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Choice and the Contradictions of Identity Politics: A Reply to Pat McGann

Sue Hum

As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes. It is possible, upon assuming an appropriate position, to reduce this difference of horizons to a minimum, but in order to annihilate this difference completely, it would be necessary to merge into one, to become one and the same person.

—Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*

Despite feeling "stabbed and stuck" by my essay "'Yes, We Eat Dog Back Home': Contrasting Disciplinary Discourse and Praxis on Diversity" (*JAC* 19.4), Pat McGann chooses not to assume an agonistic, confrontational position, the most predictable of disciplining tactics.

Rather, McGann accepts my invitation to continue exploring identity politics for areas of in-betweenness, instability, and flux. In his response to my essay, he assumes what Bakhtin calls an “appropriate position,” offering three vignettes in order to examine his own “complicity with privilege and the possibility of challenging and changing this [white, Eurocentric, middle-class, heterosexual, male academic or WEM-CHMA] identity.” If reform within the discipline of rhetoric and composition and in higher education is to usher in a future predicated on social justice, it begins with individuals who are willing to accept the challenge with courage and dedication. Because fundamental change does not occur overnight, McGann shows that he has taken the first of many steps in his effort to imagine, from the perspective of gender, a contradictory and fragmented identity.

Having said that, I would like to turn my attention to a crucial difference between McGann’s position and my own: the issue of choice. As a white man, McGann speaks from a position of power and privilege, even as he challenges the normative definitions and expectations that attend privilege. Institutional boundaries and definitions place WEM-CHMAs at the front of the line when the academy distributes goods, services, and benefits. WEM-CHMAs have the option of choosing (or rejecting) the position of the Other, just as McGann chooses to hide his mother’s letters in a drawer. Otherness is not forced on WEM-CHMAs. Furthermore, WEM-CHMAs have the luxury of indulging in “outlaw emotions,” just as McGann chooses to be emotionally and affectionately reciprocative with his partner Abby. Unlike most minorities, WEM-CHMAs need not experience their ethnicity (or their gender) as a definitive and limiting aspect of their social identity. While no one enjoys absolute and unencumbered agency, McGann, in his deployment of masculinity, gets to pick when, where, and how (if at all) to exercise his ethnicity and gender with minimal fear of personal or professional consequences. Even as WEM-CHMAs position themselves to live on the hyphen, so to speak, they need not sacrifice their positions of authority and power.

Minorities have few options in defining their positions. Certainly, Otherness is not an intellectual experiment or a mask or accouterment that can be removed and discarded. Physiological markers like slanted eyes, kinky hair, or olive skin historically have been used to distinguish and call attention to Others, who are characterized by and in relationship to institutional structures that limit, if not usurp, their choices for self-definition, self-representation, and self-articulation. Minorities remain

outside the institutional and disciplinary grand narratives and norms, but not by choice. Minorities must endure academia’s projections of its fears and expectations onto their identities. As minorities are paraded before the discipline, representing diversity and testifying to multiculturalism’s successes, they are both assimilated in and caricatured by those master narratives. In the politics of articulation, minorities seldom participate in, let alone control, the construction of their own subject positions. Their discursive practices are uttered against the grain of established power relations that determine not only *who* gets to speak and *when*, but also *what* gets heard and *where* it may be heard.

Configurations of ethnicity and gender remain unstable. Every individual or group juggles plural selves, competing identities, contradictory perceptions, and shifting desires. The similarities in these instabilities and the struggles to overcome normative definitions offer common ground for dialogue. Yet articulations of ethnicity and gender are neither parallel nor identical; they are contingent on the politics of position and location. That is, a speaker’s position and location affect his or her claims in epistemically significant ways.

In order to assume Bakhtin’s “appropriate position,” we must refuse the polarizing claims about who is more marginalized or oppressed, whose pain is more legitimate. The question is not whose identity is more fractured or fragmented. Dialogue is discouraged when speakers invoke either a rhetoric of victimhood or a hierarchy of conflict. Differences exist, and differences produce pain, struggle, and conflict. Differences cannot be annihilated. Let us not collapse the layers of differences or erase their complexities. Let us not ignore the politics of position and location that impinge on our material choices. Because McGann and I cannot merge, cannot become Bakhtin’s “one and the same person”—nor would we want to—we must recognize the fundamental differences in our experiences that result in patterns of systematic racial and ethnic exclusions. Let us honor the particularities of our lived experiences and interests, of WEM-CHMAs and Others, while simultaneously thinking beyond and through sustained critical interrogation. Let us imagine a future that is predicated on social justice.

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