

ON BISEXUALITY AND CULTURAL PLURALISM



Adapted from a Lecture at U.C.—Santa Cruz December 3, 1995.

PLURALISM HARDLY EVER comes up, in conversation. Once in a great while I'll hear that somebody "won" something by a "plurality" of votes, and that always sounds weird. Right away I'm wondering, does that mean s/he got more votes, or what? It's not clear. It's not *win* or *lose*. It's not *yes* or *no*.

Because I live inside the same popular culture that saturates the consciousness of my neighbors, I am conditioned to regard "clarity" as the construction of reality in terms of either/or. For example: You love me or you do not. You love me or you love somebody else. These formulations presumably lead to clear conclusions that void, or avoid, complexities such as, "You love me and I am not the only woman you love." But complexity is the essence of everything real.

And so I find myself increasingly resistant to allegedly "simple" anything. I don't trust "simple." I don't believe in it. And, with our Western bent toward insidious evaluation, and analysis, I worry

about the dangerous, Aristotelian, here-or-not-here implications of "simple."

So I turn to the concept of *pluralism*. Is that a start, at least, toward an intellectual illumination of our complex identities and experience?

According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, "pluralism" is "the condition of being plural"; "a condition of society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups coexist within one nation"; "the doctrine that reality is composed of many ultimate substances"; "the belief that no simple explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life."

And, after thinking about these definitions, I arrive at my own related ideas:

- A. *A democratic philosophy of cultural pluralism*: A society in which numerous distinct ethnic and racial and religious groups *rightfully* and *equally* CO-exist within one nation.
- B. *Sexual pluralism*: A condition in which one person advocates and/or adheres to two or more kinds of sexuality.
- C. *A democratic philosophy of sexual pluralism*: That advocating and/or adhering to more than one kind of sexuality is duly consistent with individual and collective values basic to the creation, and the upkeep of cultural pluralism *per se* (of, the value of *freedom*).

IN MY POCKET I have twenty-six cents: one quarter and one penny, official American currency decorated by the Latin inscription *E Pluribus Unum*. For a long time I thought nothing in particular about that particular motto, "from many, one." It seemed to make (common) sense if only because I'd never heard any ideas to the contrary.

But actually that's a pretty dangerous notion: *E Pluribus Unum*.

Unless we're looking at strawberries and bananas and kiwi California smoothies, "from many, one" could mean some awful, even horrifying state policies and beliefs. It could mean the Aryan race. It

could mean ethnic cleansing. It could mean apartheid. It could mean the Naturalization Act of 1790, which decreed that only white people could become naturalized citizens of the United States.

It could mean "English only" legislation. It could mean I'd better forget about who I really am, or why; it could mean I'd better identify with that dominant force, I'd better embrace and espouse that domination.

But also, *E Pluribus Unum* is not God's truth, or God's plan. How we got here, as a species, for example, does not support that ambition, *E Pluribus Unum*. And, in general, evolution flows in an opposite direction. Evolution flows into diversity by dint of infinite diversification: *from The One, many*.

If you put something on your money I would assume you mean it and the fact that *E Pluribus Unum* appears on my twenty-six cents suggests that, as a cultural and sexual pluralist, I am in serious trouble here. I am swimming in too many rivers because

A. There should only be one river.
and

B. That one river should be speeding on its way from *one* starting point to *one* destination.

Get with it!

What is my problem?

How can I fail to accept the simple truth/the natural state of affairs/the divine order of whatever prevails, whatever dominates?

Especially when whatever prevails, whatever dominates, protects its power through cautionary folk tales, primitive law, and state-initiated or state-sanctioned violence, then how can I deny those simple truths so abundantly wedged inside popular consciousness? For instance, Western civilization:

Why would I want to disturb that unified, that deified, focus with some sort of multicultural rearrangement?

And, anyway, *multicultural*? Doesn't that imply a harebrained hodgepodge leading to explorations of no intellectual validity? Mul-

ticultural! Doesn't that imply something unlimited, which is to say chaotic and nonlinear and nonhierarchical and open-ended and, therefore, possessing no intellectual validity?

Why do I want to know French and Chinese? Why do I think I need to travel to Calcutta, Osaka, Luande, Dar es Salaam, Belfast, and Brooklyn, along with London, Amsterdam, or Rome?

Why don't I settle down in central Idaho, study the rise and fall of the Prussian Empire, and watch a little football on the telly?

What's the matter with me?

Or why should I be curious about my complicated heritage:

My mother, Afro-Caribbean and East Indian

My father, Euro-Caribbean and Chinese

My childhood: East Coast-Urban-Negro-Community and Universe

My education: virtually all-Black public school followed by virtually all-white prep school and Ivy

League college.

Why should I be concerned? Should I fathom these varying parts and then attempt to configure them into a coherent, but nonhierarchical whole of many varying parts?

I should choose one!

My father or my mother/my neighborhood or my prep school.

I should simplify and stabilize!

From many, one!

And, besides, how do I dare dismiss common arguments against cultural pluralism:

1. That it consigns Western civilization to a lottery that may not defer to white or Western supremacy;
2. That it complicates that picture so that distinctions blur from among different peoples of color, for example. Accordingly,

some marginalized groups fear they may lose even their marginal visibility.

I am a cultural pluralist because I am in my right mind. What else should I be? Given that I see and I hear many peoples around me in this one country of ours, what else should I be?

I am in my right mind.

And, therefore, I do not propose that those many peoples should be homogenized into one prime-time sitcom. I reject *E Pluribus Unum* as a guideline or goal. I have to!

Yes, I understand the hierarchical urge of individuals and groups wanting to imitate or, better yet, merge with Dominant Culture because, otherwise, they fear disastrous dependency, invisibility, or extinction. And I even understand the pathological urge to act like the Number Ones; I understand the urge to copycat the hateful, violent, and disgusting, dominant history of dominant response to those who differ from those who would dominate.

But that hierarchical urge is antidemocratic, at least, and, I believe, immoral, besides. That hierarchical urge to be The One out of the many (or despite the many), that urge to be The One above The Others cannot be satisfied for any individual or any groups of individuals except at the expense—except at the possibly exterminating expense—of another individual or group.

And so, I am a cultural pluralist: from the one, many, many, many. Because many is natural. Because many is always happening—more and more, in fact. And many is the way things will continue to proliferate and abound—short of some 1990s Final Solution to the many perceived as A Problem.

Yes I am in favor of the absolute unqualified preservation of the complicated, pluralist society that already exists, whether we like it or not! I favor this completely, this pluralism, because I am not a supremacist of any sort, whatsoever. And I persist inside a critical experiment which must confer equal rights and equal protection upon the many, one by one, or fail as a democracy.

Now, any examination of culture must include the psychology as well as the biology of its specifics: the mind of the body and the

body of the mind. Nowhere is this indivisibly dual dynamic more obvious than inside the sphere of human sexuality.

Sexuality, like culture writ large, has been subjected to the *E Pluribus Unum* approach to diversity for a long time. Regardless of the physical and emotional varieties of sexual interest/desire/need represented by the variety of human beings that we, all of us, make manifest, the *E Pluribus Unum* Club of Dominant Culture—members only—would have us accept that sexuality is something clear/something simple/basic/God-given, or, in short, heterosexual.

I would agree with *basic* and with *God-given* if, by God-given, you mean extant, here; in existence, for real.

But simple? Gosh, I don't think so!

Somehow I have never noticed a remarkable simplicity peculiar to or employed by heterosexual men and women! And yet, a hefty part of the *E Pluribus Unum* sexuality campaign rests upon claims like "diamonds are forever" and heterosexuality is "simple" because it's "dominant," because it's "simple," and so forth—"forever."

On the other hand, I have noticed a remarkable Dominant Culture inclination to define sexuality in its own heterosexual image—and to exclude/criminalize/derogate/vilify any other sexuality.

I am a cultural pluralist. And, as sexuality is a biological, psychological, and interpersonal factor of cultural experience, I am a sexual pluralist.

What else could I be?

Given men who desire women and women who desire men and men who desire men and women who desire women and men who want to become women and women who want to become men and men who desire men and women both, and women who desire women and men both, what else could I be, besides a sexual **pluralist**?

I understand why women who identify themselves as lesbians and why men who identify themselves as gay might wish to ostracize, or condemn, bisexuality. It is that fearful emulation of the history of the Dominant Culture's response to those who differ/who choose to be different. It is fear that an already marginalized and jeopardized status will become confused and or obscured and/or extinguished by

yet another complicated sexual reality seeking its safety and its equal rights.

But you cannot draw the line on freedom, you cannot draw the line on equality. And if I am not free and if I am not equally entitled to love and desire both men and women, in other words,

if I am not free and if I am not entitled equal to heterosexuals and homosexuals

then

homosexual men and women have joined with the dominant heterosexual culture in the tyrannical pursuit of *E Pluribus Unum*

and I

a bisexual woman committed to cultural pluralism and, therefore to sexual pluralism, can only say, you better watch your back!

Any abridgment of anybody's right to exist places in jeopardy each one of us, regardless of race, class, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, proportional size.

So I am a cultural pluralist. I am a sexual pluralist. And to those who do not agree with me I say, "Good luck!"

EYEWITNESS IN

LEBANON



1996

WHEN AMERICAN PUNDITS talk about "The Middle East," they mean Israel: what favors or what threatens Israeli interests.

And so, for example, the country and the people of Lebanon no longer exist because Israeli leaders have decided to focus upon Syria, Jordan, and Turkey "to the North."

Hence, when you come upon a listing of Middle Eastern states in our own media, you rarely will find Lebanon anywhere on the page.

If I had not recently traveled to Lebanon, I would probably note this currently commonplace omission as "disquieting" or "odd."

But I went there, to Lebanon. And I'm back. And I'm real. And Lebanon is real. And this poisonous pretense to the contrary seems to me insolent and ominous, at best.

What's the brainstorm here: that if Israel and the United States