The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition

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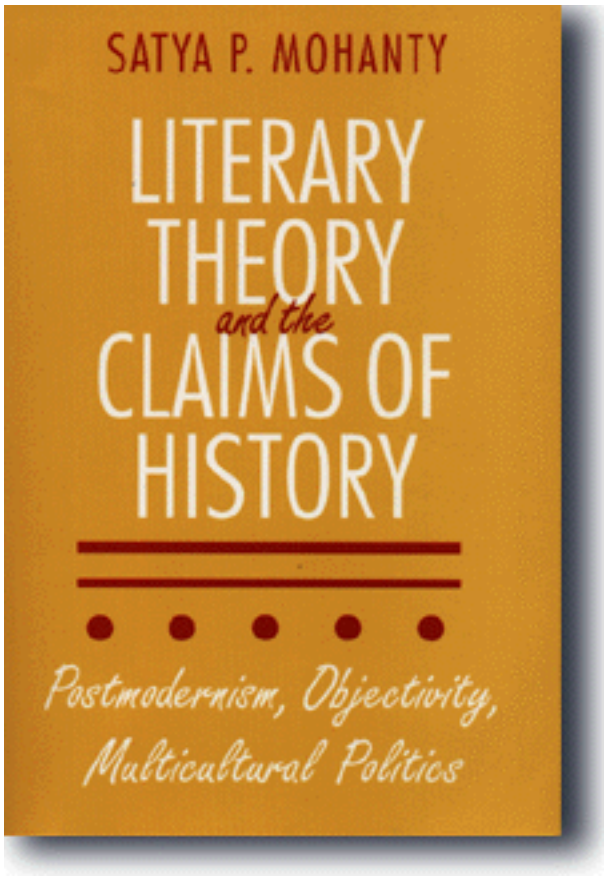

Several closely related practical and theoretical questions concerning identity emerge from current debates about cultural diversity. If multiculturalism is to be a goal of educational and political institutions, we need a workable notion of how a social group is unified by a common culture as well as the ability to identify genuine cultural differences (and similarities) across groups. Whether cultures are inherited or consciously and deliberately created, basic problems of definition -- who belongs where or with whom, who belongs and who doesn't -- are unavoidable the moment we translate our dreams of diversity into social visions and agendas. Debates about minority literatures, for instance, often get bogged down in tedious disputes over genuineness or authenticity, but it is difficult to eliminate these disputes entirely. That is because they point to what is in many cases a practical problem: who can be trusted to represent the real interests of the group without fear of betrayal or misrepresentation? Every "obvious" answer (such as "it'll have to be one of us, of course!") begs the question, indicating why our views about cultural identity always involve theoretical presuppositions. The most basic questions about identity call for a more general reexamination of the relation between personal experience and public meanings -- subjective choices and evaluations, on the one hand, and objective social location, on the other.

So it is not surprising that recent theoretical writings on cultural identity have focused on the status of our personal experiences, examining the claims to representativeness we might make on their behalf. The two dominant alternative views on cultural identity -- the view associated with identity politics and characterized as essentialism and the position of postmodernism -- are in fact seen as providing conflicting definitions of identity because they understand the relation between the experiences of social actors and the

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theoretical construct we call "their identity" very differently. Simply put, the essentialist view would be that the identity common to members of a social group is stable and more or less unchanging, since it is based on the experiences they share. Opponents of essentialism often find this view seriously misleading, since it ignores historical changes and glosses over internal differences within a group by privileging only the experiences that are common to everyone. Postmodernists in particular insist that identities are fabricated and constructed rather than self-evidently deduced from experience, since -- they claim -- experience cannot be a source of objective knowledge.1 My central task here is to show, first, that the relation between experience and identity is a genuine philosophical or theoretical issue, and, second, that there is a better way to think about identity than might be suggested by the alternatives provided by the essentialists and the postmodernists. I develop this view by examining what I shall call the epistemic status of cultural identity. After outlining some of the key theoretical issues implied in discussions of identity, I explore these questions further through an analysis of Toni Morrison's remarkable novel, *Beloved*, which is directly concerned with the relations among personal experience, social meanings, and cultural identities.

One of the main components of the postmodernist case against identity politics is the charge that "experience" is not a self-evident or even reliable source of knowledge and cannot be seen as grounding a social identity. Postmodernists typically warn against the desire to consider experience a foundation of other social meanings; they point out that personal experiences are basically rather unstable or slippery, and since they can only be interpreted in terms of linguistic or other signs, they must be heir to all the exegetical and interpretive problems that accompany social signification. This specifically poststructuralist view contains an epistemological thesis. Jonathan Culler's formulation of the thesis in his 1982 discussion of experience and "reading" is one that is most frequently cited: "'Experience' always has [a] divided, duplicitous character: it has always already occurred and yet is still to be produced -- an indispensable point of reference, yet never simply there" (*On Deconstruction* 63). This claim, with its Derridean allusions (Derrida usually couches it as a critique of specifically idealist or phenomenological notions of experience), leads to the following conclusion about the relation between experience and identity: "For a woman to read as a woman is not to repeat an identity or an experience that is given but to play a role she constructs with reference to her identity as a woman, which is also a construct, so that the series can continue: a woman reading as a woman reading as a woman. The noncoincidence reveals an interval, a division within woman or within any reading subject and the 'experience' of that subject" (64, emphasis added).2

I think, however, that this argument about the relation between experience and cultural identity can be best appreciated as part of the more general suspicion of foundationalism in contemporary thought, for there is nothing peculiar to experience as such which warrants its rejection on epistemological grounds. The critique of epistemological foundationalism contains the suggestion that we naturalize epistemology, that is, examine the production, justification, and regulation of belief as social processes. Many antifoundationalists contend that the growth of empirical knowledge about the practices and protocols of justification in the various sciences ought to shape our understanding of

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epistemological questions. In this sense, neither a "method" of justification nor some privileged class of foundational beliefs can be seen as existing outside the social contexts of inquiry.3

I suggest that we consider the postmodernist critique of identity politics in analogous terms, as a critique of experiential foundationalism. If we were not to specify the critique in this way, the general postmodernist skepticism toward experience could lead to the strange conclusion that the experiences of social actors are irrelevant to explain, say, their moral or political growth. Alternatively, we could be led to conclude that moral or political change (growth or decline) is never real because it is tied to experience and can thus never be justified. The antifoundationalist thesis I have tried to retrieve from postmodernism brings into focus the accurate and damaging critique that postmodernists can make of identity politics, but by itself it does not entail either of the two extreme conclusions to which their skepticism can lead us. The naturalist-realist account of experience I defend here is neither foundationalist nor skeptical; it maintains that experience, properly interpreted, can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point up instances and sources of real mystification. Central to this account is the claim that the experience of social subjects has a cognitive component. Experiences can be "true" or "false," can be evaluated as justified or illegitimate in relation to the subject and his world, for "experience" refers very simply to the variety of ways humans process information. (This conception carries none of the normative baggage that comes with Hegelian *Erfahrung*, which is always tied to a particular model of ethical development. Neither does it presuppose, as Dilthey's conception of *Erlebnis* does, a necessary opposition between "lived experience" and scientific thinking.) It is on the basis of this revised understanding of experience that we can construct a realist theory of social or cultural identity, in which experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities. As we shall see, to say that experiences and identities are constructed is not to prejudge the question of their epistemic status.4 Radical skepticism about the cognitive implications of cultural identity is not the only alternative to an ahistorical essentialism.

A Realist Approach to Culture and Politics

The first claim I wish to advance is that "personal experience" is socially and "theoretically" constructed, and it is precisely in this mediated way that it yields knowledge. Let me develop this idea by drawing in part on work done by feminist theorists in the last decade and a half, beginning with an insightful essay by the philosopher Naomi Scheman.5 Writing from an explicitly anti-individualist perspective on such things as emotions and feelings, Scheman explains how the notion of our emotions as our own "inner" possessions is fundamentally misleading. She focuses on the anger that women who have been members of feminist consciousness-raising groups often come to feel. This anger, Scheman says, should not be seen as a fully formed emotion that was waiting to be released or expressed in the context of the group. Rather,

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the emotion becomes what it is through the mediation of the social and emotional environment that the consciousness-raising group provides. Part of what constitutes this environment is an alternative narrative or account of the individual's relationship with the world, and these alternative accounts are unavoidably theoretical. They involve notions of what a woman is supposed to be angry about, what she should not tolerate, what is worth valuing, notions that are not merely moral but also social-theoretical in nature. They imply social visions and critiques of what exists; at the very least they suggest that it is perfectly okay to feel dissatisfied about certain relationships and social arrangements. Scheman's point is that in many important instances such alternative accounts and notions help organize inchoate or confused feelings to produce an emotion that is experienced more directly and fully. It follows then that this new emotion, say anger, and the ways it is experienced are not purely personal or individual. A necessary part of its form and shape is determined by the nonindividual social meanings that the theories and accounts supply. It would be false to say that this emotion is the individual's own "inner" possession, and that she alone has "privileged access" to its meaning or significance (179). Rather, our emotions provide evidence of the extent to which even our deepest personal experiences are socially constructed, mediated by visions and values that are "political" in nature, that refer outward to the world beyond the individual.

> The structure that consciousness-raising groups provide for the interpretation of feelings and behavior is overtly political; it should be immediately obvious that one is presented with a particular way of making sense of one's experience, a way intimately linked with certain controversial political views. Consciousness-raising groups are not, however, unique in this respect. What they are is unusually honest: the political framework is explicit (though often vague) and openly argued for. The alternative is not "a clear space in which to get your head together" but a hidden political framework that pretends not to be one. (186)

There are different ways of making sense of an experience, and the way we make sense of it can in fact create a new experience.

Consider Scheman's example, Alice, who joins a consciousness-raising group and in the safe and supportive environment provided by other women like her learns to recognize that her depression and guilt, though sincerely felt, may not be legitimate. In fact, they hide from her her real needs and feelings, as well as the real nature of her situation. "The guilt and depression," the group might argue and Alice might come to acknowledge, "are a response to and a cover for those other feelings, notably feelings of anger. Alice is urged to recognize her anger as legitimate and justifiable in this situation" (177). Here is where the "political" nature of the views Alice is now asked to ponder comes in: she is not seen as merely bringing to the surface something she, as a lone individual, knew and felt all along. Rather, her emotion (the anger) is constituted in part by the "views" about the world, about herself in it, and the details of what is acceptable and unacceptable in this new theoretical picture. She comes to experience anger by reinterpreting her old feelings of depression, guilt, and so on, but she does so unavoidably

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with the aid of theory, an alternative, socially produced construction of herself and the world. Now, "we may describe [Alice] as having discovered that she had been angry, though she hadn't previously recognized it. She would, in fact, have denied it if she were asked: 'Why *should* I be angry?' It is significant," Scheman goes on, "that a denial that one is angry often takes the form of a denial that one would be justified in being angry. Thus one's discovery of anger can often occur not from focusing on one's feelings but from a political redescription of one's situation" (177). The reason we say that Alice "discovers" she has been angry is that the anger underlay her vague or confused feelings of depression or guilt; now it organizes these feelings, giving them coherence and clarity. And our judgment that the anger is deeper than the depression or guilt is derived from (and corroborated by) our understanding of Alice's changing personal and social situation, an understanding that is based in part on a "theory."[6]

Here we discern what might be the strongest argument against the essentialist picture of cultural identity. The constructed nature of experience shows why there is no guarantee that my experiences will lead me to some common core of values or beliefs that link me with every other member of my cultural group. Our experiences do not have self-evident meanings, for they are in part theoretical affairs, and our access to our remotest personal feelings is dependent on social narratives, paradigms, and even ideologies. In fact, drawing on a Nietzschean theme, the postmodernist might declare that we need to go further, that the kind of theory dependence I have just identified leads to a radical perspectivism or relativism. When we choose among these alternative ways of organizing and interpreting experience, we make a purely arbitrary choice, determined by our social locations or our prerational ideological commitments. "Experience" remains unstable and unreliable. Why, then, speak of the cognitive component of personal experience, as though we might be able to glean objective knowledge from it?[7]

Oddly enough, this postmodernist response turns out to reveal a disguised form of foundationalism, for it remains within a specifically positivist conception of objectivity and knowledge. It assumes that the only kind of objective knowledge we can have is independent of (socially produced and revisable) theoretical presuppositions and concludes that the theory dependence of experience is evidence that it is always epistemically suspect. But what if we reject as overly abstract and limiting this conception of objectivity as presupposition-free knowledge? What if we give up both radical perspectivism and the dream of a "view from nowhere" in order to grant that all the knowledge we can ever have is necessarily dependent on theories and perspectives? We might then be able to see that there are different kinds and degrees of theory dependence and understand how theory-laden and socially constructed experiences can lead to a knowledge that is accurate and reliable.

Consider Scheman's example again. Alice's emotion, "anger," is the result of a political redescription of herself and her world, but if that new description happens to explain adequately and cogently -- as social, psychological, and moral theory -- the constituent features of Alice's situation, then Alice's experience of the emotion anger leads us to conclude that she has just come to know something, something not merely about her repressed feelings but also about her self, her personhood, and the range of its

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moral and political claims and needs. She comes to this knowledge by discovering or understanding features of the social and cultural arrangements of her world that define her sense of self, the choices she is taught to have, the range of personal capacities she is expected to exploit and exercise. And she does so in the process of learning to trust her judgments about herself, recognizing how others like her have done so as well. If this is the case, Alice's anger is not merely a personal or private thing inside, as it were, her own "innermost" self; rather, her anger is the theoretical prism through which she views her world and herself in it correctly. Hers is then an objective assessment of her situation, and in this strong sense, her anger is rational and justified.8

The example also suggests why emotions do not have to be seen as fully explicit beliefs or clear processes of reasoning for us to appreciate their cognitive role. We misunderstand the way Alice's anger gives coherence and shape to her previously confused feelings if we do not also appreciate the extent to which her experience of anger is a process whereby she weighs one vaguely felt hunch against another, reinterprets and reevaluates the information she considered relevant to her feelings and her situation, and thus redefines the contours of "her world." This sifting and reinterpretion of information sometimes happens quite suddenly; at other times, it becomes clearer and more lucid slowly and only in retrospect. The emotion is this not-entirely-explicit way Alice learns to reanalyze or even discern crucial features of her situation.

Emotions fall somewhere between conscious reasoning and reflexlike instinctual responses to stimuli. They are, as Ronald de Sousa has proposed, ways of paying attention to the world. They fill the "gaps" between our instinctually driven desires, on the one hand, and our fully developed reasoning faculties on the other, especially when we need to decide what to do or believe. Emotions are "determinate patterns of salience"; like Kuhn's scientific paradigms, says de Sousa, they provide our half-articulated "questions" about the world. Emotions are "what we see the world 'in terms of,'" and therefore, like the scientific paradigm, they "cannot be articulated propositions" ("The Rationality" 136-38). It is significant that the focus her anger provides allows Alice to discover some of the constitutive features of her world. Emotions enable and encourage specific interpretations or evaluations of the world, and our judgment that Alice's anger is rational, justified, or "appropriate" (de Sousa's term) is a judgment about the accuracy of the interpretation and the objectivity of the evaluation. In Aristotelian terms, an essential component of Alice's moral development would be the increased capacity of her analytical and affective faculties to work together for cognitive purposes. Emotional growth would be central to moral growth, and both presuppose the postpositivist notion of theory-mediated objectivity I am defending.9

There is no commitment here to the silly idea that all emotions are equally justified or rational. Questions about the legitimacy of emotions are answered by looking at the features of the subject in her world, and it is possible to glean an accurate picture of these features not only through the right theory (or narrative or description) but also through the relevant information that we can examine and share. "The difference between someone who is irrationally angry and someone who is not," Scheman explains, "may not be a difference in what they *feel* so much as a difference in what sorts of feelings, under

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what sorts of circumstances they are ready to take as anger. When we judge that people are right to deny the name of anger to their irrational reactions, we are often judging that their situation, unlike Alice's, does not really call for anger" (178-79). If Alice's father or husband were to become angry at Alice for supposedly betraying their trust by going to the consciousness-raising group meetings and by becoming dissatisfied with her personal relationships, we would evaluate these emotions as we do Alice's. The anger may be sincerely felt, but whether or not we consider it justified or legitimate would depend on what we think of the underlying political and moral views of these men about the role of women in society, as well as the information (about themselves, about their society, and so on) they draw on -- or ignore -- to support these views. This kind of assessment is naturally both complex and difficult. But the difficulty is not due to anything peculiar to emotions. All experience -- and emotions offer the paradigm case here -- is socially constructed, but the constructedness does not make it arbitrary or unstable in advance. Experiences are crucial indexes of our relationships with our world (including our relationships with ourselves), and to stress their cognitive nature is to argue that they can be susceptible to varying degrees of socially constructed truth or error and can serve as sources of objective knowledge or socially produced mystification.

This kind of argument about the cognitive component of experience helps strengthen the claim made by feminist standpoint theorists that in a gender-stratified society women's experiences are often significant repositories of oppositional knowledge, but this does not mean that experience serves to ground feminist knowledge. "It is rather," Sandra Harding maintains, "the subsequently articulated observations of and theory about the rest of nature and social relations" which help us make sense of "women's lives" in our sexist social structure (*Whose Science* 124). "Women's lives" constitute an "objective location" (123) from which feminist research should examine the world, because without it we would not be able to explain a significant feature of our society. "Women's lives" is a theoretical notion or construct, but it involves the kind of social theory without which we could not make sense of -- explain -- a central feature of our world. The theoretical notion "women's lives" refers not just to the experiences of women but also to a particular social arrangement of gender relations and hierarchies which can be analyzed and evaluated. The standpoint of women in this society is not self-evidently deduced from the "lived experience" of individual women or groups of women. Rather, the standpoint is based in "women's lives" to the extent that it articulates their material and epistemological interests. Such interests are discovered by an explanatory empirical account of the nature of gender stratification, how it is reproduced and regulated, and the particular social groups and values it legitimates. Our definition of social location is thus closely tied to our understanding of social interests.[10]

An important metatheoretical consequence follows from this. Objectivity is inextricably tied to social and historical conditions, and objective knowledge is the product not of disinterested theoretical inquiry so much as of particular kinds of social practice. In the case of social phenomena such as sexism and racism, whose distorted representation benefits the powerful and established groups and institutions, an attempt at an objective explanation is necessarily continuous with oppositional political struggles. Objective knowledge of such social phenomena is in fact often dependent on the

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theoretical knowledge that activism creates, for without these alternative constructions and accounts, Harding notes, our capacity to interpret and understand the dominant ideologies and institutions is limited to those created or sanctioned by these very ideologies and institutions (127). Moreover, as Richard Boyd shows in an important essay, even moral knowledge (for example, knowledge of "fundamental human goods") is to a great extent "experimental knowledge," dependent on social and political experiments. "We would not have been able to explore the dimensions of our needs for artistic expression and appreciation," Boyd points out, "had not social and technological developments made possible cultures in which, for some classes at least, there was the leisure to produce and consume art. We would not have understood the role of political democracy in [shaping our conception of the human] good had the conditions not arisen in which the first limited democracies developed. Only after the moral insights gained from the first democratic experiments were in hand, were we equipped to see the depth of the moral peculiarity of slavery. Only since the establishment of the first socialist societies are we even beginning to obtain the data necessary to assess the role of egalitarian social practices in fostering the good" ("How to Be a Moral Realist" 205).

The claim that political activity is in various ways continuous with attempts to seek scientific, objective explanations of social reality underscores that objective knowledge should not be sought by metatheoretically sundering the realm of "hard facts" from the realm of values. In the postpositivist picture of knowledge I am outlining here, some evaluations -- from vaguely felt ethical judgments to more developed normative theories of right and wrong -- can in crucial instances enable and facilitate greater accuracy in representing social reality, providing better ways of organizing the relevant or salient facts, urging us to look in newer and more productive ways. We have seen in the case of Alice how this epistemic reorientation takes place on a very personal level, where an individual's recognition and conscious acceptance of her feelings makes possible the process of search and discovery through which she comes to discern crucial features of her situation. For such emotional growth is a form of epistemic training as well. When we speak of collective political struggles and oppositional social movements, we can see how the political is continuous with the epistemological. In fact one may interpret Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach as making just such an epistemological argument. It does not urge us to give up the job of interpreting the world (in the interest of changing it) but instead points out how the possibility of interpreting our world accurately depends fundamentally on our coming to know what it would take to change it, on our identifying the central relations of power and privilege that sustain it and make the world what it is. And we learn to identify these relations through our various attempts to change the world, not merely to contemplate it as it is.11

We can thus see how the unavoidability of theory, one of the key ideas of postpositivist intellectual culture, leads to an important nonrelativist insight about the political moorings of knowledge: there are better or worse social and political theories, and we can seek less distorted and more objective knowledge of social phenomena by creating the conditions for the production of better knowledge. Given the pervasiveness of both sexism and individualism in Alice's culture, it is more likely that she will come to discover the reality about herself and her situation in a feminist consciousness-raising

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group than by herself at home. Research institutions that employ scientists from a wide variety of social backgrounds (and do not confine decision making about research topics or the allocation of funds to a handful of individuals from the socially advantaged groups) will be less likely than other institutions to betray unconscious racial or gender bias in their research agendas. Objectivity is something we struggle for, in a number of direct and not so obvious ways, and this puts into perspective the epistemic privilege "experience" might give us. Feminist standpoint theorists like Harding both develop and clarify Marx's argument about the political bases of knowledge production. A standpoint, says Harding, "is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it" (127). Since "experience" is only the raw material for the kind of political and social knowledge that constitutes a feminist standpoint, it cannot guarantee or ground it. A standpoint is thus "an achievement" (127), both theoretical and political. The objectivity we achieve is thus profoundly theory dependent and thus postpositivist. It is based on our developing understanding of the various causes of distortion and mystification. I believe a naturalistic conception of human inquiry best suits the various examples I have been discussing. An essential part of this conception of inquiry would be an understanding of fallibility which is developed and specified through our explanations of how different kinds and degrees of error arise. Precision and depth in understanding the sources and causes of error or mystification help us define the nature of objectivity, and central to this definition would be the possibility of its revision and improvement on the basis of new information. This conception of fallibility is thus based on a dialectical opposition between objectivity and error. Since error in this view is opposed not to certainty but rather to objectivity as a theory-dependent, socially realizable goal, the possibility of error does not sanction skepticism about the possibility of knowledge. Such skepticism (postmodernist or otherwise) is usually the flip side of the quest for certainty.[12]

My proposal is that we reorient our theorizing of cultural identity in the following way: instead of conceiving identities as self-evidently based on the authentic experiences of members of a cultural or social group (the conception that underlies identity politics) or as all equally unreal to the extent that they lay any claim to the real experiences of real people because experience is a radically mystifying term (this is the postmodernist alternative), we need to explore the possibility of a theoretical understanding of social and cultural identity in terms of objective social location. To do so, we need a cognitivist conception of experience, as I have been suggesting, a conception that will allow for both legitimate and illegitimate experience, enabling us to see experience as source of both real knowledge and social mystification. Both the knowledge and the mystification are, however, open to analysis on the basis of empirical information about our social situation and a theoretical account of our current social and political arrangements. Whether we inherit an identity -- masculinity, being black -- or we actively choose one on the basis of our political predilections -- radical lesbianism, black nationalism, socialism -- our identities are ways of making sense of our experiences. Identities are theoretical constructions that enable us to read the world in specific ways. It is in this sense that they are valuable, and their epistemic status should be taken very seriously. In them, and through them, we learn to define and reshape our values and our commitments, we give texture and form to our collective futures. Both the essentialism of identity politics and

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the skepticism of the postmodernist position seriously underread the real epistemic and political complexities of our social and cultural identities.

Postcolonial Identity and Moral Epistemology in *Beloved*

These complexities are at the heart of Toni Morrison's postcolonial cultural project in her remarkable novel, *Beloved*. Central to the novel is a vision of the continuity between experience and identity, a vision only partly articulated in the juxtaposition of the dedication ("Sixty Million and more"), with its claim to establish kinship with the unnamed and unremembered who perished in the infamous Middle Passage, together with the epigraph's audacious appropriation of God's voice from Hosea, quoted by Paul in Romans, chapter 9: "I will call them my people, / which were not my people; / and her beloved, / which was not beloved."

Laying claim to a past often serves simply to create an ancestry for oneself. What makes this juxtaposition of allusions in *Beloved* especially significant is that it suggests how the claim is going to be spelled out later in the novel, the terms in which one's relationship with the past is going to be conceived. The community sought in *Beloved* involves as its essence a moral and imaginative expansion of oneself, in particular one's capacity to experience. Only in the context of this expanded capacity can we understand the trajectory of the moral debate that informs and organizes the narrative: the debate between Paul D and Sethe about the nature and limits of Sethe's "mother-love." Is Sethe's killing of her "crawling already?" child to prevent her from being captured and enslaved an instance of a love that's too "thick," as Paul seems to think, an emotional attachment that makes Sethe forget that she is transgressing the limits of what is morally permissible for humans? "You got two feet, Sethe, not four," Paul says incomprehendingly when he hears what she has done (165). How we evaluate Sethe and this incipient moral debate depends on how we interpret Paul D's growth in the second half of the novel and how we define the relationship between his ability to understand and his emotional capacity to respond to the dead and absent members of the community of the oppressed.

Sethe's defiant maternal cry that she has "milk enough for all" -- repeated insistently over the course of the novel -- is as much a response to Paul D's specific moral accusation as it is a reminder of her powerful will to survive. For she claims to have had will enough to survive the indignity of the rape in which her owners steal her milk from her, and also the determined love to nourish the generations of children -- alive and dead -- who will together create the community she seeks. Sethe's argument would be, I suppose, that there is no way to respond to Paul D's question on its own terms. The moral injunction -- you are human after all, Sethe, and there are things you simply cannot do! -- is too abstract. The political vision of a community of the oppressed, which the novel seeks primarily through the agency of its women characters, provides the context in which Paul's challenge can be specified, given historical resonance and meaning. We should begin, then, by acknowledging the need for this community, a need that is from Sethe's perspective not only affective but also epistemic.

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To create this community, the survivor of slavery must begin by facing the immediate past more directly, and neither Sethe nor Paul D is able to do so alone. Only when they are together, and together in a very specific way that I shall describe in a moment, are they able to face the horror of Sweet Home. The act of remembering, Morrison's text insists, is not simply an attempt to know the past by recapitulating its events. The cognitive task of "rememory" is dependent on an emotional achievement, on the labor of trusting -- oneself, one's judgments, one's companions. Paul D's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road opens up the possibility of Sethe's renegotiation with her own past, for that past is unavoidably collective. Like Alice's in Naomi Scheman's example, Sethe's capacity to know herself is tied up with her capacity to feel with others: "The morning she woke up next to Paul D . . . she . . . thought . . . of the temptation to trust and remember that gripped her as she stood before the cooking stove in his arms. Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and *count on something*?" (38). Trusting enables remembering because it organizes and interprets crucial new information about one's life: it might be safe, now, to acknowledge one's feelings; one might be justified in counting on the relative safety of this environment. This safe environment is based on cooperation, on the most basic form of social activity, and it restores to Sethe some of her most intimate and personal experience of herself: "To push busyness into the corners of the room and just stand there a minute or two, naked from shoulder blade to waist, relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again and the pleasure of baking bread[.] Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal -- not even leave the stove -- and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?" (18). Trusting involves emotional labor because Sethe has to reorganize her feelings toward others and herself; she has to come to acknowledge what is appropriate to feel. So trusting depends in part on her ability to judge whether something is appropriate, that is, to appraise relevant information about her changing situation and about her needs and desires. The assurance that Paul would be "there to catch her if she sank" changes her world profoundly, makes possible a cognitive reorientation. Paul is important because he can raise the possibility of trust, because he can help create the emotional conditions in which a new kind of knowing is possible.

Indeed, the main argument for seeing Paul D as a central participant in the moral debate the novel stages is that from the very beginning he reveals a capacity for an extraordinary kind of sympathy. That is in fact why we take his later charge ("You got two feet, Sethe, not four") seriously, acknowledging the potential force of his judgment. Although male and an outsider in Sethe's world of dead and living kinfolk, Paul D has a moral and imaginative life that can take him far beyond what traditional individualist notions of feeling and emotion might lead us to expect.

Notice in the following extraordinary passage how a kind of braiding of consciousnesses is achieved, a weaving together of emotional perspectives, through which a memory is relived and a new meaning created. Sethe and Paul have just finished having sex, and it has been disappointingly short, abrupt, and meaningless. As they lie together in discomfort and embarrassment, a fused memory wells up without having been verbalized. Sethe remembers both her wedding night and the first time she had sex with

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her husband, Halle, in the cornfields in Sweet Home; Paul's related memory of that not-so-private event adds counterpoint and resonance. The perspectives shift back and forth, occasionally without warning, and "fusion" is achieved gradually. The text points to new knowledge as well as a new way of knowing, both registered in the word "free" and its gentle but deliberate modulation:

> Halle wanted privacy for [Sethe] and got public display. Who could miss a ripple in a cornfield on a quiet cloudless day? He, Sixo and both of the Pauls sat under Brother [the tree] pouring water from a gourd over their heads, and through eyes streaming with well water, they watched the confusion of tassels in the field below. . . .
>
> Paul D sighed and turned over. Sethe took the opportunity afforded by his movement to shift as well. Looking at Paul D's back, she remembered that some of the corn stalks broke, folded down over Halle's back, and among the things her fingers clutched were husk and cornsilk hair.
>
> How loose the silk. How jailed down the juice.
>
> The jealous admiration of the watching men melted with the feast of new corn they allowed themselves that night. Plucked from the broken stalks that Mr. Garner could not doubt was the fault of the raccoon. . . . [N]ow Paul D couldn't remember how finally they'd cooked those ears too young to eat. What he did remember was parting the hair to get to the tip, the edge of his fingernail just under, so as not to graze a single kernel.
>
> The pulling down of the tight sheath, the ripping sound always convinced her it hurt.
>
> As soon as one strip of husk was down, the rest obeyed and the ear yielded up to him its shy rows, exposed at last. How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free.
>
> No matter what all your teeth and wet fingers anticipated, there was no accounting for the way that simple joy could shake you.
>
> How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free. (27)

Paul's and Sethe's memories fuse in the repeated image of the cornsilk and the juice, and the resonance of the word "free" the second time it appears is much greater than the reference to the loose cornsilk or the jailed-up juice might suggest. The fusion of perspectives suggests something new, something that Sethe and Paul in fact have in common -- a concern with the moral implications of being enslaved and being free. After she has arrived in Cincinnati, Sethe realizes that freedom for the slave involves more than a flight from the legal condition of bondage: the colonial condition continues unless it is faced as a fundamental ethical challenge. "Freeing yourself was one thing," she thinks,

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articulating the constitutive cultural challenge of the postcolonial condition, "claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95).

In fact the disagreement between her and Paul D is defined by a question about the real implications of political freedom. Can you really be free, Paul seems to ask, if your love is so "thick" that it binds you to the level of the subrational, that it demeans your essential human self by distorting your capacity to determine which actions are simply not morally permissible for humans? Part of Sethe's response to this charge is evident in the passage I have just analyzed. Sethe is not simply reliving the first time she had sex with Halle; she thinks also about her wedding night and her relationship with her husband. Mrs. Garner is surprised that Sethe in fact insists on a ceremony to make her union with Halle a formal event. She sews her own dress, refusing to be lowered to the level of the breeder that slavery insisted she be. For Sethe, freedom -- even under slavery -- appears as the ineliminable human need for self-determination, with the capacity for moral agency at its core. So it is not enough to be free from legally imposed bondage; one must also claim ownership of one's freed self. And this ownership, Sethe might have argued with Paul, cannot be a purely individual affair. To understand this ownership adequately, we need access to the buried memories and experiences of others who might have shared our experience. We need to reconstruct what our relevant community might have been, appreciate the social and historical dimensions of our innermost selves. Paul's moral accusation is unfair and simplistic to the very extent that it seems like the application of a general law to an isolated individual act; Sethe suggests that Paul's judgment itself needs to be reevaluated in the context of the knowledge of their common historical experience, a knowledge that remains unavailable to the individual by herself.

For both Sethe and Paul, reclaiming community involves personal growth in their rational and affective capacities to deal with their traumatic pasts. In psychoanalytic terms, the novel traces their developing ability to "work through" the implications of their complex cathectic relationships with Sweet Home and everything that followed. In the early chapters both characters reveal a deep resistance to confronting their pasts on any level, which is manifested in their inability to narrate their own personal stories by themselves. If for Sethe surviving was predicated on "keeping the past at bay" (42), keeping it from forming a coherent narrative with the present and the future, the attempt to construct and narrate the story together with Paul can succeed only if the past ceases to be a form of uncontrolled repetition, "acted out" by the subject rather than integrated cognitively and affectively into her life. Even when it is successful, the narrating is at best fitful and uneasy; "working through" the traumatizing past involves dealing with the way it effectively arrests one's agency: "[Sethe] was spinning. Round and round the room. Past the jelly cupboard, past the window, past the front door, another window, the sideboard, the keeping-room door, the dry sink, the stove-back to the jelly cupboard. Paul D sat at the table watching her drift into view then disappear behind his back, turning like a slow but steady wheel. . . . [T]he wheel never stopped" (159). To go beyond this image of motion and energy without real movement, Sethe has to integrate more fully into her emotional life the theoretical knowledge she both has and resists: if her past is not just hers alone, she can regain its meaning only through collective effort-with Paul, with

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Denver and Beloved. Her anxieties about trusting, herself as well as others, cannot be resolved at a purely intellectual level.13

Morrison indicates in several ways why historical memory might be available to human subjects only if we expand our notion of personal experience to refer to ways of both feeling and knowing, and to include collectives as well as individual selves. The braiding and fusing of voices and emotions makes possible the new knowledge we seek about our postcolonial condition. That it does is evident even more clearly in the searching, exploratory quality of the chant of the black women who at the end help Sethe exorcise the ghost, searching for something that is, once again, both the stuff of history and a new knowledge: "When the women assembled outside 124, Sethe was breaking a lump of ice into chunks. . . . When the music entered the window, she was wringing a cool cloth to put on Beloved's forehead. . . . Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's hand. Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261). The dense allusions in the images bring to mind the varieties of ways people join to transcend their present condition, to recreate past and future through an act of collective imagination and will. And this act is something one learns; one searches for the knowledge to be able to do it right. Images of water evoke both the unremembered dead of the Middle Passage and the power of giving birth; the Clearing brings to mind the collective healing ritual presided over by Sethe's dead mother in law, the ritual that makes possible the communal life of the survivors of slavery. In every instance the collective effort produces something new, the fusion of voices (the call and response, the braiding of sounds that breaks the back of words) leads to possibilities that could not have been created by the effort of an individual by herself.

The image of braiding I have been using suggests that in the very way it is written Morrison's novel advocates a specific moral epistemology. If the narrative is organized around a moral debate between Sethe and Paul, we see in crucial passages such as the ones I have been analyzing why the debate cannot be adequately understood in its stark or abstract form as a disagreement in judgment. Rather, Sethe's response to Paul is elaborated by precisely such moments of narrative braiding of perspectives, suggesting how much more Paul will need to know about his communal past, as well as the way he might go about seeking this knowledge. The almost insular world of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved represents the most complex instance of the kind of intersubjective knowing that Paul and the reader must learn to appreciate. For in their search for reconciliation, mother and daughters, victims all, reclaim one another by deepening our understanding of what it means to call something or someone one's own. Again, the narrator often deliberately makes it dificult to separate the voices, but notice in the first passage from Beloved's monologue how the community of the dead from the Middle Passage is invoked in a way that frames and lends meaning to the later passage in which Sethe, Denver, and Beloved acknowledge one another's needs and demands.

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> We are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man's eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises...the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread she has nothing in her ears if I had the teeth of the man who died on my face I would bite the circle around her neck bite it away I know she does not like it now there is room to crouch and to watch the crouching others it is the crouching that is now always now inside the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing (211)

> Beloved
> You are my sister
> You are my daughter
> You are my face; you are me
> I have found you again; you have come back to me
> You are my Beloved
> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine
>
> I have your milk
> I have your smile
> I will take care of you
>
> You are my face; I am you. Why did you leave me who am you?
> I will never leave you again
> Don't ever leave me again
> You will never leave me again
> You went in the water
> I drank your blood
> I brought your milk
>
> You forgot to smile
> I loved you
> You hurt me
> You came back to me
> You left me
>
> I waited for you
> You are mine
> You are mine
> You are mine (216-17)

Beloved reconnects us with the dead and unremembered of the Middle Passage but also specifically with Sethe's mother who had come from Africa. The "face" that Beloved claims is not just her grandmother's, however, for the images of claiming kinship

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reverberate outward. "The face I want" becomes "the face that is mine," suggesting the appropriation of another to oneself. But in the very next lines the distance increases, to register an other who might need help: she has an iron ring around her neck that she "does not like" or -- more emphatic still -- "the woman with my face is in the sea a hot thing**.**"

Loving, forgiving, acknowledging, helping, even making demands or accusations -- all these are woven together through the different voices in the second passage, suggesting the complexity of coming to know oneself and one's family or community through sustained emotional labor**.** But the allusion to Sethe's mother in Beloved's monologue opens out from one's immediate purview to include those from the past whose lives frame one's own. If Sethe's mother survived the Middle Passage, she did so only to be hanged later. Sethe remembers her primarily through her absence, and through her struggle to communicate to her daughter a lineage that Sethe would barely register: "She must of nursed me two or three weeks -- that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was. She never fixed my hair nor nothing. . . . One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This,' and she pointed" (60-61). Sethe is too young and ignorant of history to know what the sign meant, and why her mother is hanged later with, as she says uncomprehendingly, "a whole lot of them" (61). The surrogate mother Nan, whose job it was to nurse babies and who spoke the same African language Sethe's mother spoke, fills in a portion of the lost narrative with a moral insistence that Sethe can appreciate only in retrospect.

> Nighttime. Nan holding her with her good arm, waving the stump of the other in the air. "Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe," and she did that. She told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea. Both were taken up many times by the crew. "She threw them all way but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe." (62)

What Sethe's perspective -- mediated through Denver, Beloved, and the dead women characters -- offers Paul is a new understanding of the historical achievement of motherhood. It had the function not just of giving birth and nurturing, but -- when fatherhood was denied the slave family -- the most basic historical role of positing meaning and continuity as well. Mothering becomes a central trope in the novel because it is defined as a key feature of the moral and historical imagination. The slave mother persevered to create identity, both personal and familial; in her image -- and on her body -- were inscribed the twin imperatives to survive and to create new meaning. The recurring images of water, milk, and blood combine in the novel to suggest some of the material conditions in which one creates the conscience of the race, for the race needs to

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survive, both physically and in our imaginations, before we can examine its moral choices**.** Sethe insists that the community of the colonized includes not just the living survivors of the slave plantations but also, beyond it, the absent, those who need to be reclaimed, who need in fact to be asked to make their claims on us. The novel's central thesis about black motherhood subtends the moral issue Paul raises; it deepens, qualifies, and historicizes it. It suggests in effect that Paul's question -- can a human do that?! -- is indeed too abstract, bereft of historical and contextual depth. In order to pose the question appropriately, we need the cognitive context that only the community of the colonized-dead and living, slave and nonslave -- can provide. It is this that Paul D begins to realize when he finally returns to 124 Bluestone Road.

Paul achieves this realization by coming to terms with Beloved, the ghost, and the powerful spell she cast on him. By coming to understand that he both needed Beloved and was afraid of her, he learns the historical lesson for which the narrative has prepared us. Before his reconciliation with Sethe, Paul D must acknowledge that his dependency on Beloved is a sign of his connection with the past he has up till now misunderstood, the past of water and death and ocean-deep emotion that threatens to both engulf him and liberate him. Through this reliving of his relationship with the exorcised ghost-child, Paul comes to have faith in the intergenerational lineage of black women whose primordial presence frames his moral questioning because it makes possible his historical and cultural present:

> There is the pallet spread with old newspapers gnawed at the edges by mice. The lard can. The potato sacks too, but empty now, they lie on the dirt floor in heaps. In daylight he can't imagine it in darkness with moonlight seeping through the cracks. Nor the desire that drowned him there and forced him to struggle up, up into that girl like she was the clear air at the top of the sea. Coupling with her wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (263-64)

If coupling with Beloved is something to which Paul was blindly and "brainless[ly]" driven, it is paradoxically because it evoked a "life hunger" in him which he only now begins to understand. His need for her was like the need for air, the "clear air at the top of the sea," but the life he unwittingly seeks is his own unclaimed history, the "ocean-deep place" of the dead female ancestors to whom he once "belonged." This belonging is what brings Paul to his final moment of reconciliation with Sethe, and this reconciliation is as much an intellectual growth as it is an emotional acknowledgment of his historical indebtedness. It is a moment that emblematizes the general cultural phenomenon Hortense Spillers indicates, the essential moral education through which the African-American male comes to "regain the heritage of the mother" as "an aspect of his own personhood -- the power of 'yes' to the female within" (Spillers 80).

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Note how in the scene of reconciliation the earlier image about the morality of infanticide gets revised, the stark demand of the abstract moral law -- "be human" -- is softened and humanized in its turn, for it is located in culture, in history, in life. Sethe is ill and exhausted when Paul returns, and she is lying in Baby Suggs's bed:

> "Don't you die on me! This is Baby Suggs' bed! Is that what you planning?" He is so angry he could kill her. He checks himself, remembering Denver's warning, and whispers, "What you planning, Sethe?"
>
> "Oh, I don't have no plans. No plans at all."
>
> "Look," he says, "Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now. First off, you don't smell right. Stay there. Don't move. Let me heat up some water." He stops. "Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?"
>
> "And count my feet?" she asks him.
>
> He steps closer. "Rub your feet." (271-72)

This transformation from law to human understanding, from abstract humanity to real feeling, is predicated on the enlargement of Paul's personal capacity to experience, but if my reading of the novel is convincing it suggests how much historical knowledge, indeed how much theoretical knowledge, is involved in Paul's growth. His new relationship to Sethe and to Beloved is based on a new understanding of his history, of a history constructed and sustained by generations of black mothers. Morrison's novel is one of the most challenging of postcolonial texts because it indicates the extent to which the search for a genuinely noncolonial moral and cultural identity depends on a revisionary historiography.[14] We cannot really claim ourselves morally or politically until we have reconstructed our collective identity, reexamined our dead and our disremembered. This is not simply a project of adding to one's ancestral line, for as we have seen, it often involves fundamental discoveries about what ancestry is, what continuity consists in, how cultural meanings do not just sustain themselves through history but are in fact materially embodied and fought for.

Sethe's act of infanticide resonates differently after we have reconsidered the role of motherhood under slavery. We think, for instance, of Sethe's unnamed mother, who throws all her children except Sethe away as an act of resistance to rape and racial humiliation. It is something of this order that Sethe decides to do in slitting her child's throat. If Paul speaks in terms of the abstraction we call "the human," Sethe's situation and that of other slave mothers reminds us that humanity is itself measured in terms of a moral personhood, a capacity for self-determination, which the institution of slavery denied the slave. "Anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself any more. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up.

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And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children" (251). We may or may not agree with Sethe's argument, but we need to come to terms with the historical community she claims as her own, and reexamine the moral theory we bring with us. That is what Paul does at the end, as he seeks reconciliation with Sethe.

> "Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."
>
> He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.
>
> "Me? Me?" (273)

He claims her community as his own and, through her, reclaims an aspect of his own personhood, but his words of acceptance and reconciliation suggest a new challenge, a new way of conceiving the postcolonial tomorrow. Sethe's argument had been that she could not let her children be enslaved because they were "her best thing"; Paul does not condemn her action now as he had done in the past, but he suggests a different emphasis: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." This is not quite a disagreement so much as an indication that the distinctly postcolonial challenge lies in leaving part of the past behind, in working through it to imagine agency and selfhood in positive terms, inventing new dimensions of cultural possibility.

Morrison's novel suggests that the community that defines our cultural identity is constructed through a complex and ongoing process involving both emotional and cognitive effort. Central to this effort is the work of the moral imagination that learns to "remember" with honesty and integrity. Morrison's vision of the writer's historical task, as she described it in a 1987 lecture, is what we would call realist or cognitivist:

> The act of imagination is bound up with memory. You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. "Floods" is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be. All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was. Writers are like that: remembering where we were, what valley we ran through, what the banks were like, the light that was there and the route back to our original place. It is emotional memory -- what the nerves and the skin remember as well as how it appeared. ("The Site of Memory" 98-99).

Needless to say, such remembering is never easy, nor is the moral growth that is closely tied with it irreversible, for fallibility, or at least the danger of forgetting what is essential, is always a historical possibility. What we need to recognize is that such forgetting would not be simply a personal failure but rather a loss of community, of necessary social

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meaning. Hence the tone of loss and mourning that frames the scene of Paul and Sethe's reconcilation. There are images of "dead ivy," "shriveled blossoms," and a "bleak and minus nothing" (270). As the novel ends, it is not just Beloved who is forgotten "but the water too and what it is down there" (275). Integral to the postpositivist realist view of experience and identity is thus the necessary caution that our cultural identities (or the moral and political knowledge we might seek through them) are defined in a way that is historically open-ended, never frozen or settled once and for all: "Down by the stream in back of 124 [Beloved's] footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. Should a child, an adult, place his feet in them, they will fit. Take them out and they disappear again as though nobody walked there" (275).

Cultural Difference and Social Power

Let me summarize part of my central argument in outlining some of the advantages of the realist view of experience and identity. First, this account of cultural identity explains an important way in which identities can be both constructed (socially, linguistically, theoretically, and so on) and "real" at the same time. Their "reality" consists in their referring outward, to causally significant features of the social world. Alice's gendered identity is theoretically constructed, to be sure, insofar as she elaborates and consolidates it in the context of the consciousness-raising group and the alternative descriptions of the world she encounters and debates there. But if this description happens to be accurate as an explanation of the key causal factors that make this world what it is, that is, make this world this world, then Alice's new feminist cultural and political identity is "real" in the following sense: it refers accurately to her social location and interests. Alice discovers that what defines her life in her society is the fact that she belongs to a group defined by gender. Gender is a social fact that is causally relevant for the experiences she has and the choices and possibilities that are available to her. Her world is what it is because in it social power is sustained through the hierarchical organization of gendered groups, including the cultural meanings they share. The collective identity Alice consciously forges through reexamination of the accepted cultural meanings and values, the given definition of her personal and political interests, is then as much her discovery as it is a construction. For good social and political theories do not only organize pregiven facts about the world; they also make it possible for us to detect new ones. They do so by guiding us to new patterns of salience and relevance, teaching us what to take seriously and what to reinterpret. To say that theories and identities "refer" is thus to understand the complex way they provide us knowledge about the world. Beyond the elementary descriptive relationship that individual signs might have with unique and static objects, "reference," postpositivist realists say, should be understood dialectically and socially as providing us degrees of "epistemic access" to reality. On this view, there can be both partial and successful reference. In some cases, theories (like signs) can fail to refer accurately, but reference should not be conceived as an all-or-nothing affair. Thus, when I say that cultural identities refer, I am suggesting that they can be evaluated using the same complex epistemic criteria we use to evaluate "theories."[15]

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So the second advantage a realist theory of identity offers is this: it helps explain how we can distinguish legitimate identities from spurious ones. In fact it gives us the way to appreciate different degrees of legitimacy and spuriousness. It does so by urging us to take the epistemic status of personal experience very seriously, seriously enough in fact to consider why Alice's anger and her father's are not equally justified, and how Paul D's initial moral judgment of Sethe's action can become subtler and deeper, more adequate to the reality they share. Alice's evolving personal experience plays an epistemic role since it reveals to her some of the determining features of her social location and her world, and where, objectively speaking, her personal interests might lie. To say that Alice (like Paul or Sethe) learns from her experience is to emphasize that under certain conditions personal experience yields reliable knowledge about oneself and one's situation.16 And since different experiences and identities refer to different aspects of one world, one complex causal structure that we call "social reality," the realist theory of identity implies that we can evaluate them comparatively by considering how adequately they explain this structure. This comparison is often a complex and difficult negotiation (since it can involve competing interpretations and only partially overlapping bodies of information), but it is facilitated by making buried explanations explicit, by examining the social and political views that are involved in what seem like purely personal choices and predilections. Experiences and identities -- and theories about them -- are bits of social and political theory themselves and are to be evaluated as such.

The cultural radicalism of the postmodernist position I identified earlier is based on the argument that all identities are constructed and are thus contingent and changeable. But it cannot adequately explain what difference different kinds of construction make. Since it refuses to take the epistemic dimension of experience seriously, it cannot explain how (as, say, in the case of Alice or Paul D) changes in our cultural identity reflect moral and political growth, an increase both in our personal capacities and in knowledge. Once we consider the theoretical option to postmodernism provided by the realist account of identity I have proposed here, it might also be clearer why we should not frame our questions about cultural identity in terms of a rigid opposition between essentialism, claiming unchanging "reality," and (social) constructionism, emphasizing social and historical ideology. Both this unhelpful opposition and efforts to transcend it through such weak theoretical compromises as are suggested by such terms as "strategic essentialism,"17 are based on an evasion of the difficult but unavoidable epistemological questions that the postmodernist confronts. If the identities of social actors cannot be deduced from experiences whose meanings are self-evident, is there anything objective we can say about these identities? How do we determine that one social identity is more legitimate than another? How do we justify one "strategy" over another? Is such justification purely a matter of pragmatic calculation, or does it obey some epistemic constraints as well? Does what we know about the world (independently of specific questions about identity) have any bearing on our understanding of this justification? I have suggested some answers to these questions by emphasizing the continuity of accounts of cultural identity with accounts of the social justification of knowledge, especially the knowledge involved in our ethical and political claims and commitments.

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The third, more specific, advantage of the realist approach to experience and identity is that it explains how the oppressed may have epistemic privilege, but it does so without espousing a self-defeating or dubious kind of relativism with separatist implications. To have a cognitivist view of experience is to claim that its truth content can be evaluated, and thus potentially shared with others. As we saw in my discussion of a theory of emotions, the individualist "privileged access" theory is wrong because it denies that personal experience is fundamentally theory-mediated. A realist theory of the kind I have outlined would both acknowledge the constitutive role played by theory and respect the ways specific theories -- and social situations, conditions of research, and so on -- provide better or worse ways of detecting new and relevant information about our world. I have said (drawing on Harding, Boyd, and Marx) that certain social arrangements and conditions -- social struggles of dominated groups, for instance -- can help produce more objective knowledge about a world that is constitutively defined by relations of domination. That would help explain why granting the possibility of epistemic privilege to the oppressed might be more than a sentimental gesture; in many cases in fact it is the only way to push us toward greater social objectivity. For granting that the oppressed have this privilege opens up the possibility that our own epistemic perspective is partial, shaped by our social location, and that it needs to be understood and revised hermeneutically. One way to read my account of Paul D's growth over the course of the novel is that he grows because Sethe challenges him to become aware of his partiality. His recognition of the nature of his dependence on Beloved -- the particular needs she fulfilled, the ocean-deep place to which he had lost access which she restored -- is a historical lesson that is learned by becoming less forgetful and more fully human, more aware of the cultural sources of his own personhood.

This is a general lesson whose implications every historian confronts, as theorists have lately been pointing out. Reviewing the recent cultural debate among German historians about the centrality of the Holocaust in the writing of objective national history, Dominick LaCapra shows why the historian of the period must overcome the kind of false objectivity that is derived from a denial of one's "subject position." What is needed, instead, is an understanding of the variety of affective responses to the past, responses shaped by one's location. For the historian's interpretation to be more objective than might otherwise be possible, she must attend to the ethical implications of her discursive stances:

> The Holocaust presents the historian with transference in the most traumatic form conceivable -- but in a form that will vary with the difference in subject position of the analyst. Whether the historian or analyst is a survivor, a relative of survivors, a former Nazi, a former collaborator, a relative of former Nazis or collaborators, a younger Jew or German distanced from more immediate contact with survival, participation, or collaboration, or a relative "outsider" to these problems will make a difference even in the meaning of statements that may be formally identical. Certain statements or even entire orientations may seem appropriate for someone in a given subject position but not in others. (It would, for example, be ridiculous if I tried to assume the voice of Elie

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> Wiesel or Saul Friedlander. There is a sense in which I have no right to these voices. There is also a sense in which, experiencing a lack of a viable voice, I am constrained to resort to quotation and commentary more often than I otherwise might be.) Thus although any historian must be "invested" in a distinctive way in the events of the Holocaust, not all investments (or cathexes) are the same and not all statements, rhetorics, or orientations are equally available to different historians. ("Representing the Holocaust" 110)

La Capra goes on to characterize "statements, rhetorics, or orientations" as specific choices about "how language is used" (110), but in the context of my present discussion it is possible to see that they point to epistemic choices and stances as well. They "orient" inquiry by suggesting where we might be reflexive or critical, where attention to seemingly irrelevant subjective information can lead to greater objectivity. When we acknowledge that the experiences of victims might be repositories of valuable knowledge, and thus allow that they have epistemic privilege, we are not thereby reduced to sentimental silence. Entailed in our acknowledgment is the need to pay attention to the way our social locations facilitate or inhibit knowledge by predisposing us to register and interpret information in certain ways. Our relation to social power produces forms of blindness just as it enables degrees of lucidity. The notion of epistemic privilege is thus inseparable from the cognitivist account of experience and cultural identity I have sketched, and it explains how objectivity in historical and moral inquiry can be found not by denying our perspectives or locations but rather by interrogating their epistemic consequences.

My arguments should indicate that these consequences are not so severe that we need to retreat into skepticism. Even when we are discussing such slippery things as personal experiences and cultural meanings, it is not clear that postmodernist skepticism is warranted. Either to base definitions of identity on an idealized conception of experience (as essentialists do) or to deny experience any cognitive value whatsoever (as postmodernists might) is to cut with too blunt a theoretical knife. The realist-cognitivist account of identity I have proposed here, a definition implicit in Toni Morrison's novel, might suggest to some a viable alternative to these dominant theoretical positions.

Concluding Remarks

One implication of the realist account of identity I have provided may surprise some readers. This theory reconciles the claims of certain forms of identity politics with moral universalism. Indeed, it enables us to respect social difference while deepening the radical potential of universalist moral and political claims. The notion of epistemic privilege I outlined, a notion central to the realist understanding of identity, shows us why this should be the case. If our views about our identities are partly explanations of the world in which we live and these explanations are based on the knowledge we gather from our social activities, then the claim that oppressed social groups have a special kind

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of knowledge about the world as it affects them is hardly a mysterious one requiring idealist assumptions about cultural essences or inaccessible particularities. Rather it is an empirical claim, tied to a wider (empirical and theoretical) account of the society in which these groups live. And therefore any claim about the epistemic privilege of a particular social group will be only as convincing as the social theory and description that accompany it. On the view I am defending, claims about the epistemic privilege of a particular group are necessarily embedded in wider explanatory theories of history and of the society in which the group lives. Both the claim of epistemic privilege and the identity politics based on it need to be evaluated as any social and historical explanation should be; they are prone, like all explanatory accounts of the world, to error -- both empirical and theoretical.

But when such a claim about a particular social group is true, its implications are general, not merely limited to the subjective experiences of the group in question. The knowledge we gain is "objective." This conclusion shows why we need to be wary of those overly-abstract universalist visions of morality or social justice which focus on only the most general features that the various social groups (or individuals) have in common and exclude consideration of relevant particularities, relevant contextual information. Part of Sethe's response to Paul D's moral indignation is that he has inadequate understanding of the social context in which he, as a (black) man, has developed his moral views about infanticide. Paul's understanding is deepened by his recognition of his partiality, his -- historically and socially produced -- ignorance about the role of motherhood in the slave family. Sethe does not defend infanticide; she widens the focus of the moral debate to include the relevant contexts of her action, and thus makes it more complex.

Paul's growth is predicated on his coming to know Sethe's perspective, on learning to acknowledge both the partiality of his knowledge and the reason Sethe knows something that he does not about the world in which they both live. Sethe's epistemic privilege is not an accident; it derives from her experience of being a slave mother, that is, her resistance to being a reproducer of slaves. Paul comes to recognize that both motherhood and the gendered division of labor on which slavery was built are objective historical and social facts that shape what he knows and what he does not, that -- consequently -- influence the moral judgment he makes. But Paul's response -- in fact the genuineness of his emotional and moral growth -- is predicated on his acceptance of Sethe's claim about motherhood as an empirical fact about slave society. I have not argued in this chapter that Paul *has* to accept this claim, and Morrison's novel gives the reader the same option. If the historical claim is seen as cogent, however, it is incumbent upon us to pay attention to the special knowledge that slave mothers have. But in that case such attention would not derive from sentimental respect for motherhood but would rather be sound epistemic practice. Such subjective perspectives often contain deep sources of information and knowledge, or even alternative theoretical pictures and accounts of the world we all share. An adequate appreciation of such "particular" perspectives and viewpoints makes possible a richer general picture, a deeper and more nuanced universalist view of human needs and vulnerabilities, as well as -- by implication -- human flourishing. In such cases, the (cultural or historical) particular and the (moral) universal complement and substantiate each other.

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This explains why, with all their flaws and obvious limitations, identity-based political struggles can be built on genuine political insights. Once we acknowledge, as the realist theory requires, that such struggles cannot be based on a priori claims to political or moral knowledge, we can understand how they can legitimately draw on personal experiences and histories to deepen our knowledge of society. A feminist political consciousness often develops, for instance, through a recognition of the overwhelming significance of the personal, of the way gender relations and inequalities are played out in our most intimate relationships (including our relationships with ourselves). As we saw in Alice's case, an adequate appreciation of the political effects of gender often depends on a personal reorientation or growth, involving both the affective and the deliberative faculties. And the relation between the personal and the political is complex and indeed dialectical. The recovery of an individual's sense of personal worth and the development of her capacity for the right kind of anger or indignation partly depend on finding the right social and political theory. In Alice's case, such a theory or such deeply theoretical hypotheses are what the consciousness-raising group provides. The group also provides Alice with the appropriate epistemic and emotional context in which to examine such hypotheses, and thus Alice's political growth, the growth in her knowledge about herself, her capacities, and her world, is predicated on her acknowledgment of her inherited social identity and its effects.

What cultural and social conditions make identitarian politics a necessary (though certainly not sufficient) form of social struggle, even of social inquiry? Alice's situation is by no means uncommon. What makes Alice's "identity" so central to the process of her moral and political growth is a very crucial feature of the world in which we all live: hierarchical and unequal gender relations are produced and reproduced by a process through which Alice is taught in effect to devalue her personal experiences as a source of knowledge about her world, and even about herself as a person -- that is, as someone with genuine needs and capacities, rights and entitlements. Alice learns to value these experiences again and to glean from them -- as well as from the fact that she had been taught to ignore them -- crucial information about both herself and her world. "Learning" to value and imagine in such new ways is relevant not only for the disadvantaged but also for the historically privileged, for both privilege and privation can produce (different kinds of) moral and political blindness. Cultural decolonization often involves an interrogation of the epistemic and affective consequences of our social location, of historically learned habits of thinking and feeling. For both Alice and Paul D the developing recognition of aspects of their inherited identities amounts to a form of decolonization, a necessary political education. Through his extended dialogue with Sethe, Paul comes to acknowledge both his indebtedness to his community and his own partial knowledge -- a partiality fostered at least as much by his gendered identity as by any purely personal trait or idiosyncracy.

For Paul and Alice, as for so many others in modern society, an identity-based politics becomes a necessary first step in coming to know what an oppressive social and cultural system obscures. Such "obscuring" is often a highly mediated and almost invisible process, implicit in traditional forms of schooling as well as in less formal practices of education and socialization. The institutions of social reproduction and cultural

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transmission -- schools, libraries, newspapers, and museums, for instance -- are oriented to the dominant cultural and social perspectives. Much of their bias is often invisible because of the relatively benign form the transmission of cultural information takes: it seems utterly natural, part of the scheme of things. In such instances, cultural assimilation amounts to a repression of alternative sources of experience and value. That repression would explain why the feelings of minority groups about their "racial" or cultural identities are so tenacious, for instance, or why claims about the significance of gender or sexual identity are more than the simple "politics of recognition."[18] Quite often, such claims and feelings embody alternative and anti-hegemonic accounts of what is significant and in fact necessary for a more accurate understanding of the world we all share.

Thus, in analyzing identity-based politics, claims about the general social significance of a particular identity should be evaluated together with its accompanying assumptions or arguments about how the current social or cultural system makes some experiences intelligible and others obscure or irrelevant, how it treats some as legitimate sources of knowledge about the world while relegating others to the level of the narrowly personal. Both the claims and the underlying assumptions refer to the social world; they amount to explanatory theses with both empirical and theoretical content. They need to be engaged as such, and evaluated as we evaluate other such descriptions and theories about society. This realist attitude toward identity politics does not guarantee that a particular version of identity politics is justified; that justification will depend on the details of what is being claimed. We need to ask if these details mesh with the world as we know it, and to see how the accompanying theories compare with our best moral and political accounts. Thus, for instance, parallel claims and assumptions can be made by both the kind of feminist identity politics that Alice practices and a retrograde form of religious fundamentalism, and we have no way of choosing between them in advance. It would be hasty to dismiss both Alice's feminist identity and the fundamentalist religious identity *in the same way*, simply because both appeal to personal experience and make some claim to epistemic privilege. As I have been emphasizing, realism about identity requires that we see identities as complex theories about (and explanations of) the social world, and the only way to evaluate such theories is to look at how well they work as explanations. "Good" social and cultural identities are quite simply (based on) good explanations of the social world. Such explanations are not purely empirical, and what makes them "good" is in part the cogency of the background theories they draw on, which often necessarily have deep moral and evaluative content. But such necessary interdependence of the empirical and the theoretical, the factual and the evaluative, is, the postpositivist realist will point out, not evidence of the unique epistemic status of cultural identities; this interdependence is a feature of all inquiry, scientific and moral, and adjudicating between different identity claims is not fundamentally all that different from adjudicating between two fairly complex accounts of the natural or social world. There simply is no easy way out, for a lot depends on the details. What we lose by looking for an easy way out -- for example, by denying all identity any validity because it is always tied to personal experience and subjective judgments -- is the capacity to make useful and important distinctions between different kinds of identity, different kinds of value and judgment.

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Notes

1 Diana Fuss, in *Essentially Speaking*, provides an intelligent discussion of various kinds of essentialism and identity politics. Since my focus here is primarily on postmodernism, I have found it expedient to initially accept the simple definition of identity politics in terms of an ahistorical essentialism. Later, however, I attempt to answer some of the fundamental questions raised by proponents of identity politics (e.g., the status of experience, the epistemological privilege that the oppressed might have, etc.) in terms that are not available through the postmodernist-essentialist debate as it is currently understood, even in resourceful reinterpretations such as the one Fuss provides.

2 For a selective survey of the various critiques of experience in modern European philosophy, see Jardine, 145-155. Jardine is however not too helpful when it comes to basic distinctions such as that between Hegel's *Erfahrung* and the ordinary idea of everyday experience Culler and other poststructuralist critics wish to question. For a useful account of some of the responses to Culler's position, see Fuss, 23-37. For a postmodernist position on identity that draws on a variety of sources and identifies itself as "postcolonial," see Bhabha, 183-209; the relevant epistemological claims (as I understand them) are presented on pp. 191-194.

The current skepticism about the claims of experience can be traced back to Nietzsche, especially his critique of idealist notions of consciousness and subjectivity as self-sufficient and self-authorizing (see, e.g., *The Will to Power*, 263-267/sections 477-480). Nietzsche's central argument is an antipositivist one about the theory dependence of experience and facts. Whether recognition of theory dependence should lead to a denial of objectivity is one of the main questions I am addressing here. Postmodernists say that it does; Nietzsche was at least ambiguous on the subject. For Nietzsche's conception of objectivity (through the mediation of theories or perspectives), see *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 555/Third Essay, sec. 12, a conception that is compatible with the antirelativist theory I am outlining here.

3 For a brief statement of the naturalistic view of philosophy as "continuous with science" rather than an "a priori propadeutic or groundwork for science," see Quine, *Ontological Relativity*, 126-28.

4 I think it is a belief in the cognitive component of experience (and the knowledge it can give us about our social location) that is behind Houston Baker's impatience with Anthony Appiah's "debunking" account of the reality of race (both in Gates, *"Race," Writing and Difference*). Appiah's critique of racial essentialism is not based on postmodernist premises, but his response to Baker on the question of experience is evasive (see "The Conservation of 'Race'" 39-44) and might point to a vagueness in his conception of identity.

One way of evaluating my theory of experience and identity is to see how it responds to the challenge historian Joan Scott has formulated quite well: "Experience is not a word we can do without, although it is tempting, given its usage to essentialize identity and

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reify the subject, to abandon it altogether. . . . But [experience] serves as a way of talking about what happened, of establishing difference and similarity, of claiming knowledge. . . . Given the ubiquity of the term, it seems to me more useful to work with it, to analyze its operations and redefine its meaning. . . . The study of experience. . . must call into question its originary status in historical explanation" (37). Scott points out that postmodernist attacks on experience are a critique of a certain kind of epistemological view. I am not sure, however, that I agree with her assumption that a "genuinely non-foundational[ist] history" is possible only "when historians take as their project not the reproduction and transmission of knowledge said to be arrived at through experience, but the analysis of the production of that knowledge itself" (37). I would suggest that once we acknowledge the cognitive status of experience, as well as the way it is necessarily theory-dependent, we can conceive of legitimate ways of reproducing and transmitting "knowledge said to be arrived at through experience." As will be clear from what I argue below, this is in fact the best way to understand the "epistemological privilege" of, say, the oppressed, as well as how it demands hermeneutical respect from the historian.

5 See Naomi Scheman, "Anger and the Politics of Naming."

6 This theory-mediated process of coming to acknowledge one's genuine feelings is central to any form of political consciousness raising. The anti-racist work done by the "freedom schools" in the South also drew on normative theories of personhood and racial justice in order to enable victims of racism to accurately interpret their experiences and their needs. Such "interpretations" are, as I hope to suggest, never purely intellectual.

7 I am thinking here of the kind of extreme thesis about "drives" and "needs" that Nietzsche sometimes combined with his valid antipositivist insights: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena -- 'There are only *facts'* -- I would say: No, facts [sic] is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself': perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing. . . . It is our needs that interpret the world; our drives and their For and Against. Every drive is a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all the other drives to accept as a norm" (*Will*, p. 267, sec. 481).

8 In emphasizing the fact that Alice comes to know something about her world through her emotion, I wish to show how Scheman's account of emotion is a realist one. Scheman does not identify her position as realist, perhaps because she thinks (wrongly, to my mind) that realism about emotions can only lead to a sort of physicalism: e.g., "types of psychological states (like being angry or in pain) actually are types of physical states (like certain patterns of neurons firing)" ("Individualism" 225). My interpretation of emotions in this essay should suggest a better conception of the realist view. For a cognitivist-realist understanding of emotions that is compatible with mine, see the many valuable suggestions in Lorde, especially 54-58.

9 "A person of practical insight," writes Martha Nussbaum, imaginatively and resourcefully elaborating Aristotle's view of moral development, "will cultivate emotional openness and responsiveness in approaching a new situation. Frequently, it

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will be her passional response, rather than detached thinking, that will guide her to the appropriate recognitions. 'Here is a case where a friend needs my help': this will often be 'seen' first by the feelings that are constituent parts of friendship, rather than by pure intellect. Intellect will often want to consult these feelings to get information about the true nature of the situation. Without them its approach to a new situation would be blind and obtuse. . . . Without feeling, a part of the correct perception is missing" (78-79).

10 This explanatory notion of "objective interests" implies comparison with other competing explanations of the same phenomena. When marxists talk about the objective interests of the working class, they are trying to explain the location of the class in terms, on the one hand, of the relations of production and, on the other, of their theories about human freedom and social justice. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's criticism of the notion of objective interests thus seems to be either hasty or disingenuous: "In our view," they write, ". . . it is necessary to. . .discard the idea of a perfectly unified and homogeneous agent, such as the working class of classical discourse. . . . [F]undamental interests in socialism cannot be *logically* deduced from determinate positions in the economic process" (84). The theoretical assumption here is that "fundamental interests in socialism" can either be "logically deduced" on the basis of "determinate positions in the economic process" or else not discovered at all. The view that "interests" might be inferred (or deduced, in their stronger language) solely on the basis of "determinate positions" without the mediation of any theory is clearly based on a positivist understanding of explanation. Having rejected this view, Laclau and Mouffe leap to the postmodernist conclusion that a social group's interests cannot be identified through an objective explanation: There is "no constitutive principle for social agents [interests or anything else] which can be fixed in an ultimate class core." This leads to the more general assertion that "Unfixity [is] the condition of every social identity" (85). The glib antiobjectivism of many postmodernist positions is based on such positivist presuppositions about the nature of inquiry. For a useful point of contrast, see the accounts of Marx's conception of scientific and moral objectivity in Railton, 763-73, and Gilbert, 154-83.

11 See Railton, especially 770-71.

12 One way to evaluate different versions of postmodernism is to examine the conception of objectivity they define themselves against; another is to look carefully at how precisely they develop their notion of fallibility. Donna Haraway has suggested in a well-known essay that we need to go beyond "realism" (by which I think she means positivism) to conceive the world (i.e., the object of knowledge) as a "coding trickster with whom we must learn to converse" (esp. 198-99, 201). "The Coyote or Trickster," she argues, "embodied in American Southwest Indian accounts, suggests our situation when we give up mastery but keep searching for fidelity, knowing all the while we will be hoodwinked" (199). The image suggests the epistemological injunction to acknowledge "the agency of the world" by "mak[ing] room for some unsettling possibilities, including a sense of the world's independent sense of humour" (199). This view is for the most part compatible with the postpositivist epistemology I am developing here, but Haraway's conception of fallibility is not precise enough to be very helpful. It is important to know more than the

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fact that "we will be hoodwinked," which is here formulated as a generalized possibility. We do not begin to understand the hoodwinking until we appreciate why and where we were wrong in our expectations (or theories). In many situations -- many more than Haraway's image suggests -- it is barely useful to know that we were wrong unless we are also led a more precise understanding of the sources of our error. I agree with Haraway that we should give up (foundationalist) "mastery," and opt for (postpositivist) "fidelity"; but our conception of that fidelity will be richer to the extent that we can specify and deepen our understanding of the conditions that lead to our "hoodwinking." Objectivity and error are the products of social practice, and we should attempt to understand as much as we legitimately can about them (in naturalistic terms) before we generalize about our condition of original epistemic sinfulness.

13 Mae Henderson has provided an insightful analysis of the historiographical project of *Beloved*, focusing on Morrison's views about memory and narrative (See 62-87). For an application of psychoanalytical concepts like "acting out" and "working through" to the historian's relationship with his or her object, see La Capra, "Representing" 108-27, 356-60. This theme is developed in what is easily one of the most honest and illuminating articles on the de Man controversy, La Capra's "The Personal," 5-38, where the focus is less on de Man's World War II journalistic writings and their moral implications and more on the responses of some of his more illustrious defenders.

14 It is of course not only the colonized who need to worry about the way their search for a noncolonial identity depends on an adequate historiography. For an account of the colonizer's identity, and how it might survive in postcolonial contexts precisely to the extent that its genealogy is not traced, see my "Drawing the Color Line," especially the concluding section.

15 This way of understanding reference builds on the "causal" account discussed in Chapter 2 of my *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*. Also see Boyd, "Metaphor and Theory Change," 356-408, for a useful development of the causal theory.

16 For two realist accounts that define political identity by reference to social location, common interests, and shared contexts of struggle, see Sivanandan (on "black" people in Britain) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (on "Third World women"). I discussed Sivandandan's essay briefly in my *Literary Theory and the Claims of History*, 17.

17 See Spivak, 202-211; and for a position that is both more complex and more lucidly discussed, Fuss, esp. 118-119. I think Fuss's overall project would be better served by a fully developed realist theory of experience than by the Althusserian one she invokes in her concluding discussion.

18 Charles Taylor sees contemporary demands for multiculturalism as primarily the demand for "recognition"; see "The Politics of Recognition," 25-73. It should be evident by now why I would think that this is an underestimation of the multiculturalist claim.

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