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MULTIPLICITY IN IDENTITY: BEYOND THE METAPHYSICS OF SUBSTANCE

By

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
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ABSTRACT

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By

Crista M. Lebens

Any theory incorporating 'identity' as a central concept must respond to the criticisms of identity posed by postmodernists. For feminist theorists, the most complete articulation of such criticisms has been developed by Judith Butler. Butler focuses on gender identity at the level of subjectivity, how the individual is constructed as a gendered being. The conception of subjectivity Butler criticizes is one that legitimates the social order by masking the power dynamics involved in the construction of subjects.

In this dissertation, I argue that the construction of subjectivity developed by María Lugones engages the criticisms of identity raised by Judith Butler. Furthermore, *mestiza*, or multiplicitous subjectivity, on Lugones' account, can be the basis for political action. To illustrate this, I analyze the construction of gender identity and racial identity. Finally, I show that *mestiza* subjectivity as a ground for politics, provides a means for constructing a sustained coalitional identity politics.

*This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Patricia Lebens
and to the memory of my father, Nic Lebens Jr, and Terri Jewell*

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Introduction

In the fall of 1995, a woman whom I am honored to have called ‘friend’ took a gun and shot herself in the head. She was a well-known Black lesbian poet who once wrote, ‘racism is killing me.’ I believe it did. I believe that what contributed to her pain was the simultaneously precarious and wearisome phenomenon of having no ‘home.’ She was without a ‘home’ among lesbians, among Black folks, and perhaps among poets. As a white lesbian, I regret that the community in which I found a place could not offer the same support that ‘home’ could have given to her. Despite the resultant isolation, it was important to her to claim all of these identities: Black, Lesbian, Poet. The problem was that she could not bring all of herself, her multiple identities, to any of these communities. Each community asked her, in some way, to leave behind those identities that did not “fit.” The racism, sexism, and homophobia that led to her death are, at least in part, a result of the ways in which we understand our identities. A concept of identity that allows for connection between different social identities would help to alleviate fragmentation and isolation. Philosophy can help us to imagine new possibilities for thinking about identity, and to challenge the dynamics of exclusion experienced by many, including my friend. It is my hope that new concepts of identity can provide a basis for a kind of identity politics that is inclusive of multiple identities.

In this dissertation I adopt a construction of identity that accounts for multiplicity in order to develop a new form of identity politics. I argue that any identity politics must be coalitional in order to be truly liberatory. María Lugones develops a theory of

subjectivity, mestiza subjectivity, that I use as the basis of a coalitional identity politics. My contribution in this dissertation is to defend that concept of identity against political and philosophical criticisms, and to defend a viable account of coalitional identity politics¹ that ought to be embraced by marginalized groups as well as privileged groups. I am interested in constructing a philosophical understanding of identity politics, an account that addresses the construction of identities at the social and individual levels. The philosophical issues in this politics concern the construction of social identities around axes of oppression based on race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. The purpose of this project is to displace those concepts of identity, and the group power dynamics intertwined with that concept of identity, that foster the relations of domination and exclusion that killed my friend.

The term ‘identity politics’ conjures up many images: people “identifying as” members of a group, separatist groups splitting off from mainstream political activity, and a politics grounded in identities that have been made socially significant and stigmatized by society. Some theorists characterize identity politics as a process of identifying with a particular marginalized group where ‘identification with’ means both recognizing one’s self as a member of that group and taking up a political agenda articulated by that group. For example, a woman can understand herself to be female without taking up an explicit woman-identified politics. Upon identifying as a woman in a political sense, she may act on that identity politics by engaging in actions such as lobbying for reproductive rights or working to maintain separatist spaces. She may also

¹ This is a modification of the term ‘coalitional identity’ which I first encountered in the work of JeeYeun Lee, “Beyond Bean Counting” in *Listen Up! Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, edited by Barbara Findlen, Seattle: Seal Press, 1995.

rethink what it means to be a woman, and how that meaning ought to displace current norms. Identity politics, especially in the latter sense of shaping meaning, names a process of cultural formation. Those who claim an identity as a member of a marginalized group are in the process of self-definition, individually and collectively, usually in contrast to having a definition imposed by others outside the group. For those who contest the norms of group definition, the statement 'I am a _____' is replaced with the question, 'what does it mean that I am a _____?' This process of self-definition is often empowering to those involved in making new meaning. I believe that self-definition is an important aspect of identity politics. However, critics of identity politics have pointed out, identity politics can be practiced in such a way as to set up and maintain dynamics of exclusion. Some claim an identity but are marginalized within that group, e.g., women of color marginalized as women and as persons of color. Others, for whom the identity is not political at all are also marginalized when it comes to self-definition or setting a political agenda. For marginalized persons, then, identity politics instantiates a set of norms to which one must conform in order to claim that identity. Marginalized members of the group may be excluded by the hegemony that dictates cultural practices such as dress, music, leisure or political activities, choice of sexual partners or sexual practices, etc. On this view, identity politics as a cultural practice serves to empower those who can make central their own views, but marginalizes those who don't accept the newly established norms. This criticism of identity politics centers on the power dynamics that foster domination within a group. While I recognize that this dynamic exists and is harmful, identity politics so construed is not the form of identity politics I endorse.

Another concept of identity politics, which I do not hold, comes from those who see it as the cause of the breakup of the New Left movement of the 1960s and more recently the fragmentation of the Democratic party. The 1960s witnessed the peak of the Civil Rights movement and the outgrowth of the anti-war movement and liberation movements for marginalized groups: Chicana/Latinos, Native Americans, Black power, women, lesbians and gay men. The New Left did not accommodate the demands of these marginalized groups. Consequently, each group pursued its own agenda. The perception of many associated with the New Left was (and is) that the identity politics of these liberation movements is responsible for fragmenting and weakening the New Left, and has prevented a unified response to the rise of right wing fundamentalism. This view of identity politics places the blame for the dissolution of the left on those who, at one time sought to be represented by it. Though the issue of responding to a right-wing coalition is crucial, this is not the line of thought I will to pursue, nor do I concur with the criticism of identity politics that marginalized groups pursuing their own agenda were responsible for the downfall of the New Left.

Two notions of 'politics' broadly construed have been introduced above, first, a cultural politics, including claims about what counts as 'political,' and second, a more standard notion of politics as activity in the public sphere, including but not limited to participation in the electoral process. I wish to argue for a conception of politics that speaks to the demarcation of what counts as political.

'Politics' conventionally understood includes actions taken to effect change in the public sphere. Advocating for or against changes in policy or laws: signing a petition, forming coalitions, marching, boycotting, or demonstrating to voice opinion; all are

political activities and all take place in the public sphere. Many of these actions center around electoral politics, but politics is not limited to these actions.

Furthermore, what counts as political is not limited to action around issues in the public sphere. Actions and circumstances that are private and seemingly individual can be political. The division of labor within the home, a “private” matter, is a political issue insofar as the definition of ‘work’ usually excludes work done in the home without compensation—typically work done by women. Those who wish to broaden the scope of the political, myself included, argue that actions which support and are supported by power relations are political acts.

Another way to understand this concept of ‘political’ is in contrast to a liberal individualist conception of politics. On the latter view, individuals are equal before the law. Any unequal treatment can be remedied in the public sphere by changes in the law. What this view does not take into account is the structural inequalities that regulate the exercise of power. For example, discrimination might be addressed by affirmative action policies. Such policies are a legislative response to a structural inequality. What this response does not and cannot account for is the ways in which the dominant construction of white women and all persons of color serves to undermine the force of legislation. The following example demonstrates that a narrow definition of what counts as political excludes an understanding of those power dynamics which undermine the effectiveness of political action.

Affirmative action policies are designed to counteract systemic discrimination which would otherwise keep people of color and white women out of jobs. The fact that these folks have benefited from affirmative action is used as evidence to argue that, since they wouldn’t otherwise have gotten the job, they must not be qualified for the job. (This criticism ignores the fact that the purpose of affirmative action is to get people hired who, though they were qualified, would not otherwise have been hired.) Furthermore, anyone

who is a member of a group that is eligible to benefit from affirmative action is automatically suspected of being unqualified. The result is that we have laws that make discrimination illegal, we have policies in place to remedy the effects of past and present discrimination, but we see the effect twisted around to once again benefit those who wish to maintain the status quo. Affirmative action is stigmatized, and anti-discrimination laws can be used to support the charge of “reverse discrimination.”

To understand how such policies are undermined, we need a concept of politics that includes an account of these power dynamics. A liberal individualist conception of politics does not provide such an account. Thus, we need an expanded definition of politics.

It is also important to clarify the concepts of identity at work in the term ‘identity politics.’ There are two levels of identity at work in my analysis: identity at the group level, or collective identity; and identity at the individual level, or subjectivity.² The former is most commonly associated with identity politics. As a member of a collective, one has a sense of place, of who one is in relation to others.

The understanding that a collective has of itself *as* a collective is partly determined by society and partly by the members of the group. These two understandings often conflict when the group contests the value placed on it by the dominant culture. For example, one struggle social groups may engage in is that of developing an identity that acknowledges the humanity of their members. In doing so, practitioners of identity politics reaffirm their own agency. Yet the process of self-

² One sense that will not be used in this project is identity in the logical sense, referring to a relation between two entities expressed in the proposition, ‘A is identical with B’. Nor will I address the question of the persistence of personal identity over time.

definition by social groups can also serve to exclude some members. When those who hold the power to shape the group self-concept do so in ways that emphasize the sameness of the members, then differences between the members are erased, and some members are excluded or marginalized. This dynamic of exclusion leads to some of the problems with identity politics that will be discussed in this project.

The other concept of identity that is intrinsic to identity politics is that of individual subjectivity. How does one understand one's self in relation to others? How is one constituted by one's community and by cultural discourses? Two important concepts intrinsic to subjectivity are adopted here. First, the subject is constituted by, and is located in a social context. This concept stands in contrast to the concept of an individual in the Enlightenment sense, where the individual exists prior to the group to which it belongs. The situated subject does not pre-exist society and is not outside of a historical context. Second, the subject is complex in two significant ways. First, there are many social identities, acknowledged or not, which construct one's subjectivity. Second, the subject is not transparent to itself, but is driven in part by unconscious motivations. The subject is not a substance, a Cartesian thinking thing, the content of whose thoughts are transparent to itself.

It is important to connect this concept of subjectivity to the concept of identity at the collective level. One recognizes one's own subjectivity by recognizing one's membership in a social group. Collective identities are the categories in which we are placed or in which we place ourselves. The lived experience of these collective identities shapes our subjectivities. We may share a common identity, but our choices as

individuals to live out our placement in a discursive construction differ from person to person.

We cannot have only one of these levels of identity. Theories of subjectivity that account for the formation of the self as, e.g., gendered, without accounting for the larger collective structure of gender leave out the context in which one knows one's self. Theories that focus on the collective without accounting for individual subjectivity risk negating differences among members of the collective. Theories of collective identity that leave subjectivity unanalyzed may import an Enlightenment concept of self as substance.

Along with including complex, multilayered notions of identity, the construct of identity politics I develop must be coalitional. An identity politics that is largely focused on a single identity is problematic and should be rejected. To focus on one identity, 'lesbian' for example, is to exercise hegemonic power in ways that replicate power relations between, e.g., heterosexuals and lesbians. First there is a definition or concept of 'lesbian' that is implicitly understood to be the measure of what a lesbian is. Because 'lesbian' is the only salient identity recognized, other salient marginalized identities are erased. So the working-class lesbian, the lesbian of color, and, some would argue, the sex-radical lesbian are all marginalized as lesbians. To put this another way, if a politics revolves solely around one's identity as a lesbian, then one's other identities are not included.

To further complicate the matter, this dynamic works in other social groups as well, so that the lesbian of color, e.g., a Latina lesbian, works in solidarity with Latinas and Latinos who may not acknowledge their own heterosexual privilege, thus erasing her

lesbian identity. (Or they may knowingly assert their heterosexual privilege in order to suppress expression of her lesbian identity.) Both communities, lesbian and Latina, may believe that inclusion of the “other” community’s interests is a watering-down of their own political power. Thus, the lesbian of color is marginalized in both (already marginalized) groups.

The construct of identity politics I am developing requires a political agenda that comes from one’s social identities as positions where one can claim agency. The meaning of ‘politics’ is expanded in ways that break down the public/private dichotomy. Identity is understood collectively and individually as multiple. One can make salient many identities in this politics. This identity politics fosters coalition that comes from a theory of subjectivity that recognizes the self as multiple, thus acknowledging the various ways in which one is privileged as well as the ways in which one is marginalized. Thus this politics can integrate gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, and other socially salient differences, and can lead to connection and coalition.

Using this construct of identity politics, one can also account for the co-optation of identity politics by such right wing groups as the Christian Identity movement and white supremacist groups. Such groups lack an account of their own privilege, and thus focus on a single aspect of what they perceive to be oppression on the basis of their beliefs. A macroscopic analysis would reveal that the barrier they wish to point to does not, in fact, work structurally to constitute oppression, though individuals may suffer for their beliefs.³

³ Frye, Marilyn. “Oppression,” from *Politics of Reality*, by Marilyn Frye. Crossing Press, 1983, pp. 4-7.

Why do we need a philosophical account of identity politics? We need an account of such an identity politics in order to conceptualize a way to register rather than dissolve distinctions between social groups, and to form coalitions among social groups. It is important to acknowledge that social groups: races, sexualities, genders, classes, do in fact exist. The alternative is a “melting pot” politics aimed at assimilation. This account of identity politics can help to create a space where we can acknowledge multiple identities, both in ourselves and in others.

I take seriously the message that my friend sent with her death. The issues surrounding identity are philosophical, political, and deeply personal. We can create a transformational politics that acknowledges identities and social groups and does not support fragmentation, personal or political.

The theories of individual identity or subjectivity that will be in use in this project demonstrate that individuals have multiple salient social identities. That multiplicity must be reflected at the macroscopic level by forming a coalitional identity politics. In order to avoid single-issue politics, a politics that excluded my friend even as she lived it, identity politics must be coalitional. Multiplicity in identity forms the basis for coalition.

A Brief Overview of the Dissertation

In chapter one I address criticisms raised against identity politics, moving from the political to the philosophical. I dismiss the criticisms of biological determinism. I agree that we must not let identity politics become reduced to single-issue politics, or worse, become devoid of political analysis and activity altogether. Furthermore, I take seriously the criticism that we replicate exclusion when we rely on identities.

In chapter two I take up the issue of identity and exclusion at the philosophical level. Philosophical criticisms of identity at the individual level draw on Judith Butler's concept of gender identity formation, of bodies that are sexed. I consider criticisms of Butler that highlight her reliance on language as a totalizing system, and the underdetermination of subjectivity respectively. These criticisms show the limits of Butler's arguments.

Chapter three turns to a consideration of the construction of racial identities, centering on Lucius Outlaw's argument for the importance of an anti-racist concept of race. Outlaw argues (in contrast to Appiah and Zack) that race has an identifiable biological component. This is an account that could be useful to identity politics insofar as it provides a construction of racial identity that affirms the existence of race. While I agree with his argument that we need to assert the importance of the concept of race, I am concerned that the evidence he uses will lead him into a problematic concept of race. His reliance on a biological element to race is not necessarily essentialist, but it is misleading and unuseful. Furthermore, there is a tension between a desire to preserve social groups and a desire to rely on universal principles. This commitment to liberal individualism undermines the effectiveness of his politics.

In chapter four I articulate María Lugones' theory of mestiza subjectivity and show how it responds to the criticisms brought against Butler. I focus here on the construction of subjectivity within what Lugones calls the logic of purity and Butler (following Derrida) calls the metaphysics of substance. Lugones' system is preferable to Butler's because Lugones does not take language to be the ubiquitous and totalizing force governing all discursive constructions that Butler takes it to be. Finally, I consider an

objection to Lugones's model raised by Sue Campbell, namely that the 'world-traveling' model is not useful to those who mostly inhabit dominator identities. Campbell rightly points out the problems that may occur when privileged persons discover their own 'mestiza subjectivity.' However, Lugones accounts for this problem in her theory by directing privileged persons to examine their identities as dominators.

I conclude my analysis in chapter five where I show how Lugones's concept of identity works at the individual and collective level. Then I explain how mestiza subjectivity leads to a coalitional politics.

The complete analysis will prove that Lugones' concept of multiplicitous identity meets the criticisms, developed by Judith Butler and others, of the concept of identity. Furthermore, multiplicitous identity can be the basis of a sustainable identity politics.

Chapter One: Identity Politics and the Retreat to Idealism

Identity politics has been used by marginalized groups as a tool to fight against their own oppression. Despite its effectiveness in empowering members of these groups, it has been criticized and discounted by those who do not recognize the project of constructing an identity as a political project, and by those who consider organizing around identity to be exclusionary. “Identity” can refer to a collective social group, e.g., ‘identity as’ a Black woman, as a lesbian, or it can refer to one’s individual identities, i.e., how those collective identities come together to make up one’s subjectivity. Identity politics takes up the concept of identity at the group level. The ‘identity’ in question is that of a subordinated group whose members collectively forge an oppositional identity that contests the construction placed on them by dominant groups. The construction they resist is one that maintains their subordinated status. The construction articulated by the group itself promotes a vision of the members as agents acting on their own behalf and capable of struggle against oppression with the hope of overcoming it. In this respect, identity politics is *political*, in that it promotes empowerment through community building and self-definition. Theorists who make use of either level of identity, group identity or subjectivity, have been criticized for conceptualizing identity as an entity that is fixed, or unchanging over time, and unitary, meaning it is not internally multiple or divided. Such a concept of identity draws on the notion of the liberal individual, taken to be outside of and pre-existing culture, a concept that need not be invoked by an identity politics.

I understand identity politics in this sense to be one kind of liberatory activity directed to effect social change. Identity politics can take a variety of forms, such as

seeking recognition and representation as a group in the public sphere, and seeking to undermine and overthrow institutions that maintain systems of oppression. “Politics,” in the sense I find most helpful includes an analysis of power dynamics, and aims at transforming social institutions. A politics of individual representation cannot account for power dynamics that support exploitation and oppression; such a politics treats individuals as equals before the law without regard to axes of oppression such as race, class, sexuality, and gender. As such, a politics of individual representation forecloses any analysis of oppression, thus limiting its potential for progressive change.

Identity Politics in a Liberal Society

Any politics organized around identity can appear to be special interest politics within a liberal framework. I have given reasons for why one might reject a liberal political framework, but, for those who work within a liberal context, it is possible to meet this criticism within the context of liberal individualist politics.

Linda Nicholson takes up this question in the context of examining the increasing role that ‘feelings’ play in political decisions. Especially since the 1950s and 1960s, people more often ask the question, ‘how do I feel about it?’ rather than, or in addition to ‘what is the right action?’ According to Nicholson, the extent to which feelings influence politics has led to criticisms by political conservatives and liberals alike:

. . . even political liberals frequently attack such a view of [feeling-motivated] decision making, which they often associate with identity politics. The argument here is that these political movements rely too heavily on group-specific feelings and too little on rational consideration of the common good (Nicholson, 146).

On this view, feelings, like interests, represent a subjective dimension outside the bounds of rationality. To include feelings in decision-making, in the eyes of critics, is to include an element of irrationality.

Nicholson disagrees. She cites instances where the inclusion of emotion has led to progressive change. One important example comes out of the social justice movements of the New Left. In addition to an analysis of oppression in political and economic terms, the growing emphasis on self-analysis led to consideration of the impact of oppression on the psyche (Nicholson, 158). This move led to charges that such movements focused only on their own interests:

According to the white, male, leftist story of what supposedly went wrong in the 1960s, the civil rights and women's movement became too focused on group-specific issues and too little focused on the problems humans share (Nicholson, 158).

Nicholson points out that the "therapeutic turn," the inclusion of emotions in the reasoning process led to an uncovering of various forms of oppression. Because these types of oppression were group-specific, they were largely discounted by white male leftists. These theories of oppression posed a direct challenge to the assumption of common interests:

Prevailing notions of "what humans have in common" tend often to be insufficient in addressing social injustice simply because prevailing notions of "commonality" often assume unjust social patterns (Nicholson, 158).

"Shared" norms often benefit the privileged at the expense of the marginalized. Thus, the emphasis on a common human good only reinforces oppressive social patterns. For example, women claimed in the 1960s that housework is necessary labor that deserves compensation. Men who dismissed this claim as too narrow to fit the notion of a

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