

INTRODUCTION:  
CULTURE TO THE RESCUE!

Hope for the future is routinely left at the doorstep of our schools and universities. To policy makers, cultural change seems easy and inexpensive: A brief memo should do it. Teach the children to stop being racist. Make textbooks more inclusive. Expand literary experience. Make well-rounded, deep-thinking, culturally sensitive citizens. According to this thinking, all social problems would dissolve in the face of a perfect culture.

The trend in the 1980s and 1990s toward multiculturalism in English literature was an attempt to orchestrate one of those cultural changes—to socialize children and young adults into a more diverse world by exposing them to a broader sampling of literary works. There was plenty of resistance, but multiculturalism, in one form or another, has been accepted into most corners of U.S. literary education. In fact, 92 percent of U.S. colleges have made curricular changes to address the diversity of American culture.<sup>1</sup> In 1991, 72 percent of college vice-presidents and deans surveyed reported that they talked about multiculturalism frequently or continually, and most were trying to increase faculty diversity. Moreover, curricular changes were more likely to happen in English departments than in any other discipline.

Many hoped that expanding the cultural horizons of new generations of college students would achieve something momentous. Students might become better prepared to operate in a global economy. They might develop more sophisticated cultural sensitivities, greater empathic capacities, fewer

prejudices, and more elastic intellectual abilities. Some progressives even thought that multiculturalism could begin to erode the foundations of patriarchy and racism by reducing the extent to which students learn to associate greatness with certain categories of people (white men). After all, it is not only the physical attributes of the authors that matter. Linguistic styles, moral claims, religious influences, dark villains, and lily-white damsels lurk between the pages of those great books, just waiting to capture the imagination of our impressionable young students.

Defenders of traditional education, on the other hand, saw the situation differently and worried that de-emphasizing Western culture might be dangerous. The ideas contained in those classic works of literature are, they argued, “the glue that binds together our pluralistic nation.” The quote is from William Bennett’s infamous 1983 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) report titled *To Redaim a Legacy*. The report, along with the media attention and opinion pieces it generated, is widely seen as the first volley in the national battle over English literature, and it set the stage for a full-scale attack on the Humanities. Soon, pundits such as Dinesh D’Souza and Roger Kimball jumped into the fray and escalated the rhetoric of cultural preservation to the point of frenzy, charging that multiculturalism would disintegrate U.S. national culture.<sup>2</sup>

Two decades of heated battle would ensue between members of what would become known as the Cultural Left and the Cultural Right—academics and public intellectuals who engaged the debate in the national media. Despite the appearance of an epic battle between opposing forces, however, the two “sides” shared an extraordinary premise: that every time an English teacher put together a reading list, the future of a nation hung in the balance.

But nothing so profound has come of multiculturalism since its national debut in the mid-1980s. Reading lists have changed some, but not at an unusual pace. (Reading lists always evolve over time.) College students and English professors alike are more conservative now than they were in the 1980s—never mind the 1960s! Shakespeare and Melville are still with us. They have been joined by Alice Walker and James Baldwin, but sexism, racism, and xenophobia persist. The Ivory Tower and U.S. national culture are both alive and well.<sup>3</sup>

Despite fiery claims to the contrary from both sides of the media frenzy, multiculturalism has neither dissolved the foundations of American life nor

liberated the victims of cultural oppression. But this book is not devoted to merely claiming that our cultural critics are full of hot air. (They are full of hot air. But there's a reason for it, and that's an important part of the story.) Instead, I begin from the premise that multiculturalism really could have changed our world.

The following chapters will explain the reasons why multiculturalism has not proven to be an effective agent of change in American social life. Despite the powerful rhetoric coming from would-be cultural extremists, the bulk of multiculturalism's current existence was produced by *the center*—major institutions of public life in the United States, and especially the U.S. system of higher education. In other words, multiculturalism, the movement that some say threatens the core of American culture, is itself a product of that center.

In short, our cultural warriors were mistaken to think that their piece of culture could work alone.<sup>4</sup> In this story, our parcel of cultural treasure is a literary tradition. In other battles, the golden apple might be family values or patriotism. But in all these cases, the bits of culture we fight over get their meaning from something larger. If you take literary multiculturalism and put it in a box of crayons, the box will not explode. You'll just get a new assortment of crayons.

Crayola introduced their "multicultural crayons" in 1992, and they are still available today, but I don't mean to make light of that story. In fact, it illustrates what I mean when I say that culture is bigger than our "cultural critics" claim it to be. The fact that for a decade children sat down to draw with a crayon called "flesh" is a fairly profound cultural problem with a firm grounding in the material world. According to a 2000 press release, Crayola changed the name of their "flesh" crayon to "peach" in 1962. The only other name changes between 1900 and 2000 were those for "Prussian blue" and "Indian red." So it turns out that crayons can have cultural importance beyond their mechanical qualities. Crayola originally defined "flesh" as a peachy color, and now they define multiculturalism as "apricot, burnt sienna, mahogany, peach, sepia, tan, and," the marketing description explains, "black and white for blending."

That's essentially what happened in English literature, too. Pundits talked about both literature and multiculturalism in lofty terms, as though they were the only things that mattered in the world. It made for great reading, but it had almost nothing to do with the multiculturalism that now exists "inside

the box” of everyday life in college classrooms and the outside world. Real multiculturalism—multiculturalism in action—is much different. It is more restricted, more resistant to cultural change, and more closely tied to stable social institutions.

There is no doubt that culture is real and important, but the myth of an omnipotent culture that can single-handedly change the world is more than harmless fantasy. It is the central problem that fuels the battles over culture, and it is the reason those battles never end. The myth keeps our intellectual wheels spinning, but it doesn't do much to inform concrete strategies for social action. The problem extends well beyond the battle over multiculturalism in English literature, of course. As we come to place more and more attention on the cultural aspects of social problems, we move our conversations farther and farther into the clouds.

In *Dogmatic Wisdom*, Russell Jacoby argued that battles over culture divert our political attention away from real national problems, material problems. In many ways, he is right. Important questions about material inequalities have lost the limelight, but that's no reason to argue that culture doesn't matter. The following chapters will suggest, conversely, that our difficulty lies not in the sheer fact that we've increased our focus on cultural problems but in the way our cultural warriors attempted to separate culture from its material existence—the material conditions that concern Jacoby. There is some value in making an analytic distinction between ideas and material structures (as I will explain later), but it makes very little sense to carry out a purely cultural “war” on the premise that ideas alone are responsible for justice, equity, and national survival.

In all of this, the story of multiculturalism in English literature is not merely a story of abstract theoretical relationships and naive cultural warriors. To get back on the ground, I decided to approach multiculturalism as a meaning-making problem. I asked professors in four college English departments to tell me how they make sense of the word “multiculturalism.” I expected them to distance themselves from the overblown media reports that there was blood in the halls of academe. I knew that college professors make their living producing such arguments. That's what they do; it's no shock to them. But I was not prepared to find that multiculturalism was an entirely different creature inside English departments. The sweeping proclamations of those cultural warriors were virtually absent. There were some common el-

ements: something about diversity and an occasional nod toward literary traditions. But those ideas were often overshadowed by more practical concerns: time constraints, teaching strategies, student abilities, and how well a given piece of literature performs in the classroom. In my research, I came to understand this effect, not as the difference between imaginary culture and real life, but as the difference between two kinds of culture, one abstract and the other grounded in material realities.

In addition to the constraints of the classroom, the meaning of multiculturalism in each university was also influenced by unrelated aspects of department administration. An efficient bureaucratic structure, for example, can turn a few ideas about multiculturalism into a sweeping curriculum change with shocking speed. An autonomous collection of scholars, on the other hand, may generate more radical ideas but never find a way to enact them, thereby keeping multiculturalism in the clouds. A lack of community can leave multiculturalism (and much else, for that matter) essentially meaningless and nonexistent.

In short, what happens to multiculturalism inside English departments bears very little resemblance to the picture we get from cultural critics. How can we expect that dramatic form of multiculturalism to have any effect when it does not even exist, perhaps cannot exist, inside English departments?

The answer lies in my claim that both versions are cultural. The grounded version of multiculturalism can be debated in a national forum. It can be printed in magazines and newspapers. It won't melt the page. It will only constrain the writer to address some less lofty ideas.

That disconnected view of culture is what made the canon wars irrelevant to real life both inside academe and in the political world beyond it. And it was also the isolation of this battle in the (imaginary) cultural realm that disabled its potential effects.

This book does not attempt to answer some of the more commonly posed questions about multiculturalism. I do not ask the "What's going on here?" question, and I do not address all the other very important places that multiculturalism happens on a college campus—within student movements, as a result of interest group pressures, or in recruitment and retention of faculty. Neither do I devote much attention to the problems that gave rise to the idea in the first place, such as racism, sexism, or global migration. I focus exclusively on the organizational conditions of meaning-making, and then only on

the meanings associated with a grossly imperfect and problematic concept, multiculturalism. But I make all those concessions in order to study the problem in a new way. I ask what happened to the idea of multiculturalism in those places where its influence was most hotly debated—four college English departments where grand ideas collided with everyday life in four different ways.

With a focus, therefore, on questions of meaning-making and cultural change, this study offers a first glimpse into the way English professors have processed multiculturalism as a practical challenge. The short answer to the question of whether our social cohesion is in danger (or whether our appreciation for cultural difference will be greatly altered) is “No.” Many English professors have indeed embraced the idea of multiculturalism, but they have done so primarily by shaping it into something that fits the pre-existing organizational routines and meanings that created the literary canon in the first place—the canon that traditionalists hope to preserve.<sup>5</sup> (“The canon” refers to those works most widely taught and respected as “great literature.”)

English literature *is* different today from the way it was twenty years ago. Some portion of that change can even be attributed to multiculturalism, but multiculturalism within English literature departments does not challenge canons, Western culture, or the idea of greatness. When it came to deciding what multiculturalism would mean for any given class, professor, curriculum, or department, those choices hinged heavily on existing conceptions of literary education. Those versions of multiculturalism that allowed English professors to continue going about their business or, more important, those that allowed English professors to do their business *better*, were the ones that were finally etched into institutional structures through habit and policy.

### *The Myth of Omnipotent Culture*

#### They Have a Theory, and You Should, Too

Exactly how powerful is culture? It is important to have a good answer to this question. Culture is everywhere, and our cultural choices are not always made as carefully as they could be. But which choices matter and why?

The plan for saving the world by changing culture has an implicit social

theory. It assumes that culture steers human action by way of ideas or values, and that life is all about ideas and action. It views both culture and people as extremely powerful. And, as a consequence, it views everything else as mere byproducts. In theory, our culture determines our values and desires, then we do what we want, and the world becomes what we make of it. If we could improve the way they think, people would behave better and we would have a better, kinder, gentler society. Step 1: Change culture. Step 2: Relax—the rest will fall into place.

That's the popular version of the multicultural plan, and the people who were putting the idea to work prior to 1980 were pretty excited about it. They weren't sophisticated cultural theorists or literary critics; they were teachers (who sometimes actually used the word "multiculturalism") and parents who just wanted to teach their children about the world, to "socialize" them.

But when President Ronald Reagan appointed William Bennett to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities in December 1981, Bennett faced a serious problem. Students were fleeing from the humanities in droves to sign up for majors in business management and computer science. Bennett needed a way to reassert the value of the humanities, and he landed on the theory of omnipotent culture when he made that claim about cultural glue.

If this theory of omnipotent culture is correct, tinkering with culture could, indeed, be an easy way to change the world. But it could also be extremely dangerous—especially if it's *national* culture we want to alter. If we change that culture too much, life as we know it could disappear. In this view, culture is so powerful that everything else depends on it. So everything social is subject to the whims of human action, and is, therefore, terribly fragile. Economic systems, national sovereignty, family structures, baseball—all these things could evaporate if our nation's children aren't taught to value them. In short, the destruction of a value system can amount to the destruction of a nation. That was the central claim of the cultural Right.

Once the theory of omnipotent culture was established and the fear of a fragile society firmly planted in the popular imagination, the groundwork was laid for a free-for-all attack on the American system of education. Cultural diversity was everywhere. It was dangerous, and educators showed no interest in stopping it!