that program houses are inherently suspect because they mistakenly and perniciously tend to construct racial identity as a source of power. Racial particularity is a source of political and epistemic power—and not simplistically a marker of difference from white racial identity. Moreover, the webs of meaning within which racial particularity exists are not delimited by the experiences of racism.<sup>18</sup> As Lucius Outlaw argues, “For many persons—and I place myself in this group—the continued existence of race and ethnic based communities of meaning is highly desirable *even if, in the very next instant, racism and perverted, invidious ethnocentrism in every form and manifestation would disappear forever*” (*On Race and Philosophy* 157: original emphasis).

## ESSENTIALISM AND RACIAL IDENTITY

What, then, are the strategies residential colleges can adopt in the effort to support the continued existence of race-based communities of meaning? Far too many of academia's attempts to serve the needs of students of color are preoccupied with simplistic naming of racial specificity, without sustained attention to the challenge of supporting nonwhite race-based communities. And in the face of this, one can understand a serious objection to program houses: it allows institutions to look as though they are serving the needs of students of color, when actually the program houses divert attention from the more complex task of creating racial democracy on campus. I am arguing instead that when institutions

18. A cursory examination of recent autobiographical, fictional, and theoretical work by U.S. people of color confirms that nonwhite racial identities are experienced as meaning giving, life sustaining, and identity forming—apart from racial and racist politics. Consider the expansive depiction of Southern black family life, gay politics, and racial identity depicted in Marlon Riggs's documentary film *Black is . . . Black ain't*. In her most recent film, *The Watermelon Woman*, Cheryl Dunye explores images of black lesbians in the history of American cinema. Cornel West's *Prophetic Fragments* offers an analysis of contemporary U.S. politics from a specifically black vernacular framework. The contours of mestiza identity and Mexican American generational knowledge are central subjects in Cherrie Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*. Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* contests the Eurocentric rejection of Native American approaches to change and loss as obsolete, irrational, and barbaric. Finally, Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* documents the rich structure of Chinese rites, specifically as they are practiced in the United States. In each of these films or texts the meanings of racial specificity extend far beyond oppositional relation to white supremacy and racism.

endorse the creation of program housing, they support the processes whereby students of color legitimately struggle together for complex understandings of racial identity. And while Steele is likely correct in claiming that when people of color in the United States consolidate their power on the basis of racial identity white men (and white women for that matter) *feel* incited to seize on their difference *as power*, this is not a legitimate reason to reject or even avoid any expressions of racial identity. For white people are so incited to maintain their superior position not by people of color but by the history of white supremacy that asserts the legitimacy of white racial dominance.

But this is not to say that there are no serious objections, both theoretical and political, to the articulation of racial specificity. If we acknowledge that program housing has even the potential to solidify invidious forms of racial authenticity, then to defend it effectively requires establishing, first, that it will more likely produce complex articulations of racial identity; and second, that its potential to increase racial tensions is significantly outweighed by what we stand to gain in our efforts to achieve racial democracy. Kwame Anthony Appiah has raised the possibility that all assertions of racial group identity, especially those appealed to in the creation of program houses, are untenable because the notion of race on which they rely is theoretically incoherent.<sup>19</sup> Pointing out that there is no empirical evidence<sup>20</sup> to justify the division of human beings into racial categories (*In My Father's House* 38), Appiah recommends that we give up on the practice of appealing to race as a classification.<sup>21</sup> But Appiah's convincing argument denying the materiality of race says little about the current condition of racist politics on college campuses. His claim that modern genetics shows no underlying racial essence is cold comfort to those who do experience hateful racist stereotyping.<sup>22</sup> Such a position on the overall meaninglessness of race requires

19. Appiah contends that although Du Bois aims to distance himself from the nineteenth-century biological definition of race, that biologism is implicit in the sociohistorical conception of race underlying Du Bois's effort to "defend his belief in the connection between race and morally relevant properties" (*In My Father's House* 45).

20. Appiah explains that the most recent research demonstrates that there is little more genetic variation between individuals from different racial groups than there is between different individuals from the same racial group.

21. The existence of biracial, multiracial, and multiethnic individuals does present another significant challenge to the very idea of racial classification. Again, however, the theoretical difficulties with the concept of race say nothing about the existence, or lack thereof, of racism.

22. Appiah goes on to say that in the absence of such a racial essence "being told that someone is of African origin gives you little basis for supposing anything much about them" (*In My Father's House* 39).

a willful ignorance of both the history of racial significance in the United States and the contemporary conditions of U.S. people of color in comparison to U.S. whites.<sup>23</sup> As Paula Moya has argued, "The empirical fact that there is no 'Mexican' race, that 'Mexican' denotes a nationality and not a race, and that some Mexicans are phenotypically 'white' seems to have little bearing on the ethnic/racial classification of Mexican-origin people in the U.S." ("Postmodernism, 'Realism,'" 147). So Appiah's preoccupation with establishing the lack of empirical data to explain the existence of racial identity has little bearing on the very real social and epistemic consequences of racial identity.

Appiah's exposure of the conceptual emptiness of race, however, leads to a serious political objection to the articulation of racial identity; namely, that the attempt to articulate racial identity, in the case of Latinos for example, is both theoretically wrong and politically dangerous because doing so reifies a nonexistent essence, a "Latinoness," which is then used perniciously both by non-Latinos to stereotype Latino individuals (as in "All Latinos are illegal immigrants") and by Latinos themselves who appeal to the nonexistent racial essence in order to exclude from the community anyone they believe is not Latino enough (as in "Light-skinned Latinos are not really Latino"). This tendency to enforce invidious forms of racial authenticity is the basis of what I take to be the most serious objection to racial program houses.

On this view, program houses are objectionable because they rely conceptually on a nonexistent racial essence. On predominantly white campuses this unreal essence becomes the focal point for white supremacist attacks—both subtle and explicit. Moreover, within student of color com-

23. Several randomly selected statistics are relevant here:

- 33.1% of all African Americans, 30.6% of Latinos, and 18.8% of other nonwhites live in poverty, as compared to 9.9% of white Americans (Tauber 145).
- While 10.3% of Hispanic families were unemployed in 1996, 19.0% were underemployed (Bernstein 1-4).
- Among blacks aged 16 to 25, about 35% were underemployed in 1996 (Bernstein 1-4).
- Gaps in the academic performance of black and white students appear as early as age 9 and persist through age 17 (National Center for Educational Statistics 3).
- Hispanic children start elementary school with less preschool experience than white children, and this gap has widened over time (National Center for Educational Statistics 2).
- A June 1998 report from the National Cancer Institute found that two-thirds of HIV-infected young people in America are black or Latino, when blacks and Latinos make up only 27% of the population in these age groups (*New York Times*, June 17, 1998, A22).

munities, the apparent obligation to self-segregate in program houses encourages students of color to enforce on one another authentic adherence to the contours of this unreal, essentialist racial identity. In this sense, the call for program houses is racist.

One might answer this objection by claiming that program houses rely on an ethically permissible, though unreal, essentialism of defense.<sup>24</sup> I would like to suggest, however, that to defend program houses by employing even *strategic* essentialism requires us to reassert untenable notions of racial authenticity. Moreover, as Michael R. Hames-García argues, in this volume, the reliance on strategic essentialism requires us ultimately to concede that there is no "strong epistemological justification" for the assertion of racial group identity. Instead, the effective defense of program housing rests on a rejection of the view that it is impossible to instantiate racial identity without some version of essentialism. Critics argue that without any real basis for constituting racial identity, imagined communities of distinct races are allegedly based on naturalized fictions of homogeneous racial groups.<sup>25</sup> And thus program houses are criticized for their role in reinstantiating the mythic categorizations of racial identity and thereby enforcing increasingly invidious versions of racial authenticity.

## POLITICAL IDENTITIES

Certainly, program housing cannot be defended unless there is some coherent way to conceive of racial groups. Thus I would like to propose that mythologizing fictions of universal racial identity are not the only tenable concepts on which to ground assertions of group identity. Many feminists have successfully outlined the contours of identity for "Third World women" without appealing to essentialist or ethnocentric frameworks. Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains that the category "Third World women," as a political definition, is based not on shared and falsely homogenized categories of race or gender but instead on a common context of struggle against sexist, racist, and imperialist structures ("Cartographies" 7). Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz's volume, *The Is-*

24. Omi and Winant make this very argument.

25. As Appiah has claimed, "Group identity seems to work only—or, at least, to work best—when it is seen as natural, as 'real'" (*In My Father's House* 175). Importantly, though, for Appiah, this so-called natural organization of racial categories is based on unreal idealized notions of racial identity, leading him to conclude therefore that one "cannot build [racial] alliances without mystifications and mythologies" (175).

*sue Is Power*, illustrates the heterogeneity of Jewish identities by exploring secular, lesbian, working-class, and Sephardic Jewish realities. In so doing she undermines the mistaken essentialist versions of Jewish authenticity, as she offers a progressive structure for conceiving of Jews as a social group.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Outlaw argues that we can interpret Du Bois's definition of race expressly as inessentialist, given that Du Bois understood race as a "cluster concept in which the elements are connected in an indefinitely long *disjunctive* definition" (155; original emphasis). In his most recent book, *Blackness Visible*, Charles Mills outlines a far more specific "metaphysics of race" (41) according to which the elements of racial identity<sup>27</sup> may conflict with one another in the overall determination of individual racial categorization. For example, someone who subjectively identifies as Latino may have the bodily appearance of a white person.

Following the lead of these philosophers, we can see how the articulation of racial identity can be based on a disjunctively joined series that might include shared histories, geographic origins, political identities, struggles for racial and economic justice, cultural manifestations, and religious practices. If we adopt Mills's constructivist view of racial identity, asserting that racial categories do have a social objectivity (*Blackness Visible* 48), we are not put off by a racial classification system that can categorize people lighter skinned than many whites as black and vice versa. Mills successfully demonstrates that coherent racial group identity does not depend, logically or practically, on all individuals of a given group sharing at least one essential characteristic. Exploding even the most foundational beliefs about racial identity, Mills shows that in theory and practice Americans have historically operated with inessentialist conceptions of racial identity. Dominant white normativity unproblematically classifies brown-skinned Jews as white, light-skinned Puerto Ricans as "Hispanic," and relatively darker-skinned foreign nationals or immigrants (Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Indians, etc.) as white/Caucasian. Ironically, then, the American racial group "white" is one of the best examples of inessentialist conceptions of racial iden-

26. In scholarly, mainstream, religious, and secular discourse the categorization of the Jewish people as a religious group, a racial group, an ethnic group, a nationality, or a culture remains a contested issue. Without attempting to take up this issue in all of its complexity, it is worth recognizing that many Jews do consider themselves to be members of the Jewish "race." Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, for example, has written extensively on the structure of anti-Semitism as a variety of "race-hatred" (149).

27. Mills's criteria for racial identity include bodily appearance, ancestry, self-awareness of ancestry, public awareness of ancestry, culture, experience, and subjective identification.

tity, composed as it is of diverse nationalities, ethnicities, races, religions, and skin colors.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is the effortful practice of resisting the tendency to revert to essentialist conceptions of racial group membership that opens the conceptual space for articulating the actual heterogeneous racial identities in existence. I would like to emphasize here that on this understanding of racial identity, the meaning of racial specificity extends far beyond simple opposition to whiteness and even complex political struggles against racism and imperialism to include constitutive meanings, such as aesthetic traditions, spiritual practices, and philosophical webs of belief. Program houses that provide a safe social and intellectual space for students of color and white students to address themselves to these questions thereby foster the development of inessentialist racial identities. Students of color are empowered by such an opportunity because it gives them increased authority over decisions that affect their lives and life chances. The same holds true for white students, whose racial separatism is authentically challenged by the expression of inessentialist versions of racial identity. And it is this process of maintaining dynamic tension between racial diversity and human community that stands to advance us toward racial democracy.

It seems evident, therefore, that while the process of articulating racial identities, particularly in a context of white supremacy, has tended toward the impulse to falsely homogenize identity, it is both theoretically and practically possible to conceive of racial groups that are at one and the same time ultimately diverse.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, however, *intentional* disruption of the standard discourse on racial difference and identity is crucial if we are to be successful in the effort to support these political, inessentialist, realist versions of racial identity. Program housing offers us a remarkable opportunity to engage the unique structure of academic and social life we find on our residential campuses, and specifically, to intentionally interrupt the perpetuation of essentialist racial identities.

28. In fact, one could argue that the U.S. racial category "white" is also a political identity, which masks itself as natural and performs a central role in the maintenance of white hegemony.

29. In his *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* Satya Mohanty argues convincingly to show that the opposition between conceiving of racial identity according to essentialist definitions (that racial group membership is based on one or more characteristics—such as skin color—allegedly shared by all members of a racial group) or postmodern definitions (that racial groups cannot be defined as groups since every individual is so radically unique) is actually an antinomy. Alternatively, Mohanty asserts that racial groups can be defined based on a realist theory of identity, which acknowledges that our personal experiences as members of socially defined races yield knowledge that is theoretically mediated.



## MULTICULTURALISM: CURRICULAR REFORM AND RACIAL DEMOCRACY

In only the last twenty years the standard curricular offerings in American colleges and universities have changed dramatically. Not only have the traditional disciplines undergone significant modifications to represent more accurately the global creation of intellectual history, but the categories of inquiry themselves have also changed with the introduction of a variety of new disciplines. One of the primary aims of the insurgent disciplines—and here I mean women's studies, Africana studies, Latino studies, Asian studies, Native American studies, queer studies—has been to demonstrate the diversity of experience within various social groups, for example, differences among people who nonetheless identify themselves as members of the following groups: women, people of African descent, Latinos/as, Asians and Asian Americans, Native Americans, and gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people. While these articulations of difference may very well challenge our received essentialist notions of racial/ethnic/gender identity, they do not preclude the assertion of realist political identities that are predicated on an understanding of difference within coherent groups. Let me suggest, then, that by forging connections between the efforts to diversify curricula and the attempt to create racial democracy, we can create the space for students of color to articulate racial identity that is not racist, ethnocentric, or essentialist.

Critics of curricular reform often argue that multiculturalism threatens the real work of academic inquiry, by substituting vacuous and banal celebrations of oppression for old-style intellectual rigor. For example, Steele claims that "when [racial or ethnic] difference is celebrated . . . people must . . . find meaning in difference, and this meaning comes from an endless process of contrasting one's group with other groups" (183). But these "taste of the world" and "oppression olympics" views of multicultural education are distortions. One of the chief goals of the insurgent disciplines is to undertake analysis of the diversity of individual experiences in marginalized communities. These projects are necessarily complex, given that they move beyond simple comparison and contend with the positive and political meanings of racial specificity.

For instance, even introductory courses in Latino history delineate the divergent and often contradictory experiences of Latinos with respect to economic development, political action, national origin, and racial identification. Teachers and students in these courses must contend with dismantling not only the most obviously mistaken racist assertions of es-

essentialist nonwhite racial identity, for example, of black intellectual inferiority, Latino hypersexuality, Arab brutality, or Asian rejection of human individuality. These essentialist versions of racial identity are obviously factually erroneous, hateful, and antithetical to the development of legitimate political democracy. But the intellectual and political work of contesting essentialist versions of racial identity extends well beyond the criticism of racist essentialism. Strategically essentialist assertions of racial identity, many of which have their origin in the struggle against white supremacy, are also subject to critical analysis in the insurgent disciplines. Declarations of Asians' superhuman intelligence, black women's maternal love, and Latinos' emotional intensity are extremely complex. These views appear to valorize desirable human qualities that racist ideology defines as uncharacteristically Asian, black, or Latino. However, contemporary scholars from the insurgent disciplines have demonstrated the logic by which these essentialist claims actually advance covert racist agendas. For example, Elaine Kim, in "Home Is Where the Han Is," explains how the "model-minority" stereotype of Asian Americans has fueled racial tensions between African Americans and Asian Americans. In her book *Yearning*, bell hooks exposes how valorization of black women's capacity for maternal love, as an attempt to redress slave-era denial of black women's rights to mother their children, is distorted by racist sexist ideology into the view that black women "matriarchs" are responsible for unemployment among black men, gang violence among black boys, and teen pregnancy among black girls. Similarly, María Lugones, in "Hablando Cara a Cara," discusses the racist uses of viewing Latinos as stereotypically intense; the "Latin Lover" and the "Fiery Latina" are familiar and recurrent tropes in racist nationalist discourse.

From these examples and many others we can see that directing our attention to the project of creating racial program housing on predominantly white campuses is logically of a piece with the effort to diversify intellectual inquiry. While both program houses and insurgent intellectual work serve a variety of functions, the central purpose of racial program housing and insurgent academic disciplines is the same: to provide a legitimate place in academic communities for sustained critical inquiry into the histories, meanings, and expressions of racial difference and identity. In this shared goal is the strong epistemological justification for preserving racially defined communities of meaning. Additional benefits of racial program houses include higher grade point averages for students of color and the very real testimony from students of color that the houses are a significant aid in their efforts to meet social, emo-

tional, and academic challenges in the predominantly white communities of colleges and universities. Furthermore, most program houses are not uniformly occupied by students from the designated racial group, and thus these residences provide the opportunity for racially and ethnically diverse groups of students to live and work together. Indeed, the successful proposal for the Cornell University Latino Living Center included extensive analysis and documentation of the benefits such a program house provides to the entire campus community, which is of course predominantly white. Finally, I think it is important to recognize that dormitories are only one of many student spaces on campus and that when given the option many students of color choose to live in program houses for only a fraction of their undergraduate residency, if they choose to live there at all.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, no matter how radically the curriculum changes in the academy, the basic mission of the university to pursue truth and produce knowledge about the social, political, scientific, and aesthetic worlds we encounter as humans remains the same. Satya Mohanty has asserted that once we recognize the "complexity of human nature and the deeply theoretical nature of moral and cultural practice, the realist will favor cultural diversity as the *best social condition* in which objective knowledge about human flourishing might be sought" (243; original emphasis). That is, once we acknowledge that pure objective knowledge about anything is neither possible nor desirable, we conclude that our ability to achieve the sort of "strong objectivity" (Harding) or "theory-mediated objectivity" (S. Mohanty) we can strive for will be considerably enhanced by contending as thinkers with a diversity of socially embedded knowledge claims. The slow, but undeniable, reform of university curricula to reflect this diversity of socially constructed knowledge is evidence that the academy acknowledges the intellectual and epistemic value of the insurgent disciplines. By forging the connections between the academic disciplines that take as their subject of study the histories, languages, literatures, and theories by and about people of color and the activities of the program houses, we create an institutional commitment to the possibility of heterogeneous race-based communities of meaning. In so doing, we contribute to the possibility of reconstructing these historically mar-

30. I wish to emphasize, though, that by instituting program houses, the progressive white institutions stand to gain in terms of racial integration and racial democracy is far more expansive than increasing grade point averages and making students of color more comfortable.

ginalized categories of identity, we challenge white student separatism, and we promote racial democracy by supporting politically defined racial communities.

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