Being Critical about Identity
Reply to Frye, Garcia, and O’Connor

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I would like to begin by thanking the contributors to this forum for taking the time to review my article and for writing such insightful comments. I am afraid that the reader will find the most instructive and fruitful part of this exchange in the challenges my critics have raised, not in the responses I will provide. I will divide my comments into two parts. Since I find an interesting and productive convergence in some of the critical questions that Marilyn Frye and Peg O’Connor pose, I will address their commentaries together in the first part of my response. I will then discuss Garcia’s critique in the second part.

Salient Features of Identity and Political Activism
Frye’s commentary is to be commended for making clear what the limitations and dangers of the familial metaphor are. It is certainly true that we cannot expect the metaphor of “family resemblance” to explain every single aspect of identity categories. Indeed this metaphor, like any other metaphor, has its limits and needs to be supplemented by other metaphors or analogies. In this sense, in point 5 of her commentary, Frye calls our attention to the Wittgensteinian metaphor of the thread which—she claims—is more apt than the metaphor of the family because it captures the density and heterogeneity of identity by emphasizing the interaction of heterogeneous elements and the friction that exists in that interaction. I could not agree more. I have myself used the thread metaphor precisely in the way suggested by Frye; and, in fact, in “Identity Trouble” I tried to use the two metaphors in tandem (661) so that the networks of similarities and differences that support familial relations are thought of as a thread of heterogeneous fibers with constant friction and multiple points of tension. But most of Frye’s remarks concentrate, not on what the metaphor of the family cannot do for us, but rather, on the dangers involved in what this metaphor does do for us.

Frye’s cautionary remarks suggest that the metaphorical conceptualization of identity through the notion of family resemblance exhibits certain biases: an individualist bias (point 2), a cognitivist bias (point 4), and a biased tendency toward the unification and purification of the raw materials that make up an identity (points 1 and 3). I will try to show that although Frye’s worries are real concerns that call for more careful conceptual work, we can (and must!) formulate the familial account of identity without the biases that she specifies.

In the first place, Frye argues that the notion of family resemblance presupposes individualism because it is based on the attributes or traits of individuals. According to Frye’s interpretation of this notion, family resemblances are predicated on “the pre-existence of attributes or traits” that individuals have as intrinsic properties. But she contends that the similarities and differences that are perceived “between me and other people [are] determined in part by what families the perceiver thinks I am in.” I agree with this contention but I do not think it is antithetical to my familial view. For, on my view, family ties create a complex and dynamic dialectic between the individual members of the family and the group, with traffic going in both directions.
The similarities and differences among the members of a family are not determined and stabilized in any particular direction: they do not emerge from individual features, but they do not emanate from group membership either; they are fluid, dynamic, unstable, and they involve a constant process of negotiation at different levels and in different contexts (economic, legal, political, religious, cultural, etc.). Given the present state of the networks of similarities and differences that sustain membership in a particular group (say “woman” or “Hispanic”), there are certain features that are typically associated with the group (say having breasts or having a particular accent), so that the affiliation of individuals in that group carries with it the prima facie presumption that those features apply to them. These normative expectations do exist and they are part of the social dynamics of identity. I plead guilty to calling attention to how individuals can tinker with the identity of a group, without putting the emphasis also on how group membership can affect the identity of its individual members. But I did so simply because I was interested in investigating how individuals and subgroups can resist the normalizing and homogenizing tendencies present in the similarities and differences that have become salient and are reinforced by dominant representations of the group. I wanted to identify ways in which people can contribute to the diversification of the group and to the problematization of how the group is perceived internally and externally (by its own members and by members of other groups). It is for this purpose that I used the notion of disidentification. But the claims I made about the contestation and critical contributions of the members of a group (whether individuals or subgroups) do not presuppose or require any kind of residual individualism: these critical members can contribute to the reconfiguration of the group not in virtue of their pre-social nature but in virtue of their agency in the group in question.

Indeed, why should we think of individuals as fixed hooks in which social relations and groupings have to be hung (without their affiliations or groupings affecting their identity—that is, the nature of the hook, so to speak)? I agree with Frye that this naïve individualism should be rejected, as should its mirror image, namely, a collectivism in which social relations and groups bear all the ontological weight so that they become pre-existing realities unaffected by the individuals who participate in them, and so that individuals become mere dummies to be assigned to different relations and groups that will determine their identities. I have argued elsewhere against individualism and collectivism and their common source (a set of misconceptions about the relation between individuals and groups) (forthcoming, Chapter 2). What I favor is a relational view of identity in which the identities of individuals and groups are entangled in such a way that they become interdependent and inter-defined (Medina forthcoming, Chapter 3; Schutte 2000). It makes little sense to talk about free-floating individuals prior to and independently of family ties or group affiliations. Such individuals would be nothing more than an empty abstraction, that is, ghostly selves without properties or qualities; for indeed the qualities or traits of individuals do not pre-exist group affiliations, but are negotiated and shaped in the formation of family ties.

In the second place, Frye criticizes my view for having a narrow cognitive focus, that is, for focusing exclusively on perceptions of similarities and differences while disregarding the affective and emotive elements of identity. She argues that a proper conceptualization of identity categories should also include “networks of overlapping and criss-crossing desires, indifferences and aversions.” Frye’s point is well taken and her suggestion welcome. My view must be modified and expanded in precisely the way she recommends.

In the third place, Frye argues that the notion of resemblance is ultimately not appropriate for the kind of heterogeneous pluralistic view of identity that I defend because this notion retains the logic of unity and purity. According to Frye, the relation of resembling one another contains an intrinsic impetus toward the unification and purification of the features exhibited by the subjects who become the objects of comparison. As she puts it (in point 1), when we reduce the dense multidimensional aspects of our identity into perceived similarities/dissimilarities, “the complexity, the curdled-ness of identity is cognitively resolved toward unity and set-theoretic clarity.” So Frye’s claim is that although the notion of family resemblance
admits heterogeneity in the raw materials of identity, it nevertheless privileges unity and purity because it demands the unification of those elements in order to compose a particular configuration of identity. The claim is that resemblance requires unity, harmony, and congruency; and it forces us to work toward the dissolution and overcoming of any kind of tension, conflict, or disunity. Frye emphasizes that this also has a problematic affective dimension. Let me begin with the emotional implications.

In point 3 of her commentary Frye finds it problematic that my view underscores the emotional gains achieved by being unified and fitting well in identity categories: acceptance and a sense of belonging. My discussion suggested that subjects who are not completely comfortable in any single familial category are emotionally punished by being excluded or rejected. Frye complains that the familial metaphor thus evokes a problematic angst and longing for harmony and stability. But, she asks, why should the experience of our plurality involve a feeling of “discomfort and a nostalgia for a new stability”? Why should plurality be “uncomfortable? Why should it not be pleasant, energizing, experienced as delightful richness?” Why indeed! I fully agree with Frye’s suggestion. And it was in order to facilitate the celebration of our differences and the enjoyment of the multiplicity and heterogeneity of our identities that I tried to dissolve the so-called problem of difference. But although I agree that feelings of discomfort are not a necessary part of the experience of our plural and heterogeneous identities, it is important to note that, unfortunately, rejection and exclusion often an important part of the phenomenology of difference and plurality. Departures from standard (normalized) profiles of collective identities are often experienced as uncomfortable differences, as stigmata that are the source of rejection. This is the result of processes of marginalization and exclusion that transform certain configurations of identity into impossible or nonsensical identities—identities that cannot exist or that we cannot make sense of if they do exist (Scheman 1997). It is often not comfortable to inhabit identities that defy normative expectations; it often gets you in trouble. And that is the identity trouble that my article talks about. But of course it was not my contention that non-conforming identities must always and unavoidably remain troubled identities, at least not in the sense of uncomfortable subjectivities that are unable to celebrate and enjoy their plural, excessive, and heterogeneous aspects.

It was the contention of my article that we all have identity trouble of some sort because there is no such thing as a perfect conformity with the binary norms (masculinity/femininity, whiteness/blackness, heterosexuality/queerness, etc.) which try to domesticate our identities by making similarities and differences mutually exclusive. The suggestion of my view is that the goal should not be to erase the destabilizing differences, excesses, and heterogeneities that create conflicts and tensions (identity troubles), but rather, to create contexts and practices in which these differences, excesses, and heterogeneities can be enjoyed without rejection, exclusion, or stigmatization. I do not see anything in my view that suggests that the struggle for solidarity and the fight for (social/political/cultural/legal) recognition of differences should require the harmonization and unification of similarities/dissimilarities and the creation of a new form of stability in our identities.

The familial view of collective identities I have laid out has no use for the unification or purification of identity features. And this brings me back to the first point in Frye’s commentary. I do not think that the notion of family resemblance requires or presupposes the logic of unity and purity. I do not think it is necessary to unify or purify similarities and differences in order to maintain the familial ties of collective identities. As Frye points out, there have been Wittgensteinian researchers in Cognitive Science—notably Rosch and Mervis (1975)—who have argued that “some sort of perceptual filtering and focusing goes on to make some similarities and some differences salient in perception and cognition.” But, pace Rosch and her colleagues, family resemblances do not have to be conceived in terms of prototypes or paradigmatic exemplars; and they do not need to contain focal points which relegate to the periphery of the group those members that do not exhibit the stereotypical features that have become salient. The goal of my article was precisely to sketch a more pluralistic model in which there are multiple networks of similarities and
differences that offer different configurations of familial identity, without these being competing configurations that we need to harmonize or that we need to adjudicate between and choose from. But we do have to keep in mind that the resemblances that become constitutive of familial membership can operate in the unitary way suggested by Frye; and indeed there are forces—social, political, and cultural forces—that try to impose that unitary logic on the dynamic life of identity groups. This danger is explored by O’Connor’s commentary in her discussion of privileged identities, to which I now turn.

O’Connor extends my familial account to cover privileged identities and to explain how they are formed and how they can maintain their privileged status. I welcome this extension of my account and agree with what O’Connor has to say.

I take it to be a virtue of my view that it can shed light on the identity of both marginalized and privileged subjects. I tried to use my analysis of the internal structure of identity categories to develop strategies of political contestation that can be useful for creating solidarity and for fighting against oppression on multiple fronts. But it is certainly true that my analysis can also be used to develop political strategies for maintaining privilege and subordination and for creating divisions and solidarity within and across groups. O’Connor’s observations in this respect are important cautionary remarks. She notes that the internal dynamic of group identity as I describe it is susceptible of being exploited by privileged classes of subjects to maintain their privileged status. Privileged subjects within a group enjoy a disproportionate amount of power and agency in the group and are, therefore, better positioned to manipulate the family resemblances that matter for familial membership. These subjects will make salient those similarities and differences that best serve their purposes for including and excluding people in groups and for maintaining relations of subordination within and across groups. Privileged subjectivities have a vested interest in creating a center and a periphery within identity groups so that there are fixed prototypes of identity that can signify the status of particular subjects within these groups. The perpetuation of privilege requires the manipulation of the networks of similarities and differences that sustain familial identities so as to create the illusion of essentialism, that is, of there being essential similarities and differences that can keep people in and out of groups or in particular subordinate positions within groups. This essentializing strategy tries to domesticate and contain the fluidity and heterogeneity of identity by reifying and universalizing similarities and differences so that they become fixed and homogeneous. The struggle against marginalization, exclusion, and oppression requires the neutralization and critical contestation of this essentializing strategy. This is why it is so important, in order to resist essentialism and the relations of privilege and subordination it sustains, that we call attention to the heterogeneous pluralism of identity that my familial view underscores. Similarities and differences that are claimed to be stereotypical and essential need to be constantly subject to critical contestation. And it is here—I suggested—that disidentification can play a critical role.

But there is more. O’Connor also warns me that the political strategies of contestation suggested by my view can be easily monopolized by the most conservative portion of the oppressed group. According to O’Connor, the familial framework I provide runs the risk of privileging those non-conforming identities who can best resemble mainstream subjects, that is, those who—although deviant in some respect—are nonetheless closer to the standard subjectivities that have become privileged, for those subjects are the ones who have a best shot at claiming “We are like you.” This conservative activism takes care first of those marginal subjects who are closest to the mainstream and therefore least marginal, without ever getting to the oppression of the most peripheral subjects—which is presumably the most severe oppression and the one in most need of urgent attention. And thus the political demands of truly dissimilar subjects who cannot draw on their similarities with the privileged classes become displaced. This conservative activism is unacceptable. It involves an unacceptable alliance with privileged classes and an implicit complicity with oppression. In the hands of conservative activists, the fight against oppression, instead of being a struggle for equality, becomes
a struggle for *sharing privilege*. I am in complete agreement with O’Connor on this point and it is for this reason that I reject “strategic essentialism” and any kind of political strategy of contestation that works exclusively through similarities, basing political claims and demands on an identity claim of the form “We are like you.” I take it that O’Connor’s argument is a critique of philosophical conceptions of identity (such as Spivak’s) that emphasize similarities over differences (if only for strategic purposes), but not a critique of my view, for one of the central tenets of my view is that similarities and differences are not mutually exclusive but bound up together, so that the critical task of contesting marginalization, exclusion, and oppression must pay attention to differences as well as to similarities. Justice and equality will not be attained by our political activism if the reconfiguration of the relations among identity groups and within them is produced through identity claims that are based on similarities with those in privileged positions. To think that oppressed subjects in order to liberate themselves must assimilate to what society takes to be mainstream is already to abandon the fight against oppression, to give up on the ideals of justice and equality of identity politics, to capitulate. In this struggle of liberation we must begin by critically examining and contesting the relations of domination between groups and what has become the privileged center or core of identity categories. And it is important to keep in mind that the struggles against oppression fought in identity politics are not “merely cultural”: these struggles have to address issues of socio-economic power and status; the cultural critique must be accompanied by the transformation of material conditions and the redistribution of resources.

I am grateful to O’Connor for raising the issue of the strategic value of the philosophical conceptions of identity that we use. We should indeed become critically aware of the strategies for political activism that can be derived from these conceptions; and O’Connor’s point about the dangers of a conservative activism that lets mainstream culture set the priorities of our political agenda is very well taken.

Identity Lucidity: The Critical Dangers of Unproblematic Identities

Garcia’s critique consists in a list of assertions that are supposed to specify familiar *facts* that some philosophers such as myself have forgotten. Garcia claims that with his assertions he is “assembling reminders” for philosophers who are out of touch with the world. But what are we being reminded of? Are Garcia’s assertions mere platitudes? Do they express unproblematic *facts* that everybody takes for granted in everyday life? No. As we shall see, Garcia’s assertions express his (very contentious) personal beliefs about identity, beliefs—I should add—that emerge from a particular philosophical (as well as religious and political) tradition. It is ironic that Garcia presents these beliefs as familiar *facts* that philosophers have forgotten while in fact they are the traditional metaphysical beliefs that philosophers used to take for granted before Wittgenstein and other contemporary critical thinkers. Although Garcia’s assertions express virulent opposition to my theses and arguments, they do not critically engage with them. Mere dismissals are critically unhelpful; and it is difficult to respond when no argumentative challenge has been raised. But I will do my best to provide a critical response to Garcia’s assertions, trying to show that they constitute a missed opportunity for critical engagement. Garcia’s assertions implicitly claim a special lucidity or clairvoyance about the specific configurations that human identities must take—a lucidity or clairvoyance that is presented as self-justifying or in need of no justification. The very title of Garcia’s review reveals the arrogance of the received essentialist view which he presents as a list of undisputable truths or facts of life that cannot be criticized or contested in any way. For, indeed, it is not accidental that Garcia uses the expression “identity confusion” to condemn my view, thus echoing the paternalistic and domesticating force of the expressions “gender confusion” and “sexual confusion,” which have been used to stigmatize those minority subjects who don’t conform to the normative expectations about gender and sexuality that mainstream society imposes on all of us.
García organizes his assertions in five groups. The first set of assertions concerns the notion of family resemblance. From the beginning García gives a metaphysical twist to the discussion of identity: while my paper discussed our judgments of identity and how they are based on perceptions of similarities and differences, García talks about ontological relations of similarity and difference. He thus shifts the discussion from the epistemological level to the metaphysical level. He starts by acknowledging that identity has to be relativized to particular respects, but he contends that once thus relativized, identity cannot contain differences, and similarities and differences become mutually exclusive. García gives no argument for this contention (nor does he address my arguments about the dynamic interrelations between similarities and differences), but he does offer an example: “If X and Y are the same in color, then *eo ipso* they cannot also be different in color.” The accuracy of García’s example is highly questionable and it has been in fact questioned by many, not only in philosophy but in Cognitive Science. There is a wealth of evidence in the literature on comparison in Cognitive Science which suggests that X and Y can be classified as being the same color in one context and as being different in color in another context depending on the contrast class—I myself have contributed to this literature (Gentner and Medina 1997, 1998). García will surely reply that I am confusing two different aspects of identity: being X or Y and being perceived as X or Y. But to sharply separate the metaphysical and the epistemic aspects of identity—that is, to appeal to intrinsic properties that are prior to and independent of the comparison—is already to assume the *realist* view of identity that García holds and I reject. García needs to provide arguments for this view. In the case of color I don’t see any reason to assume that these arguments are forthcoming; and the claim García makes about the irrelevance of differences in shade, tint, or saturation certainly do not do the trick. To claim that these differences cannot amount to anything—that is, that they cannot change the color identity of the object—is to beg the question. On the other hand, to note that these differences often do not amount to anything is not to identify a brute metaphysical fact about color identity, but simply to note how these differences are treated in our practices: that differences in intensity, saturation, etc. become negligible simply means that they are neglected in order to protect (in certain contexts and for certain purposes) the salience of certain similarities that are brought to the foreground.

What I find most remarkable about García’s assertions is that they disregard my distinction between the *strict* sense and the *lax* sense of relative identity. He is trying to revive the strict sense of identity (absolute identity in a particular respect) without engaging with the arguments I provided to show that this sense of identity is not applicable to the collective identities of human groups (at least not until cloning is perfected). At the same time he is overlooking my account of how the lax sense of identity works. As explained in my article, things or people are considered similar or identical in a lax sense against a background of differences that are considered negligible and are in fact neglected: “differences are overlooked in a context in which [the objects or people under consideration] are brought close enough to each other so that they can be grouped together and treated as members of the same category or *family*” (660).

In group 1 of his assertion García also suggests that I offer a poor interpretation of the notion of family resemblance because Wittgenstein was talking about “blood relatives” and about similarities based on their physical features. There is no textual evidence whatsoever suggesting that when Wittgenstein uses the expression “the members of a family” he is referring *only* to blood relatives; and it is very symptomatic that García would assume so. More importantly, when Wittgenstein talks about family resemblances in the *Philosophical Investigations* (§67), the open list he provides includes both physical features such as eye color and behavioral and personality traits such as “gait” and “temperament,” which seem to have at least some social elements in their etiology. (There is further textual evidence of social family resemblances in Wittgenstein’s lectures and notebooks.) But be this as it may, my argument about family resemblances was not an exegetical one; and I made it quite clear that I was extending the Wittgensteinian notion for my own philosophical purposes. This extension should be judged in its own merits. And it is important to note that my
extension does not try to displace the physical and biological, which are indeed crucial elements of family resemblances, but only to make room for the social. (It would be a false dichotomy to make us choose between a purely biological and a purely social construal of the notion of family resemblance.) I see no reason why physical similarities should be privileged in the way suggested by Garcia.6

Garcia not only rejects my extended notion of family resemblance, but also calls into question whether it can even make sense. In assertion 1.1.3.1 he claims: “It makes little sense to talk of a family resemblance holding between an adult and her adopted children.” The way Garcia talks about blood relatives such as the Rivera family (his example) is indeed a very natural way of talking, but it is not the only way of talking about family members and their resemblances. I do not see anything nonsensical about speaking of the members of the Medina family, adopted children included, in the following way: “Juan and Paula have the Medina imprint; they look like Medina’s and sound like Medina’s; they have the Medina way of talking, clothing style, eating habits, humor, taste in music, film, etc.”—and feel free to add here any of the elements contained in what Bourdieu has called the habitus. This way of talking may be a bit eccentric, but people do talk in this way. I do. My family does. And we seem to be able to communicate just fine. It is a mystery to me why Garcia thinks that this way of talking is unnatural or nonsensical. Garcia accuses me of transforming the concepts of family and family resemblance “to fit an antecedent political agenda.” He, on the other hand, reminds us of “familiar truths about human nature” which establish that it is in “generative families” that we find “the real ‘family values’” that “warrant legal protection and social celebration.” It is clear that Garcia too has an antecedent political agenda. Although our political agendas are indeed very different, I do not have the “scorn” for family values that Garcia ascribes to me. In fact, an important goal of my critical reconstruction of the notion of a family was precisely to articulate a conception of family values that I think can be socially and politically fruitful.7 It is not only wrong but also disingenuous to assume that those philosophers who challenge received concepts (such as the concept of a family) are suspect activists with a hidden agenda that taints their views, while those who defend received ideas and views are simply standing up for the truth with no political agenda. This disingenuous position becomes a refusal to engage critically and to take seriously the challenges raised by critics which are dismissed with ad hominem remarks about their political motivations.

Garcia’s assertions in group 2 reject my claims about the contextuality and performativity of identity. He simply states: “You can’t be a Black person or a woman here but not over there, now but not then, among these people but not those.” Why not? What’s the force of this “can’t”? This is another mysterious assertion. Why should we think that all the aspects of our identity must always have the fixity and universality that Garcia claims? There are plenty of cases in which people’s identities are reconfigured (through their own agency or through the agency of others); and these cases cannot all be easily assimilated to instances of “passing” or mistaken identity. But Garcia insists that there are no genuine changes of identity across contexts or over time. There are certainly many obstacles and constraints (sometimes biological, sometimes social, sometimes both) that limit the variability of our identity across contexts and over time. We certainly cannot change our identity at will (we do not choose the signifiers of identity in the contexts in which we find ourselves, nor do we simply choose the corporeal and habitual elements that configure our identity even if sometimes we can manipulate them). Despite their context-dependence, most aspects of our identity are quite stable and don’t have that kind of elasticity. But that doesn’t mean that all aspects of identity are universally fixed and immutable. Changes in identity can and do occur. This contextual variability works differently in different aspects of identity; some are most stable than others. It is indeed not easy for a Black person to find contexts in which s/ he can become non-Black. Changes like this one are not always possible and certainly not easy even when they are possible. Lots of things must change in the context and/or in the subject for this kind of transformation of identity (for example, racial or gender identity) to occur. But such contextual transformations are not impossible.
People negotiate their identities in the socio-historical contexts in which they find themselves and in terms of the categories and classifications available to them; and these contexts and their categories sometimes do change (other times it is the subject who changes dramatically during her lifetime even if her contexts do not change). There have been socio-historical contexts in which the most tenuous biological relation to Blacks would make you Black (the so-called “one-drop rule”), while in others contexts this is not so. Different socio-historical contexts have also associated very different phenotypic features (for example, quite different skin colors) with “Blackness.” With the category “woman” contextual variations and transitions are even more apparent. There are contexts in which gender is quite rigidly defined in terms of biological factors such as chromosomes or reproductive capacities. There are other contexts in which the anatomical features (even if they are surgically produced) become the most salient aspects of gender identity. There are also contexts in which what matters most is the individual’s gender performance (her way of talking, of walking, of dressing, etc.), whatever the person’s anatomy or biological make-up happens to be. There are yet many other contexts in which the very definition of gender identity is up for grabs and subjects must negotiate the tensions and conflicts between several of the criteria that can be appealed to. García’s mere assertion that gender identities cannot change simply disregards the rich discussions in Gender Studies and Queer Theory concerning the multiple definitions of gender identities and the challenging negotiations, transgressions, and transitions that can be found in the intersex and transgender community. The unargued contention “You cannot perform so as no longer to be a woman” is not a convincing reply to the numerous and detailed studies of the performative transformations of identity produced in this literature, which García fails to take seriously. But more importantly, García’s assertions simply dismiss the very lives of intersexed and transgendered subjects and the problems, concerns, and demands that they raise.

The third group of García’s assertions concerns identity politics. He contends that “identity politics requires that these features must be widely shared and without significant intra-group differences.” Identity politics has often worked in this way, but there is no necessity in this oppressive social dynamic. My paper tried to articulate a version of identity politics in which group solidarity does not require a homogeneous identity shared by all (or even most of) the members of the group. As explained in the article, my familial conception is in line with views developed by critical race theorists and by feminists of color. With his assertion García simply dismisses all the alternative conceptions of identity politics developed in recent decades, without considering the arguments behind them. In 3.2 Garcia claims that I have forgotten that we belong to different social groups and that our multiple affiliations can lead to tensions and conflicts in our loyalties and values. Far from forgetting this, my article was explicitly about this problem! In 3.2.1.1 he also reminds me that the “norms of group solidarity [tend to] promote and preserve stereotypes” that privilege some groups and marginalize others. Again, far from forgetting this, my article was explicitly about this problem! Both García and I recognize these problems in identity politics, but we have very different ideas about how they should be addressed. I argued that it is possible to have group solidarity without oppressive impositions on the identity of the members of the group. I suggested that this kind of non-oppressive solidarity can be achieved through a constant critique of the configurations of identity available in the group, a critique that diversifies similarities, liberates differences, and neutralizes exclusionary claims and impositions. García, by contrast, thinks that the solution to these problems can only come from transcendent moral norms that specify the proper virtues, obligations, and rights that people have. This transcendentalism grounded in a particular view of human nature does not seem to me to be the best way to avoid impositions that can marginalize and oppress people, especially when it seems to leave no room for fallibilism and critique.

In 4 García asserts that identity does not admit degrees (4.2): you cannot be more or less gay, more or less female, more or less Black, more or less Latina/o, etc. We often do not specify degrees when we talk about identity, but sometimes we do; and this gradualist talk is actually not as
exceptional as it may seem. The ascription of identity categories in an absolute sense and without qualification seems appropriate only for people with unproblematic identities that fit neatly and squarely in prefigured moulds. The degree to which an identity category applies to a subject can change across contexts and over time; and the subject's own agency can play an important role and contribute to these changes, increasing or decreasing her degrees of—say—Blackness, Latinidad, femininity, etc. But in 4 Garcia also asserts that “being Black, Latina/o, female, etc.” cannot be turned into “a personal project” (4.3). Here, as in 2, Garcia's assertions deny any link between identity and agency. He sees no room for transitions from one identity category to another. Here too he denies that one can transition from male to female or from female to male, thus denying the reality of transgendered subjects. More implausibly yet, Garcia's assertions leave no room for any developmental process that affects identity: our identity traits are supposed to be immutable there without any developmental process leading up to them. This renders much of our identity talk nonsensical or misguided: according to Garcia, it makes no sense for people to talk about practicing their ethnicity; and it makes no sense for boys and girls to talk about becoming men or women (they just are or aren't). In his assertions Garcia treats all questions about identity as questions of immutable essences. In the 4's he insists that the proper configurations of the different aspects of identity should not be left to be decided by group dynamics, and here too Garcia appeals to universal moral norms. I don't see how the mere claim about the universality of one set of norms can settle the disputes between conflicting values (can't the competing norms be claimed to be universal as well?); and, in particular, I don't see how this appeal to universal norms can help protect the minorities who dissent from majority opinions and mainstream values (wasn't this Garcia's concern?). Apparently, in order to identify universal norms that can eliminate all identity confusion, we need very special leaders with prophetic voices: virtuous people with a special lucidity about identity. I must confess that I am quite skeptical of self-proclaimed prophets of identity and their special clairvoyance. Identities that are transparent to themselves and unproblematic are often so because they have not been problematized, because they have been protected from critical questioning, so that the possible tensions, conflicts, and exclusions that they may contain are not even considered.

Finally, in 5 Garcia confesses his contempt for Gender Studies and Queer Theory. This contempt explains Garcia's failure to take seriously the questions, challenges, arguments, and proposals contained in these bodies of literature. But more troublesome than Garcia's intellectual suspicion about these academic disciplines is his ethical and political indifference to the lived experiences and the concerns and demands of the minority subjects that those disciplines try to give voice to. The philosophical beliefs that Garcia presents as indisputable facts are not only disputed by philosophers and other academics, but also contested and challenged by very real people in their very real and ordinary lives. These critical contestations and challenges deserve to be taken seriously.

References


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1 In fact, this would be to capitulate to the homogenizing social forces that try to domesticate our identities, that is, it would be to accept that non-conforming identities cannot flourish without sacrificing their differences, that one cannot live properly with conflict, tension, and instability.

2 One can enter a familial group in many different ways and these different points of entry are often maintained even when they are in tension. Familial identities are not threatened (at least not always) by the existing conflicts (sometimes even contradictions) among familial relations.

3 For example, within the queer community, same-sex couples who are interested in attaining marital status and in adopting children or raising their own certainly seem to resemble traditional families more closely than queer subjects who are not interested in maintaining monogamous relations or in raising children. And, as O’Connor notes, it is the former who have been put at the center of the GLBT political agenda today while the others have been relegated to the margins as if their social, political, and legal demands for recognition, equal opportunities, and equal rights, did not matter as much or did not deserve as much attention.

4 Spivak has argued for “a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1987, 205). According to Spivak, essentialism can be a useful political strategy that dispossessed subjects can use to align themselves with privileged subjects.

5 See Butler (1997) for a discussion of this point (in her critical exchange with Nancy Fraser).

6 And it is important to note that he does not provide a reason at all; he merely asserts the primacy or privileged status of the physical and biological over the social.

7 I do not think that biological and reproductive factors should be precluded from entering into our critical discussions of the legal, cultural, and religious concepts of family. But I do think that we should not uncritically assume that these factors will decide which ethical and political values are most appropriate for the flourishing of human families. This discussion should at the very least acknowledge the social reality and value of those families (straight as well as queer) that cannot or choose not to reproduce. It is because of the current marginalization and legal exclusion of these families that their social celebration and legal protection is especially needed.