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## On Multiculturalism

### Notes on the Ambitions and Legacies of a Movement

*Jeff Chang*

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*Taos Journey*

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Jeff Chang is widely known for chronicling the story of the hip-hop generation through his book *Can't Stop Won't Stop* and the recent anthology *Total Chaos*. In this *Taos Journey* essay, Chang looks back at the legacy of the multiculturalism movement of the 1960s and '70s; at the last several GIA conferences, grantmakers have gathered to discuss their concerns about crises in important culturally specific organizations formed during that period. While funders have worried about financial viability, retiring leadership, and exhausted boards of organizations that grew out of "the movement," Chang points to changes in the context of their work – in academia, among artists, and across society.

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## On Multiculturalism

### Notes on the Ambitions and Legacies of a Movement

Jeff Chang

#### I. Seeing Race through the Eyes of Children: A Tale of Two Cartoonists

When Morris Turner was born to Louisiana migrants in West Oakland's Bottoms district in 1923, most of the images of Blacks in the comic strips had not moved far beyond Sambo Johnson, a character made famous in the 1830s by the father of blackface minstrelsy, Thomas "Daddy" Rice, and an archetype extending back to the early period of the African slave trade.

At Cole Elementary, the young Turner came to be known as Morrie. He still keeps a photo of his 1929 kindergarten class, and although the sepia photo has faded, it still displays a cast more colorful than the comic strips Morrie voraciously read. As he pulls the photo down from a shelf decorated with some of his many cartooning awards, he says, "West Oakland, believe it or not; because it was the Depression, it was totally integrated."

Among the thirty-seven children are several Blacks and Chicanos, and a pair of Japanese American children. There are the friends who took Turner to their Portuguese ethnic festivals, Jewish synagogue events, and Chinese New Year parties. ("You didn't know what the heck was going on, but you knew there was a lot of food there," he laughs.) There is the Native American girl with the heart-shaped face, the object of his unrequited crush.

"I'm glad I have this photo," Turner says. "When I was at ABC years later doing the cartoon show, they asked me, 'Where did you get the idea for this?' I told them I lived it."

By the time he was a junior at Berkeley High on the eve of World War II, Turner started thinking he might draw for a living. Truth be told, he didn't find much to be inspired by in the comics he was reading. Black characters were now sidekicks to Tintin, the Phantom, and the Spirit, but they still spoke minstrel's English through thick white lips. After biracial African American artist George Herriman's Krazy Kat caught on, characters like Felix the Cat (whose chief animator had drawn and animated the Sambo

Johnson character), Mickey Mouse, and Bugs Bunny may have picked up the minstrels' big eyes, white gloves, or sideways grins, but they also seemed endowed with some other wit and wisdom. In the funnies and the cartoons, the animals were more human than the humans. Oliver Harrington's Brother Bootsie was the only exception, and he was confined to the Black newspapers.

When he got older, Turner hung out on the vibrant 7th Street jazz and blues scene, checking out artists like Ivory Joe Hunter. Later he would hear Pat Boone on the radio singing – and making lots more money from – white-washed versions of Hunter's songs. It was, Turner says, how it was.

During a stint with the 477th Army Air Force Bomber Group, the feeder for the Tuskegee Airmen, he never saw combat but produced dozens of cartoons for military publications. When he returned to his parents' South Berkeley home, he took a job at the Oakland police department and found he could doodle on the night shift. He began attending cartoonists' get-togethers, where he became fast friends with Charles Schultz.

Turner published cartoons with all-white characters in Boy Scout magazines and baking industry publications, *Collier's* and the *Saturday Evening Post*. But when he tried to submit cartoons that featured people of color, he was turned down. The *Chicago Defender* gave him a chance to develop a strip, so Turner came up with "Dinky Fellas." It featured a small Black boy named Nipper, whose eyes were always covered by his Civil War-era Union soldier hat. Turner began populating the strip with kids of other cultures until he had a sprawling cast that looked like Schultz's Peanuts gang if they had grown up in an urban East Bay neighborhood. Soon he realized he had created something new from the memories of his childhood and the ongoing adventures of the kids right outside his door. He called his kids the Wee Pals gang.

Nipper remained the soul of the strip, gentle, small, unathletic, and prone to quote presidential speeches at the worst possible moments. Nipper is Turner's alter ego, his Charlie Brown. He is surrounded by kids like Oliver, an intellectual, liberal, white nerd; Sybil, a sensitive and sensible Black girl; and Connie, a fireball white feminist. When the neighborhood baseball team needs a nickname, the boys start arguing, coming up with names that might sound as if they were taken from some pre-multiculturalism urban

gang noir film were they not being delivered in word balloons from the mouths of tiny cartoon characters. George suggests "The Yellow Dragons," Rocky suggests "The Redskins," Jerry "The Mitzvah Boys," Randy "The Black Bombers," Paul "The Brown Destroyers." It's up to Nipper to suggest the obvious choice: "The Rainbows."

In 1965, six days before Malcolm X was killed and six months before Watts burned, "Wee Pals" made its national debut. Turner became the first syndicated African American cartoonist, and "Wee Pals" the first African American and multicultural strip to hit the mainstream. Against a backdrop of burning cities, demand soared for the aphoristic wisdom of the Wee Pals. Three months after Martin Luther King's assassination, the comic strip was being read in over one hundred newspapers.

Most "Wee Pals" punchlines hinged on cultural misunderstandings and mistranslations. But in Turner's world, conflict could be defused by common sense and a well of patience. The Wee Pals kids existed in a utopia no one could yet imagine. Picture five boys walking down the street, side by side, all with satisfied grins on their faces, having the following conversation:

Rocky: "Red Power!"

Paul: "Brown Power!"

Randy: "Black Power!"

George: "Yellow Power!"

Jerry: "Bagel Power!"

Randy: "Bagel Power?"

Turner coined the term "Rainbow Power" to name the boys' little club. At their meetings, the boys count their dues and decide to buy ice cream with the surplus. As they slurp up their reward, Diz, a Black boy sporting a black beret, kente cloth shirt, and Wayfarer glasses, says to the others, "There's gold at the end of Rainbow Power!" The idea migrated from the funny pages into the political lexicon when the Black Panthers, Young Lords, and Young Patriots announced a coalition of the same name in the summer of 1969. In its way, Turner's well-mannered comic strip was revolutionary.

Turner put out a handful of best-selling paperback collections and drew the interest of ABC, who picked up the rights for a cartoon entitled "Kid Power!" after one of the collections. Suddenly there were producers, writers, casting agents, voice actors, Korean animators, and lots and lots of execs. There were recording sessions and toy deals and trips to New York City for meetings in which he had a seat at the table and the right to be ignored, which studio heads exercised often.

When it ended, he went back to the simple pleasures of drawing, wiser if not any wealthier. Over the years he used the Wee Pals characters in children's books that tackled freedom, prejudice, religion, and African American history. He led countless workshops at schools, community organizations, and colleges. Now eighty-three, he still pens "Wee Pals" – along with its Sunday supplement on multicultural heroes, "Soul Corner" – on pieces of Bristol board. He mails them to the Creators Syndicate, which distributes it to forty newspapers.

On a rainy night in San Francisco this past spring, I took Mr. Turner to meet Aaron McGruder, the dazzlingly brilliant, controversial creator of the comic strip "The Boondocks." In 1999, McGruder's strip had one of the most successful syndicated launches ever, opening in more newspapers than "Wee Pals" peaked at. "The Boondocks" has left the funny pages to become the cornerstone of Cartoon Network's Sunday-night "Adult Swim" programming.

McGruder has since fled his own Maryland boondocks for the twilight velocity of Los Angeles, where he keeps a humming office of young hip-hop heads who help him create his half-hour shows. He hops the country to do a few talks a year. McGruder cut back on his appearances after a negative, neo-Wolfe-ian *New Yorker* profile that skewered his multiculti chic – he was described as mau-mauing an audience of uptown white liberals. But he remains a media star, named by *People Magazine* one of the country's most eligible bachelors. I was scheduled to interview McGruder that night before a standing-room-only crowd at the San Francisco Jewish Community Center. Backstage, he was happy to finally meet and spend a few minutes with one of his idols.

As it turned out, Turner and McGruder had a lot in common. They both dressed like cartoonists, which is to say that they seemed to have put on whatever wasn't in the hamper that morning. They shared a love for flying. McGruder's father is an air traffic controller, and he explained that he might have been a pilot had he not, like Turner,

*One side of the multiculturalism movement confronted overwhelming whiteness in institutions of power and fought to open up positions of power to the outsiders. The other saw an ocean of negative images and tried to reverse the tide with their own visions.*

decided in high school to draw for a living. He talked about his desire to work on George Lucas's long-rumored Tuskegee Airmen project, "Red Tails." When Turner told him he had been in the 477th, McGruder's jaw dropped.

Too soon, it was time to hit the stage. But Turner never says good-bye. Instead, he told McGruder what he tells everyone: "Keep the faith."

Once asked to describe the difference between the two strips, Turner offered, "Boondocks' is hip-hop and 'Wee Pals' is cool jazz." In

a time of turmoil, Turner's comic strip characters were hopeful in mind and light of heart. In a complicated post-civil rights world that offers

broader opportunities to people of color while maintaining racial segregation and misery, McGruder's characters fight to maintain their right to be hostile. Turner wanted to show that undermining the power of whiteness need not lead to incivility. McGruder wants to expose the hypocrisies that the present-day multicultural consensus suppresses. Attitude and a certain armored self-consciousness marks the aesthetic edge in this post-civil rights era. It hardly diminishes McGruder's accomplishments to say that his career is the manifestation of Turner's faith. Nor does it diminish Turner's achievements to say that McGruder's impatience – which many have read as impertinence – is partly with this faith.

Between the debut of "Wee Pals" and the rise of "The Boondocks" came the U.S. multiculturalism movement.

## II. The Promise of Segregation's End: The Rise of American Multiculturalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era

To flip an old George Clinton proverb, multiculturalism used to be a good word. Even an anti-affirmative action neocon like Nathan Glazer could write, approvingly, "Multiculturalism, for its advocates, becomes a new image of a better America, without prejudice and discrimination." Who could be against that?

The civil rights movement cohered and accelerated after the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board* 1954 decision. After grassroots uprisings led to the trio of landmark pieces of legislation in the mid-sixties – the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 – interest turned to a broader effort to end de facto segregation in all aspects of American life. The multiculturalism movement sought to fulfill the promise of segregation's end, to be the signature achievement of the post-civil rights era. It combined intellectual, aesthetic,

and political agendas to articulate a then-radical desire to diversify the representation of racial and sexual minorities and women.

The high moment of multiculturalism may have come around two decades ago, a point itself two decades from the civil rights movement. During the late eighties, the racial struggles of the sixties were well on their way to becoming hagiography, shaped by left and right into something like "the last American consensus on race."

When it looked like the United Colors of Benetton (itself a symbol of a different kind of emerging marketplace consensus), multiculturalism seemed unobjectionable. But when the movement tried to continue the agenda of desegregation in politics and aesthetics, it became controversial.

Now, as the civil rights movement is routinely invoked to reverse *Brown v. Board* and affirmative action, multiculturalism has been abandoned even by many of its supporters. On the left, white scholars charged multiculturalism with fragmenting progressive agendas by "identity politics." Scholars of color deconstruct the movement's failures. On the right, ideologues still blame multiculturalism for continuing racial gaps in education. Unlike the civil rights movement, the multiculturalism movement seems one that few want to claim. Even McGruder parodied multiculturalism in an episode of "The Boondocks," lampooning a white school teacher who encourages Huey Freeman to direct a radically Afrocentric Kwanzaa celebration for their suburban school's winter performance.

And yet the global popularity of "The Boondocks" is proof itself that multiculturalism has had profound effects on not just American society but the entire world. The movement literally changed the way that we see race. How did we get here? And what's next?

## III. Arts Insurgency: Multiculturalism's Aesthetic Agenda

By the late sixties, insurgent movements – Black Power, feminism, gay rights, and others – had taken a militant turn. In 1968, San Francisco State students went on strike to demand a Third World College, a place where the histories of oppressed peoples of color in America would be studied. The moment was mythologized as the birth of the intellectual wing of the U.S. multiculturalism movement.

The Third World Studies movement soon impacted campuses like Berkeley, UCLA, and Harvard, where nascent ethnic studies programs sprung up, often taught by some

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of the same student radicals of color. In their demands was both a critique of elite institutions and a strategy for their takeover. Two decades later, calls rose for faculty and curricular diversity and ethnic studies graduation requirements, and prompted a corresponding conservative backlash.

Education would be a primary terrain upon which the culture wars of the eighties and nineties would be waged. On campuses, at school board meetings, in halls of power, and on the nation's editorial pages, visceral battles over multiculturalism would be fought. To this day, the bulk of the literature – and there are literally hundreds of volumes – documents the politics of multiculturalism.

But perhaps less well understood are the ways that the aesthetics of multiculturalism transformed American and global popular culture. The culture wars in underground art galleries, on Hollywood studio lots, in the publishing world, and beyond were less celebrated, but the victories of the multiculturalism movement here were far more decisive.

At the end of the sixties, a study by the National Endowment for the Arts from 1970 Census data found that just 9 percent of those working in the arts – defined broadly from radio/TV announcers to dancers – were of color. It also found that artists of color tended to make 84 percent the salary of white artists.<sup>1</sup> The report did not hint at the creative ferment taking place in the avant-garde and in communities of color, where underground networks of galleries, theaters, nightclubs, and performance venues were fostering art defined by racial pride and militancy. The Black Arts movement, for instance, was launched with the idea that art needed to serve a political purpose: to mirror the condition of the people.

By the mid-seventies, a shift began to take place as a new generation of artists of color articulated a Third Worldist position within a context of continuing American invisibility. In 1973, two left-field pop-cultural moments – Bruce Lee's film *Enter the Dragon* or Bob Marley and the Wailers' album *Catch a Fire* – framed the context for what was happening at the grassroots level. Writing in *Le Monde* in the summer of 1976, Ishmael Reed argued that the emergence of the multicultural artist marked "a new phase in American writing." Citing as predecessors Black Arts poets and writers such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, and Haki Madhubuti, he namechecked dozens of Native American, Chicano, Latino, and Asian American writers. In his *Yardbird Reader*, Reed championed these writers as authentic voices of their communities.

Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Audre Lorde, Bruce Franklin, Amiri Baraka, and many others would soon expand the call. They argued that politics and aesthetics were shaped by racism, sexism, and homophobia. Surfacing the hidden narratives of those who lived "on the

borders" and "in the shadows" could transform American realities, that recognition of difference might promote true equality for minorities.

The central issue was representation. One side of the multiculturalism movement confronted overwhelming whiteness in institutions of power and fought to open up positions of power to the outsiders. The other saw an ocean of negative images and tried to reverse the tide with their own visions.

#### IV. What Did You Call Me?: Anti-Racism and the New Counterculture

When the sixties were drawing to a close, Sly and the Family Stone released *Stand!* The album's biggest hit single, "Everyday People," looks now like a prophecy of a multiculturalism movement still on the horizon. But the song also acknowledged the rock counterculture's inability to find a language to achieve its integrated utopia:

There is a yellow one that won't accept the black one  
That won't accept the red one that won't accept the  
white one  
And different strokes for different folks  
And so on and so on and scooby dooby doo-bee.

Among the album's anthems of uplift that would be welcomed later that year at Woodstock – "Stand!" "You Can Make It If You Try," "Sing a Simple Song," "I Want To Take You Higher" – was a relentlessly pessimistic song that shattered the counterculture dream. "Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey" – built around this angry call and its response, "Don't call me whitey, nigger" – portrayed the collapse of racial dialogue. The fact was that segregation – like the Vietnam War – was far from over and the revolution no closer.

A decade later, New York City's downtown counterculture – built of the ruins of the sixties and perhaps a certain naïvete – became a key battleground for the multiculturalist activists. White punker Patti Smith had recorded "Rock N Roll Nigger," whose last verse linked Jimi Hendrix, Jackson Pollock, Jesus Christ, and her grandmother as fellow "niggers." With romantic roots in Allen Ginsberg's "negro streets," Norman Mailer's "White Negro," and John Sinclair's White Panther Party, Smith's definition of the counterculture was summed in the chorus: "Outside of society, that's where I want to be." The following year, white male artist Donald Newman opened an exhibition of his abstract charcoal drawings at the alternative gallery Artists Space. It was entitled "The Nigger Drawings." The show's title, Newman's appearance in charcoal-smearing blackface, and his subsequent comments that he had been

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1. Data Use and Access Laboratories, *Minorities and Women in the Arts, 1970*. National Endowment for the Arts, 1978. Research Division report, no. 7.

“niggerized” by being forced to show at a non-commercial gallery polarized the downtown avant-garde.

Artists Spaces’s white staff, wrote co-founder Irving Sandler, believed “the racist taunt had become a broadly used adjective that no longer referred specifically or even pejoratively to African-Americans – that is, it had become deracialized. [Artists Space executive director] Helene Winer pointed out that it was African-Americans ‘who perpetuated the use of that term,’ and if they could use it, why not whites?”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, artists of color were arguing that they had been locked out of even alternative spaces like Artists Space. Rather than accept a counterculture whose rebellion depended on the erasure of racism and people of color, African American artist Howardena Pindell and white art critic Lucy Lippard organized opposition to the show’s “esthetically motivated racism.” For them, there was little romance in being “outside of society.”

Years later, Newman would say, “‘The Nigger Drawings’ was the precursor to political correctness, which is basically self-censorship, in the art world.” Pindell, who would take up the antiracist cause in the arts world, noted, “As a black artist, the first effect when you walk into a gallery still has to do with the color of your skin. You are not seen as an artist first, but as a political entity.”

The coming culture wars would feature the same stalemate – whites talking censorship and the right to express socially unacceptable ideas, artists of color talking representation and the powerlessness to define the political or aesthetic context. The debate would often be reduced to “Who can say what?”, a frame revived recently in the aftermath of the Imus episode. But what was really at stake was the question Who has the power to define identity? Although it would take many more years to become clear, the countercultures of the sixties and the seventies failed because of these cleavages along the question of race and power.

While activists set up pickets in art galleries, at movie openings, and on campuses, emerging artists of color also tried to define a new aesthetics of representation – writers like Reed, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Jessica Hagedorn, Essex Hemphill, and Greg Tate; artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kerry James Marshall, Pepon Osorio, and Judy Baca; playwrights and performance

artists like August Wilson, Ntozake Shange, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and Phillip Kan Gotanda; filmmakers like Julie Dash, Marlon Riggs, Gregory Nava, and Steven Okazaki, to name just a few. In a way, the multiculturalism movement offered a distinctly different kind of counterculture.

By the end of the 1980s, some artists were vaulting from alternative, independent networks into the mainstream, and facing angry criticism from white critics who often called their work “victim art.” (Apparently, Donald Newman’s aesthetic of victimization had been long

forgotten.) The most extreme example was the critical firestorm over Spike Lee’s 1989 movie *Do the Right Thing*, which divided reviewers largely along racial lines.

But, in fact, multiculturalism had come to encompass wide interests and sensibilities. Diversity – in its most elemental sense – was the only unifying theme of 1990’s sprawling arts exhibitions at three New York arts institutions – the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, the New Museum of Contemporary Art, and the Studio Museum in Harlem – called “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s.” Cornel West could argue that nothing less than “a new cultural politics of difference” was underway, in which the impulse was to “trash the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity, and heterogeneity.”

In 1993, the activist and artist strands of multiculturalism – one that decried white privilege, and the other that expanded the range of representations of marginalized peoples – culminated in a famously inclusive and polarizing Whitney Biennial that one reviewer praised as “an explosive self-examination shaking American society” and another dismissed as “cultural reparations.” The multiculturalist explosion had not only brought the issue of race and representation into the mainstream, it had ignited a white backlash.

## V. We Are All Multiculturalists Now: Political Reversals and Realignments

While multiculturalism stormed the popular culture, a political backlash against it cohered. During the mid-nineties, state-level campaigns, bankrolled by conservative foundations, were successful in getting the electorate to overturn affirmative action and bilingual education and to block gay marriage. Even diversity-weary liberals such as Todd Gitlin, Richard Bernstein, and Arthur Schlesinger argued that multiculturalism was balkanizing the nation

2. Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists: A Memoir*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003: p. 330.

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into insular racial camps, and hastening the decline of the Left, the degeneracy of aesthetics, and the end of civility.

On the other hand, neocon Nathan Glazer – whose 1975 book *Affirmative Discrimination* was an inspiration for African American anti-affirmative action activist Ward Connerly – had changed his mind on multiculturalism. In his 1997 book, *We Are All Multiculturalists Now*, he commemorated the long shift from the forced Americanization campaigns of the early twentieth century to the diversity programs of the late twentieth century, arguing, perhaps prematurely, that “multiculturalism in education...has, in a word, won.” When Federal Reserve Board chief Alan Greenspan appeared before Jesse Jackson’s PUSH Coalition in 1998, he seemed to describe a new Wall Street consensus: “Discrimination is patently immoral, but it is now increasingly being seen as unprofitable.” And, as Vijay Prashad has pointed out, the military, the academy, and the corporate world supported affirmative action in the landmark University of Michigan cases.

The multiculturalism movement had created strange new alignments – radicals of color and pro-diversity liberals with status quo defenders and corporate sponsors on one side, white establishment liberals with neoconservatives of color on the other. But while multiculturalism faced such major political reversals, it made massive gains in the culture industry. The same demographic changes that anti-multiculturalists used to evoke fear in aging white electorates in California and Florida propelled forward-thinking capitalists to thoroughly transform the popular culture.

## VI. Blackness Is the New Black: How Multiculturalism Gave the Culture Industry Its Groove Back

The American culture industry’s primary function has always been to establish an “aspirational” ideal of the American Dream in order to sell the commodity goods that define that Dream. Multiculturalism forced the industry to come to grips with the sweeping demographic and attitudinal changes brought on by the landmark civil rights and immigration legislation of 1964 and 1965. Rather than resisting those changes, the culture industry used those changes to transform itself into a global media/entertainment complex.

This becomes clear when we look at how the face of advertising has changed. After World War II, the aspirational ideal was the stable white suburban nuclear family, the *Leave It to Beaver* archetype that multiculturalists would mercilessly parody. After the 1960s, that ideal was reshaped by the Baby Boomers, who accentuated youth, rebellion, and hipness, but still centered bourgeois whiteness. By the late eighties, the culture industry was in a free-fall. As Naomi Klein has documented in her book *No Logo*, the idea of the brand itself – the industry’s very

currency – was losing value. Multiculturalism gave the industry its groove back and made it ready for the world.

Spike Lee and Michael Jordan’s wildly successful commercials for Nike helped vault a then-upstart shoe company into dominance, ushered in the return of the brand, and began a new era of racial representations. The new aspirational ideal was young, Black, masculine, and urban. Blackness, long the American apotheosis of cool, had finally become mainstream. What’s more, if done properly, the images could incorporate both notions of outsider re-bellion – think of Norman Mailer and Patti Smith’s desires – and mainstream ambition – think of Jordan and Jay-Z’s – sometimes both at once.

For the captains of consciousness, the 1992 Los Angeles uprising may have been the point of no return. If riots represent social crises to national governments, they present underserved, unincorporated markets to global capitalists. The main question became how to make multiculturalism *pay*.

After the riots, in a demonstration of the new political alignments, the founder of the National Congress of Black Women, C. Delores Tucker, sought out and mobilized Black civil rights leaders, Black politicians, and white neoconservatives against hip-hop music and the hip-hop generation. Alienated from their elders and the left, the hip-hop generation found that the marketplace was interested in what they had to offer.

There was a burgeoning demand for new narratives that needed to be filled. The publishing industry, for instance, commenced a bidding craze for memoirs from young writers of color. (One of the best-known artifacts of this era is a best-seller called *Dreams from My Father*, written by the first Black editor-in-chief of the *Harvard Law Review*, a man named Barack Obama.) Hip-hop was a youth culture already embedded around the world, and it offered a ghet-centric pool of images and stories of people of color.

In 1996, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, the beginning of a paradigm shift in the role of media. Federal media regulation had been premised on the idea that the media played a crucial role in serving the local and national public interest. But the deregulation that followed after the Telecom Act allowed media companies to consolidate themselves into vast global conglomerates. Thanks to multiculturalism – and its youthful hip-hop contingent – these giants had ample content and a brand new aspirational ideal to offer.

They had seen the future in 1992 and learned their lesson: most people in the world were not Boomer whites who lived in an American suburb, they were young people of color living in the global city. Didn’t they too want to see people who looked like them partaking of the finest things America had to offer? And who were the captains

of consciousness to deny them? Diversity is now as ubiquitous as Disney.

## VII. Deceiving Appearances: Privatizing the Imagination

Some scholars argue that difference has been defanged, through its incorporation into global capitalism. Diversity training, diversity indexes used in college and business rankings, even sudden bursts of bidding frenzies for Communist Chinese paintings are all signs that the multiculturalism movement has lost.

“Multiculturalism became about celebration, it became about dealing with your history and your past.

But white power and white supremacy was off the table and out of the room,” says the scholar Vijay Prashad. “In that sense, multiculturalism was a deeply conservative, in fact, reactionary ideology which we have now unfortunately come to hold on to, believing it’s actually liberal when indeed it’s actually power telling you not to engage it.”

Unlike in the past, when broadcast economies could leave vast markets underserved, the global consolidation of the media/entertainment complex today encourages incorporation of minority voices. Pro-deregulation Republicans and Democrats argue that bigger business means more diversity of representation. It is true that the media/entertainment industry’s logic is to totalize the “lifestyling” of identity, to expand the parceling and subdivision of communities into niche economies. No culture or subculture can remain beyond reach for long. Thus, Viacom controls images of gays (Logo), African Americans (BET), and youth (MTV), and delivers these groups as lifestyle markets to companies to sell their goods. Think of Gap commercials that have used a dozen different spokespeople on multiple channels to sell the same T-shirt and jeans.

The imagination has been privatized, and we are all multicultural *markets* now. Real cultural diversity has actually been flattened, and representations that are seen as less economically viable – that don’t sell that basket of lifestyle goods – melt into air. There doesn’t need to be a conspiracy against radical ideas and art when the entire system negates their very being.

What we have gained in sheer quantity of representations of minority communities, we have lost in the *range* of those representations. Take, for instance, representations of African Americans in film. It is undeniable that more African Americans can be seen in more movies than ever

before. (Indeed, one could argue that “political correctness” adheres in casting decisions; ensemble casts on television may be more diverse than they have ever been.) But the kinds of available narratives seem to have narrowed since the eighties. Where has the African American family drama gone? It has been rewritten into a comedy; it has been Norbitized.

How does an artist confront a complex that seeks incorporation? In the mid-nineties, Nike was interested in insinuating itself into the spoken-word scene, and tried to

commission radical poet/theater-artist Jerry Quickley. He took their money, and performed a poem comparing the company to a slave ship.

In the coming decade, issues of autonomy may become a central node around which artists will be organizing.

How does a community confront a complex that commodifies and homogenizes its culture? In 2005, a number of New York women hip-hop activists formed a broad coalition attacking the nation’s most prominent rap radio station for a lack of progressive and women’s voices and music on the air. For those concerned with content, the issue of balance – or more precisely, the breadth of representations – will remain the core issue.

## VIII. After Multiculturalism?: Post-Millennial Identity and Inequality

This past spring, a white cowboy-hatted shock-jock multimillionaire named Don Imus called a team of working-class Black women college basketball players “nappy-headed hos.” When questioned about the insult, he apologized but said he had learned the language from Black hardcore rappers. He was canned after a big outcry.

In an odd way, multiculturalism paved the way for Imus’s insult and alibi. Multiculturalism, after all, has made the world of representations somewhat less unequal. Diversity has created space for Blacks – misogynistic rappers and female champions alike – alongside white shock jocks. Yet Imus’s insult still carries far more weight than any words by a rapper or a Black woman athlete. Multiculturalism also made possible Imus’s removal, not just because it created opportunities for the people in the advertising and media companies to gain positions of access from which they could make their disgust known, but because it created a language with which to discuss race, gender, and representation, language that did not exist in 1969 or 1979. Yet voices of color – particularly progressive and women’s voices – remain sorely and significantly underrepresented in the media.



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Multiculturalists had hoped that recognition of race might diminish the historical legacies of racism. But all key social indicators – poverty, education, housing, jobs, AIDS, the list could go on – show that the color lines, gender lines, and sexuality lines have not disappeared, they have only *shifted*. So we are left with troubling questions. Is it appropriate now to speak of identity with the prefix “post”? Have we arrived in a post-racial society? Are we in the same struggle with only the names changed?

I was struck by these questions as I covered the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama earlier this year. A Black man of mixed-race parentage, a planetary citizen, and an adept code-shifter, Obama’s biography is one of crossings. He is being received in some quarters as one who might bring America toward its unfinished promise as a multiracial, polycultural democracy, one who might finally end three decades of culture wars fought across the lines of race.

Yet his Blackness has been sharply debated by some African American pundits. In the most important sense, the point is moot, for as Leonard Pitts, Jr., has written, “He is both black and black enough for whatever individual or individuals unnerved his handlers enough to seek Secret Service protection.” But some African Americans fear that a discussion about race that expands to include immigrants of color and their descendants – such as Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, Latinos, or Asian Americans – might thwart continuing attempts to address the terrible legacies of slavery.

After multiculturalism, there is a recognition that identities are much more complicated than what scholar David Hollinger once termed “the ethno-racial pentagon” (Black, White, Asian American, Latino, Native American) or what postmodernists call “essentialism.” Even sympathetic scholars and artists find that policies that may have once necessitated those fixed categories have hardened margins, especially for women, queers, and African American descendants of slavery. Post-multiculturalists struggle to articulate a new politics and aesthetics to animate the current moment.

For the 2001 “Freestyle” exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, influential curator Thelma Golden coined the term “Post-Blackness.” But unlike conservatives who call for a “post-racial” world that treats racial inequality as a thing of the past, she hardly meant to suggest that racism had ended. Instead, she was searching for a way to describe the works of African American artists such as Glen Ligon and Kara Walker, who, by the turn of the millennium, had both benefited from and wanted to move on from the narrow focus on racial content over formal quality. Multiculturalism had freed “Post-Black” artists to aestheticize questions of marginality, identity, and community.

Nadine Robinson, an award-winning Jamaican American artist from the Bronx, creates installations that reflect her love of sound systems and block parties. Her identity is less in the content than the form. In other words, the bass is in your face. The identity questions are not. “I was going from the Bronx, taking the 2 train all the way to the MOMA and looking at the art in this place and seeing there were really no Black faces. I studied art in the early nineties and was moved by the ‘93 Biennial as well but thought it was too didactic and too academic. I wanted to do work that didn’t say, ‘I’m a Black woman,’ but still be proud of where I was coming from,” she says. “At the time, I was in the Bronx watching my cousins make sound systems. I saw the same sets being built in Jamaica and also in Brooklyn. I’m around this growing up, I’m studying fine art, and I want to make art that includes this part of my world.”

In this sense, Robinson’s work reflects the ways in which multiculturalism has triumphed. A fixation on cultural diversity has given way to the expressive diversity that was originally the goal of the multiculturalists’ call for broadened representations. Nor must post-multiculturalist art – with its disparaging of “didacticism” – necessarily infer a retreat from the world, particularly given our current turmoil.

Instead, post-multiculturalist art plays a crucial role in uncovering the changed social relations and the new sources of misery in the twenty-first century, especially in three areas where race, gender, and sexuality have been not-so-hidden subtexts: the war and torture, innercity violence, and the continuing abandonment of the poor. It has helped us see what is happening in the streets of Baghdad, Milwaukee, and New Orleans. And it will still help us to confront these problems that tear apart our democracy, to understand the relationship between identity and inequality, and, above all, to imagine what a better world can look like.

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