"Just Multiculturalism": Teaching Writing as Critical and Ethical Practice

Laurie Grobman

There is little doubt that multiculturalism has an important place in composition studies. From the proliferation of "multicultural" readers to the transformation of postcolonial, feminist, and ethnic theories into critical writing practices, it is clear that many compositionists have embraced a multicultural commitment to tolerance and difference, particularly with regard to race, gender, and class. This "ethical turn" in composition seems almost paradoxical, however, in the face of postmodern skepticism and its implications for the relativity of knowledge and ethics.

At the heart of this problem of relativism for composition is whether the postmodern rejection of the notion of progress and lack of criteria to evaluate ethical worth undermine the most significant objectives of the multicultural perspective in composition: to eliminate oppression, promote equality and justice, respect cultural differences, and build a human community across cultural lines. That is, do the concepts of oppression, racism, sexism, liberty, compassion, and justice lose their ethical force if they are nothing more than constructions of a particular individual, community, or culture's contingent belief system? How do we reconcile multiculturalism's ethical aims with its apparently relativistic implications?

In this article, I will argue for what I call *just multiculturalism*, which holds justice rather than tolerance or difference as multiculturalism's first principle, as one path to consider as a way out of the relativist trap. With justice as a first principle, egalitarianism and humanitarianism become central to the multicultural project, and there are no fundamental contradictions, even if there are no easy answers. Just multiculturalism posits that there is no necessary contradiction between a genuine multiculturalism committed to both difference and shared humanity, an in-between space
between relativism and reductionist universalism that allows us to be committed multiculturalists without being hamstrung in the fight for social and political justice. As Iris Marion Young asserts, "appeals to justice still have the power to awaken a moral imagination and motivate people to look at their society critically, and ask how it can be made more liberating and enabling" (35). Centralizing issues of social justice and human rights in the multicultural endeavor, just multiculturalism provides a theoretical framework for teaching writing as critical and ethical practice. In the classroom, just multiculturalism encourages students to engage in cross-cultural understanding, judgment, critique, and dialogue, and can provide students with a more critical and nuanced understanding of the egalitarian aims of multiculturalism.

**Multiculturalism and the Epistemological Trap of Relativism**

Surely, multiculturalism is under assault, from the clichéd diatribes of conservative intellectuals such as Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, and William Bennett to academic opponents' claims of diluting education to the racial divisiveness of identity politics. In my view, however, multiculturalism's association with cultural and ethical relativism is its central intellectual and ethical weakness. The implications of relativism on/from multiculturalism threaten its integrity and effectiveness as both an academic and political movement. I quote David Theo Goldberg at length:

Cultural studies and the associated expressions of multiculturalism standardly reiterate their commitment to the nonfoundational and nonessentialist implications of social construction. Nevertheless, they have failed completely to theorize a nuanced understanding of the relativistic implications of a nonfoundational and nonessentializing multicultural commitment, resorting, instead, mostly to simplistic assumptions of cultural relativism. This failure has enabled a more or less uncontested (re)emergence of dangerous claims to the truth. . . . If the truth is relative simplistically to the group proclaiming it, then all claims to truth, no matter how much they lack substantiation, are on equal footing. (15)

Certainly, there are many forms of relativism: ethical relativism, cultural relativism, descriptive relativism, normative relativism, metaethical relativism, weak relativism, and strong relativism, to name some of them. For some philosophers, cultural relativism is descriptive (noting certain sociological facts about the variations in ethical and moral values from
culture to culture) while ethical relativism is normative (that morality itself is relative to culture or individual) (see Cavalier). Others, however, use the terms cultural and ethical relativism interchangeably. The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University defines ethical relativism as "the theory that holds that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture." Similarly, James Rachels argues that cultural relativism, a "theory about the nature of morality" (18), holds that "there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more" (17).

The relativist implications of multiculturalism derive from the postmodernist antifoundational critique of Enlightenment ideas about reason, science, and progress. On the one hand, this critique has contributed enormously to issues of justice and fairness. Postmodernism has exposed the oppressiveness of foundational claims; led to a reconsideration (and some redress) of injustices based on race, class, and gender; recovered previously silenced voices and discourses; and led to a committed effort to respect cultural differences and to refrain from imposing privileged views on the colonized.

Ironically, however, the antifoundational critique actually undermines the multicultural mission to foster social justice. Denied theologic, scientific, rational, or ethical foundations, knowledge and value claims cannot be subject to judicious consideration. Combined with profoundly legitimate concerns about imposing one culture's will upon another, especially an Other, epistemological relativism has led to a general consensus that no culture can make value judgments of others, for there are no transcultural, universal standards by which to judge any cultural practices, beliefs, or values. Indeed, antifoundationalism brings into doubt the notion of "human rights," itself perhaps a Western, even male, construct that excludes women and people of color.

Simply put, cultural relativism cannot coexist with efforts to promote values of fairness and justice in multicultural America and the world. Positing that value claims are simply reducible to culture, cultural relativism has dangerous implications. While different societies have different moral codes, and while standards of rationality and morality change over time and place, not all ethical standards are of equal value, nor are transcultural or intracultural ethical assessments necessarily invalid.1 If we accept cultural relativism, we accept that we cannot judge one societal code better than another and that we should be tolerant of the practices of other cultures, regardless of how horrific they may be. This dilemma comes into play in dramatic ways when we think about the
perhaps conflicting claims of both feminism and multiculturalism. The
defense of cultural practices in the name of cultural relativism largely
affects women in cultures that often victimize them in their personal,
sexual, and reproductive lives. Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban argues that while
anthropology as a discipline has traditionally embraced relativism, many
anthropologists have begun to challenge this view on the grounds that it
promotes human rights abuses worldwide—especially those involving
abuses against women. Fluehr-Lobban argues, finally, that “we need to
be sensitive to cultural differences but not allow them to override widely
recognized human rights.” Of course, acknowledging that human rights
exist flies in the face of relativism, which asserts that no right can apply
equally to all human beings. Goldberg argues that “a more robust and
more robustly nuanced conception of relativism underpinning the
multicultural project will enable distinctions to be drawn between more
or less accurate truth claims and more or less justifiable values (in contrast
to claims to the truth or the good)” (15). It is through just multiculturalism
that I hope to articulate such an understanding.

Wrestling with Relativism in Composition
In composition, the postmodern antifoundational critique has led to a
more complex awareness of language’s relationship to ideology in the
construction of knowledge. Language’s self-referentiality, referring not
to any outside world but only to itself, makes “‘reality’” merely a
“linguistic artifact” or construction (Blum 92). Thus, language, as we
now understand it, is infused with power relations, particularly gender,
race, and class. In turn, compositionists have embraced the multicultural
perspective in scholarship and teaching, viewing rhetorics of tolerance
and difference as powerful tools in the fight against rhetorics of hate and
injustice. Simultaneously, we have come to recognize the multiple
literacies students bring with them to our classrooms and appreciate the
ways diverse literacies enrich the learning process (see Lu), even though
we still wrestle with how those literacies are to be reconciled with the
conventions of academic discourse and the expectations of the profes­

Yet, despite the antifoundational critique’s valuable contributions to
the discipline and the way we understand and teach writing, relativism
increasingly concerns compositionists who, committed to issues of social
justice and their relevance to the teaching of writing, find themselves in
a difficult, disquieting place. Without any fixed or stable truths external
or internal to humans, what grounds our commitment to the humanitarian
aims of multiculturalism? How should this contingency affect how we teach and how (and what) students write? If language and texts always and only reside within networks of power, rhetoric becomes self-serving, undermining our humanitarian efforts, and becomes ineffectual, reducing us to rhetorical functions rather than agents (Trimbur 125–27). If everything’s relative—including the values associated with multiculturalism—what business is it of ours to teach these values?

For years, compositionists have questioned the implications of relativism on our discipline. While many scholar-teachers have reconciled for themselves how to teach ethics and multiculturalism in a relativistic context, I hope to explain why, for me, these important efforts do not go far enough in resolving the relativist dilemma in composition.

As far back as 1989, Charles Paine observed that radical teachers’ visions of emancipation are relative and “radically contingent on their personal economies” (563). Paine, however, was not hamstrung by this epistemological dilemma. Since democracy and equality are not “transcendent goods” that will inevitably emerge through radical pedagogy, he argues, teachers must “accept the role as manipulator” (563), make their agenda clear to students, and act as models of the behaviors and attitudes they want to impart, including being open-minded about students’ ideas (564). Clearly, Paine’s commitment to his personal value system remains unshaken in the face of postmodern skepticism. However, I am troubled by the idea that an instructor’s personal belief system should itself be at the center of instruction (what if an instructor’s personal belief system is reprehensible?) as well as by his acknowledged objective to manipulate students to his views. Moreover, while being open to students’ views is crucial to the learning process (for both student and instructor), what if these views are hateful? Where, if at all, do we draw the line?

Asserting that compositionists have ethical obligations at the heart of our mission, Patricia Bizzell looks beyond the personal to the social to establish ethical authority. She argues that compositionists and literary specialists should realize that “usable” rather than “transcendent” truth and “respectable” even if not “unimpeachable” authority do exist (665). Answering the question of why others should respond to instructors’ socially-constructed and ideologically infused claims, Bizzell re-imagines our task as rhetorical: “to aid everyone in our academic community, and in our national community, to share a discourse” (665) and “collectively generate trustworthy knowledge and beliefs conducive to the common good” (671). But with nothing more than the contingent beliefs of the academic community behind her, Bizzell’s position may be too
easily dismissed by students (and their parents) as merely the beliefs of a community "under the control of a 'political correctness' police" (Rorty 74). I am not completely comfortable with the notion that the academic community alone should be the primary determiners of cultural values, for it may imply an elitism contrary to the egalitarian aims of liberatory pedagogy.

In her more recent work, especially her call to reorganize literary studies along the lines of Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a "contact zone," Bizzell provides more concrete ways to engage multicultural difference. Arguing that English Studies should be organized around "historically defined contact zones, moments when different groups within the society contend for the power to interpret what is going on," Bizzell places reflective multicultural dialogue at the center of her course ("'Contact Zones'"). In "Negotiating Difference: Teaching Multicultural Literature," Bizzell goes a step further, arguing for the collapsing of boundaries between literature and composition and using literary texts to "examine how all sides engaged issues rhetorically" at crucial moments in U.S. history (166). Among her primary goals are to "educate our students to be effective communicators in a multicultural democracy" (170), to "foreground ... the negotiation of difference" (173), and to conceive of cultural diversity as a "remedy for social injustice" (173).

Candace Spigelman invokes classical rhetorical models to argue that we can contribute to and extend the scope of our students' ethical characters. However, unlike Aristotle or Cicero, she argues, today's writing teachers "try to provide instruction in virtue without promoting a single established code of principles or values but also without succumbing to a moral relativism that would obviate rhetoric's ethical purpose" (324). Spigelman points out that "to openly acknowledge our own position and to admit that we are promoting it is to potentially place ourselves in the company of certain vocal minorities who advocate the teaching of a narrow set of values in American classrooms (see, for example, Bennett; Bloom; D'Souza; and Hirsch)" (326). While I am also somewhat reassured by rhetoric's ethical tradition, I still have questions that beg answers: How can we be assured our aims are any less narrow than those who preceded us, or of the conservative critics Spigelman cites? Isn't it that we believe our more egalitarian aims are more just? Are they more just, or do we merely believe them to be?

Phyllis Ryder finds her answer in "committed relativism" (519). Embracing the strategy of "liberation morality" (517), which bases epistemological positions and action on a "concern for others and a self-
reflective analysis of whose interests are being served" (517). Liberation morality asserts that the "socially-constructed view of knowledge is more ethical than other views and that 'proper' action should be based on concerns for all humanity" (513). This theory says that we "choose actions and ideas by selecting theories and actions which will not restrict or harm people" (518), and we make these selections by "analyz[ing] situations according to relations of power" (518), for "positions which dominate others are immoral" (513). By analyzing who benefits (and who loses) from uncommitted relativistic positions, students are forced to "judge positions and, therefore, justify actions" (522), since asking students to "respect" others' beliefs without the moral authority to judge them serves the status quo (521).

One could take issue with Ryder's position based on her assertion that a socially constructed view of knowledge is "more ethical" than other views, since one of the fundamental claims of relativism is that no ethical or knowledge claim can be "better" or more progressive than another, or, at the very least, that we can never know it to be. Such assertions involve judgment (which she asks of her students), but relativism precludes ethical judgment. More significant for me, however, is that Ryder does base her classroom approach on notions of human interests, concerns, and freedoms, including freedom from harm, without ever acknowledging an allegiance with humanist (or even universalist) thought but rather insisting that we claim "our role as teachers in the world of relativism" (519).

Finally, Marilyn Cooper uses Emmanuel Levinas' and Zygmunt Bauman's postmodern ethics to develop a new kind of critical pedagogy: treating students as "responsible" by "allow[ing] them to take positions" and "enabl[ing] them to reflect on and take responsibility for the effects of their arguments and writing." For both Levinas and Bauman, morality is "grounded in a pre-ontological impulse to be responsible for the Other" and is an "absolute obligation," an "expression of the fundamental sociality of humanity." However, Cooper argues, this impulse does not constitute the submission to a preexisting established or universal code, nor does this obligation mean that people are naturally good or responsible most of the time. In writing classrooms, critical must facilitate students' awareness of the complexities and contradictions of their perspectives on ethical issues, offering students alternative perspectives but not presenting these as correct. Postmodern ethics is thus more appropriate in our postmodern "world of difference, ambivalence, and no foundations," according to Cooper, since we help students to learn how to "conduct themselves responsibly, if not with certainty, in the ambigu-
ous moral spaces of diversity." I fully agree with Cooper that we should not force our ethical views on students and that without their participation in reflective meaning-making, any value transformations that might occur will be superficial at best. However, her instructional approach seems to me to leave questions of relativism unanswered. Clearly, Cooper has an ethical agenda for her students: to feel responsible for the Other. Moreover, her goal for students to "learn to be writers and responsible citizens" carries with it a shared, specific meaning of ethical accountability, even if we avoid calling it "universal" or "absolute."

**Just Multiculturalism: From Tolerance and Difference to Commonality and Difference**

Insofar as cultural relativism affects what we do in the multicultural writing classroom, I would argue that it precludes us from saying our values of justice, fairness, and equality are "better" than values of bigotry and hate and that our composition classrooms ought to encourage anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-classist, and anti-homophobic attitudes. Most significant, it also precludes rather than promotes multicultural understanding and social cooperation, for there is no understanding or dialogue without judgment, and there is less chance for meaningful interaction between cultures (globally, nationally, locally, individually) when multiculturalism is understood as asserting that each culture should live as it sees fit. I suggest that while the forms and shapes of multiculturalism are multiple, the overriding principles shared by most, at least in the discipline of composition, are *tolerance* and *difference*. As Julie Drew argues, "the left has embraced multiculturalism because it believes that tolerance and diversity are ethically sound goals" (306–07). Just multiculturalism, as I will soon illustrate, substitutes justice for tolerance and difference as its first principle.

Multiculturalism, as our students have experienced it in high school and college, typically involves the study of all different kinds of cultures (including German, Roman, Greek, and so on), and the appreciation of everything another culture has to offer. Multiculturalism is about different customs, food, dress, religious celebrations, what Gary Olson calls "cultural and intellectual tourism—an Epcot Center approach to culture that amounts to a process of recolonization" (48). Drew, who places ethics at multiculturalism's center, points in particular to the ways multicultural readers, used in many disciplines and at many levels, commodify the Other, reduce difference, and convince students that difference has no bearing on their own lives but is foreign and exotic
Rather than engage in dialogue or negotiate difference, students are like tourists entertained by the Other, and "historical conflicts and intercultural differences that require more than a passing glance to detect have been erased" (301). Most significant, Drew argues that such cultural tourism lacks an "ethical dimension," because the encounter with the Other, constructed by the discourse of multiculturalism and with the authority of the textbook industry and higher education behind it, positions the student as "the dominant and voyeuristic Same to the Other represented in the text," a relationship void of critical reflection or awareness (302).

These forms of multiculturalism go by many names ("corporate," "liberal," "boutique," "institutionalized"), but, as Goldberg suggests, what unites them is their lack of concern with the "redistribution of power or resources" (7). They pay "lip service" to cultural difference but keep economic and political demarcations intact, pay attention to the letter of the law regarding affirmative action policies, and commodify multiculturalism and use it as a marketing strategy, even and especially in the academy (8). While such multicultural commitment has brought about women's and ethnic studies programs, it nevertheless relegates them and the professors and students in them to the margins, thereby "appropriating the idea by undercutting the practice" so that these programs can be neither transformative nor resistant (8).

By learning that multiculturalism is merely about cherishing and celebrating diversity, students neither formulate nor permit judgment of any kind. In my experience, students write about "tolerating" difference, "respecting difference," and gaining an "appreciation" or "understanding" of other cultures, but almost never interrogate these terms or get beyond any superficial understanding of them. Indeed, "respect differences" has become so commonplace a mantra that it was even part of NBC's celebrity service messages in 2001. But it has lost its critical and meaningful edge for our students. When I pose questions about condemning African societies that force women into genital mutilation, in class after class, most students respond that "that culture wants that practice," it "isn't any of our business," "who are we to judge?" and "who cares what happens over there?" As Satya Mohanty suggests, cultural relativism produces an "overly general and abstract kind of tolerance that is divorced from an understanding of another culture (112).

This kind of tolerance is not only patronizing but counterproductive. Tolerance reinscribes marginal/center dichotomies, constructing one group as subordinate and in need of benevolence from the dominant/
superior group. I do not want to be tolerated, but heard (even if not listened to), engaged with, not simply patted on the head like someone might do with a child or someone whose ideas are dismissed without consideration or reflection. Moreover, I will not tolerate that which is reprehensible—that which violates justice, fairness, egalitarianism, and denies to some people a common humanity and the rights that go with it.

Let me be clear here that my intention is not to demean my students. I suggest that their benign version of multiculturalism and adherence to relativism are entirely understandable, given their educational and “pop cultural” experiences with multiculturalism. In contradiction to William Perry’s theory of moral and intellectual development, I am not convinced my students will necessarily grow to deeper levels of critical consciousness as they proceed through college, as Perry suggests. Multiculturalism has convinced students that they must never judge another culture; anything goes except, of course, “political incorrectness.” Indeed, the whole notion of political correctness smacks of hypocrisy: students must be politically correct, but they need not worry about the ethical underpinnings, since ethics are relative. This kind of political correctness leaves our students perplexed about multiculturalism and its relationship to ethics.

Stanley Fish addresses the uneasy convergence of relativism, tolerance, and multiculturalism and concludes that at a conceptual level, multiculturalism is an irresolvable puzzle due to the dilemma multiculturalists face when intolerance presents itself. Fish argues that “boutique” multiculturalists are not really multiculturalists at all, for their “superficial” (378) tolerance of difference stops short of difference that violates their “first principle”—human rationality (“or some other supracultural universal”) (382). Strong multiculturalists, in contrast, whose first principle is tolerance, confer “deep” respect to all cultures (382). But strong multiculturalists usually blend into boutique multiculturalists when intolerance presents itself, for the strong multiculturalist will typically not tolerate intolerance. That is, when another culture demonstrates its intolerance, when its “distinctiveness that marks it as unique” is in fact defined by its intolerance (383), the strong multiculturalist usually retreats, revealing himself to be a boutique multiculturalist after all, even though the boutique and strong multiculturalists’ inabilities to come to terms with difference are “asymmetrical” (384): the former does not take difference seriously, while the latter takes it so seriously as a “general principle” that he cannot respect
a particular difference that violates a general acceptance of tolerance of difference (384). Strong multiculturalists who “stay [the] course” and thus become “really strong” multiculturalists revert to “uniculturalists” because they tolerate intolerant cultures (384). “No one,” therefore, “could possibly be a multiculturalist in any interesting and coherent sense” (384).

Fish’s argument against an intellectual justification for multiculturalism is flawed, in my view, by its embeddedness in and overemphasis on tolerance. I will return to my critique of Fish later, but for now, I want to consider how the prominence Fish ascribes to difference affects the associations of a politics of difference with the problems of critical multiculturalism.

Critical multiculturalism emerged in response to the overly reductionist tendencies of the more benign versions. Critical multiculturalism is based on a politics of difference, turning away from what David Palumbo-Liu calls a “pluralistic argument that all cultures share certain expressive values” (2) because, it is asserted, such pluralistic stances reinforce hegemonic, monocultural, and homogenizing structures and values. Critical multiculturalists advocate a critique of the power relations that work to undermine efforts at equality and attempt to focus on and thus remedy the uneven distribution of goods, power, and access to knowledge. Critical multiculturalism emphasizes that multiculturalism must do more than talk about “appreciation” and “understanding,” which can too easily mask the systemic roots of racism. As Rorty puts it, “in contrast to such facile exercises in ‘sensitivity,’ genuine discussion about the divisions in American society would concentrate on disparities of power rather than differences in culture” (74). Critical multiculturalism attends to power, structural inequalities, injustice, discrimination, and hate. It likewise reminds scholar-teachers to avoid reducing difference and co-opting multiculturalism.

Henry Giroux points out critical multiculturalism’s significant achievements, especially how it has exposed the ways class, race, gender, and sexual hierarchies are reproduced by systems of domination and exclusion (61). Critical multiculturalism has likewise uncovered and attempted to interfere in the production of knowledge, challenging such “foundational categories” as canons as well as the “‘high’” and ‘low’ cultural divide,” and worked at establishing opportunities for minority students to gain access to higher education (62). It has also created broader pedagogical and curricular opportunities for students (so they are pluralized rather than monocultural), and has linked culture, politics, and
pedagogy to explore the ways in which student work can be socially powerful (62).

For all its significant contributions, I would suggest, however, that critical multiculturalism is hampered by its overriding emphasis on difference and the relativistic understandings it implies. As Peter Vandenberg observes, despite the variations on multiculturalism within composition studies, there exists a "rather surprising degree of convergence among definitions" in its "transformative, pluralist" emphasis on difference and diversity (554). What concerns me most of all is the kind of writing I see from students semester after semester in the multicultural writing classroom (as well as my multicultural literature classes). In my experience, students' writing generally evidences a neutral, at best, and patronizing, at worst, tolerance and a routine celebration of difference that is void of judgment, critique, and genuine cross-cultural understanding. Many of my students express views that we should not feel superior to cultures other than our own, but also that we should not "worry about" them either, instead remaining concerned only with "our own," however defined. Echoing admonitions against cultural superiority, students often cut off the possibility of multicultural dialogue, genuine cross-cultural engagement, and serious reflection on the systematic injustices confronting minorities and the poor. As Mohanty suggests,

Even Palumbo-Liu acknowledges that "within a critical multiculturalism that remains attentive to the problematics of difference and its appropriation, it is crucial to map out common ground" (18). Palumbo-Liu asserts that such is the goal of his edited collection, The Ethnic Canon, which aims to complicate notions of the canonical "ethnic text" while simultaneously asserting a "common purpose" of a "cultural politics of reading and interpreting ethnic literatures" (18–19). Yet, as Giroux argues, critical multiculturalism generally leaves little room for action, particularly in the classroom. Giroux points to multiculturalism's critical focus on textuality and theory insulated from engagement (67). Theory, he argues, must become more socially useful and "politically respon-
Laurie Grobman

I believe just multiculturalism has such possibilities, because it centralizes a concrete, albeit contested, notion of justice as its principal aim.

Finally, Rorty argues that multiculturalism's emphasis on difference dilutes its egalitarian aims. While Rorty, in my view, goes too far in the other direction against a politics of difference altogether, he does point out that justice is, above all, what multiculturalism must aim for. As he explains, the "simple, straightforward, vicious, terrifying racism that still forces most blacks and browns to struggle desperately, and often hopelessly, for jobs, status, and security is not a result of a failure to 'recognize cultural diversity'" but "can be mitigated only by appealing, as Martin Luther King did, to whites' sense of justice toward their fellow Americans" (74).

*Just multiculturalism* turns from tolerance and difference to commonality and difference and brings with it the potential for meaningful action. Like critical multiculturalists, I am skeptical of the rhetoric of diversity and its potential to mask the fear of differences that can underlie it. I acknowledge the danger in embracing the notion of a common culture that respects and celebrates difference in the guise of assimilationist politics. I agree with Matthew Wilson that "multiculturalist mass tourism" "tame[s] otherness and difference" (1). There is certainly a danger when "experience is interpreted in universalist terms, thus making us all, underneath, the same, except for some exotic surface differences" (1).

But I do not believe that to embrace something ultimately human among us is inevitably reductionist; indeed, I think it is vital. We share a common humanity, experienced differently, and culturally encoded. As Sue Hum writes of her own experience as an ethnic minority woman, "an external materiality, my cultural identity, made public because of my genotype, defined as the ethnic Other, is at times burdensome.... Because ethnicity holds great currency/capital within this discipline [composition and rhetoric] and institutional setting, Others are dissected, itemized, reconstituted, and appreciated on the basis of their differences and not their humanity" (578). Hum does not aim to universalize difference, but to encourage compositionists to work harder to realize the revolutionary potential of multiculturalism rather than reinforce colonialism, but I interpret her words as also calling for a middle ground somewhere between difference and commonality. I think, further, that it is blatantly unfair to assume that all (or even most) of our students would want to be defined primarily by their difference. Certainly all of us—whether of a
minority culture or not—have different levels of allegiance to our cultures and varying levels of cultural identity. Some people may even disagree with much of their own culture’s value systems. Identities are multiple, not reducible to one particular culture, even the one which is most visible. Identities are also fluid and dynamic, always changing, and always constantly influenced by various intersecting and even conflicting ways of knowing and behaving. I am not suggesting that multiculturalism should ignore the socially and politically constructed nature of difference. We must pay greater attention to the ways many groups have been subject to discrimination and oppression based on difference. I am suggesting that for multiculturalism to do its most important work we must understand difference as a means to, not deterrent of, human understanding. As Young explains, in the ideal of participatory democracy, “groups do not stand in relations of inclusion and exclusion, but overlap and intermingle without becoming homogenous” (239).

My sense that justice should be central to multiculturalism is based on the same kind of intuitive and urgent reflection that drove Fluehr-Lobban to call for anthropology’s acknowledgment of human rights. After twenty-five years of studying the practice of female genital mutilation in the Sudan, and after reflecting on how she felt “trapped” by her simultaneous allegiances to cultural anthropology, the Sudanese culture, and feminism, Fluehr-Lobban acknowledged “a moral agenda larger than [her]self, larger than Western culture or the culture of the northern Sudan or [her] discipline.” Just multiculturalism opens up opportunities to “challeng[e] our conceptual framework for understanding identity and difference” (Hum 581). It is more than an “exploration of cultural content” but a means for “ideological and pedagogical realignment” (582)—a “critical democracy predicated on the liberal agenda of equal opportunity” (582). Just multiculturalism grounds the multicultural mission in egalitarianism and works toward what David Rothgery calls the “necessary directionality for the human condition and the condition of the planet we inhabit,” a continuum moving toward the alleviation of suffering and cruelty (243–44).

How can social justice as a first principle help us out of the relativistic dilemma? Actually, social justice poses its own particular problems with regard to relativism, thereby providing no easy answers. Indeed, Tariq Modood points out that many theorists question “whether the pursuit of a universal theory of justice may not itself be an example of a Western cultural imperialism” (200). Further, in their introduction to Social Justice: From Hume to Walzer, David Boucher and Paul Kelly emphasize
the diverse, even contested, nature of social justice (15). Compositionists wrestling with relativism as it affects how we teach writing can benefit from the complex discussions taking place within political theory, although such conversations will inevitably complicate rather than simplify multicultural complexities.

I will rely on two political theorists, Amy Gutmann and Iris Marion Young, who come from divergent perspectives, to argue for just multiculturalism. In my view, taken together, Gutmann’s and Young’s positions allow us to begin to forge a path out of composition’s relativist, multiculturalist dilemma. As I see it, Gutmann provides a way for students to engage in meaningful cross-cultural dialogue. Young provides a concrete way of viewing multiculturalism as a means to justice, defined specifically as the end of oppression and domination. Both theorists, albeit in different ways, merge a politics of difference with some semblance of universal humanity.

Gutmann argues that multiculturalism poses a “constitutive challenge” to social justice (“Challenge” 172). She dismisses both cultural relativism, “the distribution of goods according to their cultural meaning” (173), and political relativism, “a recognition that disagreements over social meanings should be publicly discussed, negotiated, and adjudicated” but which is silent on “substantive standards of justice” (182). Rather, Gutmann bases her notion of social justice on an assumption that human beings tend toward acting justly, and finds her answer in what she calls deliberative universalism, which “relies partly upon a core of universal principles and partly upon publicly accountable deliberation to address fundamental conflicts concerning social justice, conflicts that reason has yet to resolve” (193). In other words, there are times when moral disagreement exists but do not necessitate moral skepticism nor complete relativism. In such cases, there may be no single understanding of what social justice substantively demands, but it may be clear what is unreasonable (195). At the same time, “fundamental moral disagreements also coexist with universal principles that cannot reasonably be rejected” (195), such as routine murder of innocents, arbitrary arrests or other common political practices, and female circumcision, “even in the face of multicultural (and other) differences” (196). Deliberative universalism “explicitly recognizes that some conflicts over social justice cannot now (or perhaps ever) be resolved by a comprehensive, universally justifiable set of substantive standards” (197). They should be resolved through deliberation, the “give and take of argument that is respectful of reasonable differences” (197), an effort to recognize each
other’s perspective, to minimize moral disagreements, and “to search for common ground” (199):

The survival of many mutually exclusive and disrespected cultures is not the moral promise of multiculturalism, in politics or in education. Nor is it a realistic vision: neither universities nor polities can effectively pursue their valued ends without mutual respect among the various cultures they contain. But not every aspect of cultural diversity is worthy of respect. (Introduction 21)

It is Gutmann’s emphasis on reasonable disagreement with which Fish so vehemently disagrees, accusing her of going down “blind alleys” (387). Parties who fundamentally disagree, he argues, cannot deliberate because they come from completely different worldviews (388); that is, they cannot be part of mutually respectful debate because they have been excluded from debate by the views they advocate and which respectful parties abhor (390). To put it as Fish does, the “enemies” are “dispatched... not by being defeated in combat, but by being declared ineligible before the fight begins” (391). If we base deliberation on whether differences are so irrational that they exclude debate, then we have not resolved anything but have reverted to “good liberal-rationalist fashion” (388).

I can certainly understand Fish’s reluctance to accept the notion that people with such fundamental worldviews can ever engage in reasonable, deliberative debate. But like Mohanty, I believe this effort is crucial to truly understanding difference rather than merely tolerating it or even respecting it (can we really respect what we do not understand?). Gutmann asserts that views which “flagrantly disregard the interests of others and therefore do not take a genuine moral position at all, or that make radically implausible empirical claims (of racial inferiority, for example)” (Introduction 22–23) do not merit respect (although one’s right to express such views must be tolerated), for they are “not grounded upon publicly shared or accessible standards of evidence” (23). I take issue with Fish’s (perhaps tongue-in-cheek) generalizations of liberals who, he claims, stop short of actually trying to wound “the enemy at its heart” (392) because of their belief that all differences can be resolved. Just multiculturalism, which combines some components of postmodernism with some components of liberalism, is certainly eager to “stamp it out” (392) injustices and those who inflict them. What Fish wrongly assumes, in my view, is that many differences are fundamentally
incompatible. Such a view would lead me to give up on multiculturalism altogether. Rather, I agree with Michael Pavel that “an increasing number of cultures are able to convey an ever-widening variety of ideas that are productive of liberation and social justice” (3).

I certainly acknowledge that there may be some people, even some cultural groups, with whom we simply cannot deliberate because their principles are so fundamentally unjust. But I will not succumb to the idea that to believe so makes me culturally imperialist. It is incumbent upon us to try to gain as much insight into where such individuals or cultural groups are coming from, (whether religious, cultural, or other), but in the end, some behaviors are simply oppressive and violate human rights. As Gutmann claims, the “aim of deliberation is not agreement but justice” (“Challenge” 200). While we may never be able to position ourselves outside of any culture, we are not inevitably standing only inside one culture. Thus, we may be “standing up for the basic interests, dignity, or moral reason of human beings regardless of their culture, as best we can now understand what those interests are or what human dignity or moral reason demands” (192).

For Gutmann, social justice consists of “substantive principles that are necessary to secure basic human well-being” (“Challenge” 200). While relativists can claim that what counts as reasonable for matters of social justice cannot be severed from social understandings, Gutmann argues that human well-being is the salient issue in matters of social justice. Thus deliberative universalism “points away from cultural polarization towards the many multicultural possibilities that are compatible with universal respect for human life, liberty, and opportunity” (206; emphasis added).

I turn now to Young, who explicitly brings postmodern theories to bear on social justice. In Justice and the Politics of Difference, Young argues that a “conception of justice should begin with the concepts of domination and oppression” (3). When privilege and domination exist among social groups, “social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in order to undermine oppression” (3). Distribution alone is insufficient, for theories of justice must likewise concern themselves with social structures and patterns underlying distribution (15). Thus we must not only focus on what people have or do not have, but on the institutional rules, policies, and actions that determine both material and social goods (16)—that is, “procedural issues of participation in deliberation and decisionmaking” (34): norms are just only if not coerced, and social conditions are just only if they
permit all people to satisfy their needs and act freely (34). People must have the freedom and opportunity to choose, to communicate, and to develop and exercise their faculties (38).

Young explicitly acknowledges the postmodern dilemma of making universalizing assumptions about human nature or human values (36). She rejects theories of justice aiming for universality and independence from particular social systems, arguing that justice is socially derived, but she does not reject "rational discourse about justice" (5). Most significant for the purposes of just multiculturalism, Young acknowledges that explicit or implicit assumptions are inevitable, but avoid being exclusionary if they are sufficiently abstract. In her gesture toward a more inclusive paradigm of justice that includes doing and acting rather than merely possessing, Young posits the "connection between justice and the values that constitute the good life" as "the degree to which a society contains and supports the institutional conditions necessary for the realization of these values" (37). Specifically, she defines two general values: "developing and exercising one's capacities and expressing one's experience" and "participating in determining one's action and the condition of one's action" (37). In no uncertain terms, Young claims that "these are universalist values, in the sense that they assume the equal moral worth of all persons, and thus justice requires their promotion for everyone" (37; emphasis added).

Young focuses on the "deep institutional injustices" in U.S. society, injustices based on social domination and oppression (7), and on their eradication as a requirement of social justice. Thus, justice is a group rather than individual issue. As such, Young endorses a politics of difference, arguing that it may be more liberatory than its opposite, equal treatment for all individuals regardless of difference (157). On this point, Gutmann concurs: "the demand for recognition, animated by the ideal of human dignity," directs us to "the protection of the basic rights of individuals as human beings and to the acknowledgment of the particular needs of individuals as members of specific cultural groups" (Introduction 8), a both/and protection of universal rights and public recognition of particular cultures out of respect for individuals' rights (12).

Young promotes what she and others call "democratic cultural pluralism" (163), in which "there is equality among socially and culturally differentiated groups, who mutually respect one another and affirm one another in their differences" (163). She argues that "blindness to difference" (164) is oppressive, but that "a politics that asserts the
positivity of group difference is liberating and empowering” (166). A politics of difference provides a way to argue that even if a particular individual overcomes oppression and domination, “structural patterns of group privilege and oppression nevertheless remain” (166–67). The liberation of the whole group is crucial and can be realized only through fundamental institutional changes (167).

Also significant is Young’s emphasis on public deliberation, which can only occur if the underlying institutions and societal structures allow for heterogeneous participation, a “radically pluralist participatory politics” (118). Opposing most theories of a civic public, Young argues that the goal should not be the “common good,” which tends to silence and exclude marginalized voices (118). “To promote a politics of inclusion,” she argues, “participatory democrats must promote the ideal of a heterogeneous public, in which persons stand forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood, by others” (119). But Young of course realizes that her ideal of the city as a metaphor for a normative theory of social justice in many places fails to materialize, and her book discusses many of the reasons as well as offers solutions. However, my focus here is on her call for “more empowering” but also “more encompassing” governmental authority rather than greater decentralization (251), although with a great deal of local authority as well. The crucial point is that all voices must be heard and no decision should harm others, disallow others to develop their needs and desires within the parameters of mutual respect and cooperation, or require others to act (251).

As Young states, it takes politics rather than philosophy to implement such ideals of social justice and participatory politics (256). But I believe Young, like Gutmann, gives us a place to begin with just multiculturalism as an idea we can put into practice in our classrooms. Young provides a fresh perspective on viewing difference and identity, one that can lead to genuine engagement even if disagreement. However, I would suggest that Young does not address fundamental differences such as those which Gutmann excludes from respectable deliberation (unless, arguably, her admonition cited above about what decisions must not do is her way of addressing fundamental disagreements), thereby leaving me to remain committed to the notion that some disagreements and differences, but not most, cannot be resolved deliberatively or through participatory engagement by disagreeing parties when one party is acting unjustly or promoting unjust ideas or actions.
Just Multiculturalism in the Writing Classroom: Teaching Writing as Critical and Ethical Practice

In my view, just multiculturalism has an important role to play in a first-year writing course. Liberatory pedagogy in composition has helped us appreciate the importance of what students write and learn. That is, we have come to understand the complex and inseparable relationship between language, power, and oppression, and we have come to see the value when students write about substantive content: what they write and learn through the course content and texts (their own, their peers' and outside texts) is perhaps even more important than how they write it.

Furthermore, as Spigelman puts it, "ethics is well within the province of composition studies" (322). Spigelman traces rhetoric's ethical nature from its classical heritage to contemporary critical pedagogy: the "classical convergence of rhetoric, politics, and ethics" (323) of Aristotle, Protagoras, Isocrates, Cicero, and Quintilian; its re-emergence in the 1950s and 60s as the "new rhetoricians'" "search for universal principles on which to base rhetorical action" (323); 1960s and 1970s expressivist instruction as protest against injustice; and, finally, contemporary composition's emphasis on liberatory, egalitarian, and multicultural pedagogies (323–24). Furthermore, two recent edited collections have focused exclusively, and variously, on ethics and writing: Fredric Gale, Phillip Sipiora, and James Kinneavy's *Ethical Issues in College Writing* (1999) and Michael Pemberton's *The Ethics of Writing Instruction: Issues in Theory and Practice* (2000). As Wayne Booth observes, moreover, ethical concerns remain at the heart of English studies, despite the turn from traditional ethics and foundational values (41). Vandenberg, finally, makes the important point that teaching academic discourse itself is instruction in a particular set of values—"a reorientation in values" appropriate for civil discourse (552)—so that what many of us do in writing classrooms every day is inextricably infused with ethics.

A multicultural framework centered on justice encourages students to interrogate the claims of multiculturalism and work toward significant, genuine multicultural dialogue. The goal is for students to come to understand that judgment of others' ethical positions, however inscribed by cultural systems, are critical to cross-cultural dialogue and understanding—and hence to justice. That is, until students critically examine and understand difference, it is unlikely that tolerance or respect will be meaningful in any significant way. If academic multiculturalism is to survive in composition studies and elsewhere, and if we are to successfully encourage more humane and embracing perspectives from our
students, we must make the ethical goals of social justice central to our multicultural critical practice. Alan France suggests that the primary objective of composition studies is to help students understand the "dialectic between self and culture" (149); I would extend his argument to include an understanding of the various cultural scripts that define them and all others and an awareness that students—and all of us—can revise those scripts according to principles of justice. My aim is not to be reductionist and universalize all experience, but to achieve what Patrick Brantlinger conceptualizes as "the ground between" relativism and incommensurability between cultures and a reductionist universalism that essentializes historical struggles and differences (qtd. in Wilson 17). This "ground between . . . positions" does not attempt to provide authoritarian answers but is "a questioning, a dialectic" (qtd. in Wilson 17).

Just multiculturalism does not profess to "respect" or "tolerate" difference without ever getting to know the other, nor does it totalize through the overly simplistic "we're all human and that's all that matters." It does not revert to "melting pot" or assimilationist education that aims to help students become more alike, because just multiculturalism includes whiteness and Western as categories of difference and subject to critical scrutiny. Likewise, just multiculturalism does not seek to premise whiteness and Western as the standards upon which all difference is based. Rather, just multiculturalism encourages students to apply critical and ethical judgment to the oppressive aspects of white, Western culture and all other cultures as they work toward understanding what justice entails. Like Wilson, I want my students to "confront intractable cultural differences" (18), but I also want to move them beyond confrontation to a place of genuine understanding as a foundation for dialogue and interaction.

What does just multiculturalism look like in classroom practice? Due to space limitations, I can only briefly sketch out some of the approaches I have taken in my classrooms. Just multiculturalism is a constant interweaving of questions of justice with questions of difference, humanity, oppression, and domination. Most significantly, it brings students into the social construction of these principles. Just multiculturalism also promotes the simultaneous interrogation of culturally determined perspectives to work toward the ends of justice. It does not make the assumption that all differences are valuable and useful, but puts differences into view and subjects them to critical and ethical judgment. The theoretical framework resulting from just multiculturalism resists narrow
prescription in that justice is neither easily defined nor always accessible as an answer. Indeed, ethical conflicts may include competing demands of justice.

In the classroom, it is important to spend considerable time on questions of multiculturalism and justice, on the divergences and convergences between different conceptions, particularly those with which students are familiar and those we want to introduce. From there, assignments encouraging students to examine various cultures and cultural claims and then subject those claims to critical judgment can be very useful. For example, students can examine their own diverse cultures' ways of knowing, values, norms, and practices—from their racial or ethnic cultures to the subcultures of sports teams or high school or college social cliques. Students consider how some of these cultural claims might conflict with others, and how they work through and negotiate these conflicts in their everyday lives. These assignments are intended to reveal that conflicting cultural values do not necessitate cross-cultural impasse. In this sense, we incorporate into our multicultural classrooms the deliberative universalism Gutmann proposes.

In a similar vein, students can question the ways in which cultural lenses can lock us into particular perspectives. One effective means to demonstrate how socially and culturally constituted points of view potentially color how we see reality is to consider political affiliations and beliefs. For example, my students studied the Bush-Gore Florida election debacle in the semester it occurred. They studied print news articles as well as surveyed members of our college community. Among the questions they considered were: Did any Republican argue that the votes should be recounted? Did any Democrat believe the recount should stop? What language was used to describe the event? How did the language reveal politically biased perspectives? We also discuss relevant happenings in the news that involve acculturated perspectives—such as the much publicized 2001 case in which a mother in Illinois lost and then regained custody of her son, allegedly for breast feeding and co-sleeping. Most of my students vilified the mother for these practices, but why? Is this about justice, or simply about difference? How do we ever get outside these culturally determined perspectives to judge others?

As students come to acknowledge the situatedness of their perspectives and the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural ethical action, they might begin to see how such knowledge translates into means to act on the ethical. Indeed, one of the benefits of descriptive relativism (cultural pluralism) is that it encourages us to question the presumption of Western
culture's superiority and to acknowledge that many cultures exist and are entitled to equal respect. But then I ask students to think about what it means to be entitled to equal respect? Does that entitlement transcend all other principles, or is it merely a starting point from which to examine and evaluate cultural values and practices? What does it really mean to value difference and celebrate diversity? I ask students to think about their own relationships with individuals of different cultural backgrounds. Are they friends because of difference, in spite of it, or both? Does difference enrich their friendship, or hamper it, or both? In what ways? We examine race relations on our own campus. Many students observe that in our campus theater, cafeteria, and game room, African-American students tend to sit together, Asian-American students tend to sit together, white students tend to sit together, and so on. Why? Is this self-segregation or imposed by the dominant group? The questions promote serious consideration of the limitations of tolerance as a multicultural objective and of the advantages and disadvantages of a politics of difference.

I move these questions of culture, oppression, and justice into the broader cultures of the nation and the world. We move beyond superficial matters of taste and style to what matters more: different religious and political beliefs; different ways of seeing the roles for men, women, and children; different ideas about power; different criminal justice systems; different understandings of freedom and choice. Assignments ask students to examine practices and beliefs systems, and we question whether or when practices become so intolerable that we can no longer "respect" belief systems. I agree with Wilson that such inquiries require all of us, including students, to feel unsettled, uncertain, uncomfortable (2). But I would argue, along with Fluehr-Lobban, that we must not shirk these difficult questions or we end up, however inadvertently, contributing to human rights abuses. Through multicultural texts and/or research, students explore questions of cross-cultural differences when they explore such issues as genital mutilation or slavery in the Sudan. Such explorations lead to difficult questions over the point at which cultural practices cross the line and become violations of human rights. I do not expect any easy consensus on these issues, but they need to be discussed.

Finally, just multiculturalism must include critical attention to the ethical contradictions involving race, gender, class, and other social categories of difference in our own society, the injustices of oppression and domination upon which Young centers her notion of social justice. Lawrence Hinman's theory of ethical pluralism with regard to the U.S.'s fallibility must be central to just multiculturalism:
Moral judgment across cultures is necessary, but we must approach it in a spirit of humility and self-reflection. We must be prepared to learn from other cultures and to have some of our own moral shortcomings revealed to us by them. Cross-cultural moral dialogue is a necessity, but we must not forget that it is also a two-way conversation. When examining moral differences between ourselves and other cultures, we may sometimes discover that it is we, not they, who are found morally wanting. (68)

Multicultural aims of justice will not come about if we do not subject our existing social, political, and economic system to critical judgment. Celebrating and appreciating the differences between cultural groups will not remedy the conflicts within and between cultures, nor will it adequately address structural inequities. By focusing, as Young does, on justice as freedom from oppression and domination, we can make our classroom forays into the challenges of multiculturalism meaningful. We can also try to emulate her idea of heterogeneous participation in our classroom communities.

Just multiculturalism provides a new lens through which we can address social ills and potential remedies right here in our own society. By subjecting all cultures to critical scrutiny, and by holding all cultures to the principles of justice upon which the class has come to some level of agreement, we have a starting place from which to turn the critique on American culture. Again, these discussions are ripe for considering a politics of difference as it relates to just aims. Should people be afforded equal treatment despite differences, or should they be afforded rights and protections on the basis of differences? To what extent do we make these determinations based on oppression and domination, as Young would argue? How do racism and discrimination violate principles of justice? How does childhood poverty violate these principles? How can students apply principles of justice to affirmative action issues to perhaps see them in a new light? Again, there are no easy answers, but they are worth asking and answering.

Just multiculturalism is not a cure-all for the dilemmas created at the intersection of multiculturalism, ethics, and composition. As many compositionists have argued, institutional and classroom power dynamics complicate ethical teaching, potentially transforming it to coercive practice (see Spigelman; Miller; Olson). Moreover, many scholar-teachers have noted students’ sustained resistance to issues of race, gender, and class (see Miller; Ruzich; Swilky; Murphy and Trooten). Just multiculturalism does not eradicate these potential obstacles to ethical
teaching in a multicultural framework. Instructors who choose to employ just multiculturalism will still wrestle with power relations, student resistance, student capitulation, and, of course, responding to hate writing. Yet, I suggest that it offers certain advantages by asking students—and instructors—to interrogate the claims of multiculturalism and work toward significant, genuine multicultural dialogue as a means to social change.

Of course, this new framework for multiculturalism compels us to balance difference with commonality and challenges us to be more attentive than ever to the possibility of universalizing and appropriating experience. Vandenberg suggests that it is common practice within multicultural composition to “neutralize” or “absorb” difference in ways of knowing and of seeing the world, even for scholar-teachers who aim otherwise (561). I suggest, though, that by braiding together the issues of difference, commonality, and justice, just multiculturalism puts these conflicts at the center, making difference less subject to inadvertent erasure.

At the same time, we perhaps find some way to address what Vandenberg refers to as the contradiction between theoretical frameworks stressing diversity and the uniformity of writing forms (academic discourse essays) that reinforce hegemonic uniformity (555–65). Hum argues that minority students are asked in our discipline “to be either assimilated or to remain ‘native-like’” (576) in their acquisition of literacy, thus failing to acknowledge the “multiple intersections” (577) of subjectivity. I suggest that we might be guilty of imposing the same false dichotomy on our white students, who are asked either to assimilate or to resist hegemonic (academic) discourse. The “space for examining diversity” (577), Hum argues, should be what Joonok Huh refers to as “betweenness” (qtd. in Hum 577), which provides a space for “interruptive possibilities” of institutional and literacy critique while holding on to cultural specificities (578). I believe there is a betweenness as well for students to appropriate academic discourse as a means to work for justice—in much the same way Vandenberg, Hum, myself, and others in critical composition attempt in our own scholarship.

**Just Remembering Multiculturalism**

I remarked earlier that Fluehr-Lobban’s sense of the urgency of human rights issues deeply influenced my thinking about just multiculturalism. Like Adamantia Pollis, I believe that “specialists in various disciplines and subdisciplines unfortunately tend to neglect each other’s work,” such
that "theories and findings often do not interrelate as each scholar works within the boundaries of her/his own paradigm" (343). I am thus turning to multicultural educators, anthropologists, human rights theorists, political theorists, philosophers, literary specialists, as well as compositionists, as I work my way out of the relativist trap and to substantiate my belief that justice is an ethical value applicable to all human beings. But for all this intellectualizing and theorizing, I want to conclude with a personal story.

I have two young sons in elementary school, a second and third grader. I often think about what kind of multicultural education I want for them as they progress through school. What do I want them to think about difference? What kinds of relationships do I hope they will cultivate with children from cultures different from their own? I am certain that I want them to have an historical awareness of the valuable contributions diverse cultures and people have made to our world, as well as the ways many minority and non-Western cultures have been systematically undervalued, marginalized, and oppressed. I also want them to use critical judgment fairly and consistently, and not tolerate difference for difference's sake. I want them to understand that not everyone does or should think alike, and that while most of our views are shaped by our numerous cultural memberships, we can reconfigure these cultural scripts. In turn, I hope they will make an effort to bring diverse people into their lives, to broaden and enrich their minds and their hearts. Most significant, I hope they will recognize a common humanity, however differently experienced, that leads them to care about people and stand up for justice—human well-being, in Gutmann's terms, and freedom from oppression and domination, in Young's.

Have we lost sight of the important cultural work of multiculturalism? On this point, Fish and I would agree: "mind-numbing abstractions may be the official currency of academic discussion, but they do not point us to what is really at stake in the large social and economic dislocations to which they are an inadequate (and even irrelevant) response" (387). I will continue the intellectual work of asserting compelling principles in the face of what may seem like an intellectual maze with no way out. I want to move in the direction of articulating and clarifying principles of justice, and basing the work of multiculturalism on them. In advocating this position, I acknowledge that I may be caught in the trap of my culturally encoded perspectives but have chosen not to be hamstrung by this catch-22.

Recently, my younger son came home from school and began telling me what he had learned about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. He
asked me, with genuine sincerity as well as disbelief, "Mommy, how could people be so mean just because of darker skin?" Before I could answer, he declared, "I would never do that," and then went out to play. In the end, it is just that simple.

*Pennsylvania State University/
  Berks Lehigh Valley College
  Reading, Pennsylvania*

**Notes**

1. I'd like to thank Gary Calore, an Associate Professor of Philosophy at Penn State at Abington for helping me to see that philosophers are indeed grappling with these same issues and for guiding me in my search for some philosophical answers.

2. Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls this dilemma an "Egalitarian Fallacy" (qtd. in Paine 558).

3. The difficulties and challenges of grading hate writing have been discussed at length; see, for example, Lankford; Miller; Rothgery; Spigelman.

4. Rorty argues that it is in conservatives’ interests to convince the middle-class that universities are "eccentric, dissolute, corrupt, and perverse," leading the public to discredit our important work (75).

5. For more on how opposing antifoundationalist claims can elicit accusations of self-serving hegemony, see Trimbur.

6. Mohanty refers to Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition.*

7. In a short epilogue called "International Justice," Young applies her notion of injustice as oppression and domination “for any social context in the world today, as well as for relations among nations or states” (258), but acknowledges that inquiries among Western scholars into international justice is in its infancy. Most international justice studies focus on distribution, largely because of the grossly imbalanced resources between rich and poor nations, the inequalities of international trade, and exploitative working conditions internationally. But Young argues that the ways she defines oppression, welfarism, and group differences may need to be rethought as they apply to other parts of the world. In the end, Young’s analysis of justice as freedom from oppression and domination only begins to map out a strategy for worldwide justice, but can begin conversations about cross-cultural dialogue in our classrooms.

8. I use a variety of texts (usually in a class packet), including readings in multicultural education, cultural/ethical relativism, conceptions of justice, current events, international issues, and compelling issues of social justice in the U.S. involving racism, discrimination, and poverty. In both composition and literature classes involving multiculturalism, I usually avoid readers and anthologies.
9. The purpose of this assignment is to try to get all students to see themselves as part of a variety of different cultural perspectives. Some minority students in the course do choose to discuss their racial/ethnic cultures, but I try not to put the minority students on the spot, as spokespeople for their racial/ethnic cultures.

Works Cited


Murphy, Bridget, and Roberta Peirce Trooten. "Rumblings from the Back Row: Do We Have to Read Another Victim Story?" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 23 (1996): 296–303.


