PRAGMATISM AND ETHNICITY:
CRITIQUE, RECONSTRUCTION, AND THE NEW HISPANIC

JOSÉ MEDINA

Abstract: In this essay I examine the contributions of the pragmatist tradition to the philosophy of ethnicity. From the pragmatist philosophies of Dewey and Locke I derive a reconstructive model for the clarification and improvement of the life experiences of ethnic groups. Addressing various problems and objections, I argue that this Deweyan and Lockean reconstructive model rejects any sharp separation between race and ethnicity and avoids the pitfalls of the biologist race paradigm and the culturalist ethnicity paradigm. I explore some of the social and political implications of this reconstructive model through a discussion of José Martí’s inspiring account of Hispanic identity.

Keywords: Alain Locke, critique, ethnicity, Hispanic philosophy, identity, John Dewey, José Martí, liberation, pragmatism, race, reconstruction.

1. Pragmatism and the Critical Role of Philosophy

At the core of pragmatism is the idea that philosophical reflection should be continuous with everyday life. It is in this sense that Dewey argues that philosophy should follow an “empirical method.” On this view, a crucial danger for the philosopher is to adopt a detached perspective and to engage in the elaboration of theories that are not informed by actual lived experiences. This is what Dewey calls “the great vice of philosophy”: intellectualism and its companion revisionism (1988, 28). According to Dewey, intellectualism exhibits an unwarranted distrust for the ordinary and induces “disillusionment with life” (1988, 41). Intellectualist philosophies neglect the richness of lived experiences. Under their gaze ordinary experiences are distorted and ultimately replaced with theoretical constructions that cannot find a place in our lives. As Dewey puts it: “The most serious indictment to be brought against non-empirical philosophies is that they have cast a cloud over the things of ordinary experience. [. . . ] common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgment and value” (1988, 40–41).
According to pragmatism, philosophy must start *in medias res*, in the middle of things, in the stream of life. It is important to note that this internalist or immanent perspective is not a mere celebration of the ordinary. It is particularly important to note this today, given the theoretical anemia (or even anorexia) that has become pervasive in academia. In philosophy this pathological theoretical feebleness takes the form of *quietism*, which has been made popular by certain interpretations of Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Like pragmatism, philosophical quietism decryes the futile and misguided character of a theory building that neglects or obliterates our ordinary life experiences. But the quietist goes much further in condemning all theory construction in philosophy. Unlike the pragmatist, the quietist yearns for a return to a lost, pre-theoretical innocence, which in the eyes of the pragmatist is unattainable. In philosophy, Dewey remarks, “we cannot achieve recovery of primitive naïvete” (1988, 40). According to Dewey, by focusing on ordinary life experiences philosophy does not simply become the voice of common sense, for philosophical reflection is essentially *critical* and *transformative*. On this view, the relation between philosophy and everyday life experiences is a two-way street: philosophical reflection must start from experience, but it must also return to it and enrich it. For Dewey, the “primary concern” of philosophy should be “to clarify, liberate and extend the goods which inhere in the naturally generated functions of experience” (1988, 305). What motivates philosophical reflection is “the interest of a more intense and just appreciation of the meanings present in experience” (1988, 304). Accordingly, Dewey proposes as a *practical test* for philosophical reflection that we ask whether or not such reflection results in the clarification and “enrichment” of experience.

Both intellectualism and quietism fail this test, for they neither shed light on nor enrich experience. Intellectualism enjoys the added danger of distortion, and quietism the added danger of conformity. But both are *equally uncritical*: intellectualism dismisses the ordinary without engaging critically with it; quietism celebrates it without questioning it. Intellectualists and quietists cannot criticize or transform life experiences because either they choose to talk about something else entirely or they refuse to say anything that can conflict with these experiences. These philosophical perspectives cannot clarify (and typically obscure) the normative principles that shape our lives and structure our practices, and they leave them intact. This cannot be otherwise, for the philosophical illumination and enrichment of life experiences are to be achieved by

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1 Such an interpretation can be found in Diamond 1991 and Minar 1995. For a critique of this quietist reading of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, see chapter 6 of my 2002.

2 As “a first-rate test of the value of any philosophy” Dewey suggests that we ask: “Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful?” (1988, 18).
means of criticism, and intellectualism and quietism make the critical function of philosophy impossible. Philosophical reflection cannot play its critical role in the assessment of life experiences by departing from them completely or not at all. That is, philosophy cannot fulfill its critical function when the critical distance is so great that the object of criticism is no longer in sight, or when there is no critical distance whatsoever.

By emphasizing the dialectical relation between life experiences and philosophical reflection pragmatism tries to vindicate the critical function of philosophy. Pragmatism makes critique possible by dissolving the false dichotomy that intellectualism and quietism present us with: either theory or life. So long as we accept this dichotomy, philosophy will remain uncritical: it will be stuck in a pendulous movement that leads nowhere, swinging between the extremes of construction and deconstruction, going from compulsive theory building to obsessively tearing down theoretical edifices. But, as Richard Shusterman has argued, it is a mistake to think of theory and practice, of philosophy and life, as opposites. Shusterman contends that American pragmatism is a return to a practical perspective in philosophy that was especially influential in the Hellenistic tradition: a conception of philosophy as an “art of better living through self-examination and self-creation” (1997, 14). He argues that this practical view of philosophy reconciles the immediate and the theoretically mediated aspects of our lives. This pragmatic view of philosophy makes clear that theory and practice, far from being mutually exclusive, are crucially dependent on one another. It is precisely in this dialectical interdependence that the critical activity of philosophy resides.

Dewey repeatedly describes philosophy as critique. This critique has both negative and positive aspects. In its negative aspect, “philosophy is a critique of prejudices,” “a kind of intellectual disrobing” by which “we inspect critically [the intellectual habits of our culture] to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us” (1988, 40). But even in its negative dimension, it is clear that philosophical criticism aims at a positive outcome, namely: the reconstruction or transformation of experience. The results of critique are to be incorporated into our subsequent experience. “These incorporated results of past reflection, welded into the genuine materials of first-hand experience, may become organs of enrichment. . . . Clarification and emancipation follow when [prejudices] are detected and cast out” (1988, 40; emphasis added). Through philosophical reflection our lives can be liberated from harmful prejudices and enriched by critically examined experiential structures. Thus the critical activity of philosophy is at the service of a positive function: the clarification and enrichment of life experiences. On Dewey’s view, philosophical criticism is reconstructive or transformative: it aims at “a qualitative transformation,” “a re-making” of experience (1988, 323). According to Dewey, what is most characteristic of philosophical criticism, what sets it apart from other forms of critique, is its generality: “Philosophy is

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inherently criticism, having its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality; a criticism of criticisms, as it were” (1988, 298). But no matter how general, it is important to note that, on this pragmatist view, philosophical criticism is always situated and piecemeal. For Dewey, the critical activity of philosophy does not proceed according to a master plan, a grand narrative, or a fixed framework. It is never global and detached. It is always done for a purpose and in a context. The critical reconstruction of experience is as situated as experience itself.

There are many aspects and varieties of human experience, but, according to Dewey, there are some generic traits of experience that deserve special philosophical attention. One of these traits is that experience is always and necessarily both individual and social: it involves experiential subjects as well as communities of experience (cf. esp. 1988, chapter 6). Accordingly, we should expect the fruits of the critical reconstruction of experience to be both individual and social. As we have seen, these fruits are the clarification and the enrichment of experience. At the level of the individual, the critical activity of philosophy should aim at self-knowledge and self-realization. Similarly, at the level of groups, the critical reconstruction of collective experience should result in an increased group self-understanding and in the betterment of communal life. In this essay I shall discuss the pragmatist notions of experience and critical reconstruction in their social dimension. The central goal of the ensuing discussion is to elucidate the contribution that pragmatism can make to the philosophy of ethnicity, that is, to identify the theoretical resources available in the pragmatist tradition for the understanding of ethnic experiences and the improvement of the communal life of ethnic groups.

In the classic pragmatist tradition the topic of ethnic identity was largely neglected, except by classic race theorists, such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, who wrote on the topic explicitly. In recent decades, however, ethnicity has become a topic of discussion taken up by pragmatist philosophers—among them Alcoff (2000; forthcoming), Pappas (1998; 2001), and Shusterman (1997; 2000; 2002). It is no accident that race and ethnicity were linked in such an intimate way in classic pragmatism and that even today the philosophy of race and the philosophy of ethnicity go hand in hand. In the next section I briefly discuss the evolving relations between the notions of race and ethnicity. I do not try to settle the complex question of whether (or to what extent) the notions of race and ethnicity are separable. But I try to make the reader aware of the state of the question and offer some considerations against a radical separation or a complete fusion of these notions. I argue that Locke provides a promising account of how to keep race and ethnicity distinct and yet interrelated, an account that connects with contemporary trends in the philosophical literature on race and ethnicity.

In section 3 I combine the views of Dewey and Locke to elucidate in exactly what sense the critical reconstruction of collective experience can
shed light on ethnicity. In section 4 I defend this reconstructive model against certain objections; and I discuss particular ways in which the pragmatist approach to collective experience can enrich the life of an ethnic group.

Finally, in section 5 I focus more specifically on Hispanic identity. In this section I argue that, although systematically excluded from the canon of American pragmatists, there are some classic figures of Hispanic thought who have elaborated interesting views of ethnicity that have much to contribute to American philosophy. In particular, I call attention to the thought of the Cuban thinker José Martí and try to appropriate it for the critical-reconstructive approach examined in this essay. Deeply influenced by Emerson, Martí elaborated an inspiring account of the identity and the future of Hispanic Americans. I argue that we can find Deweyan and Lockean views in his philosophy of ethnicity.

2. Ethnicity, Race, and Ethnorace

Is Latino identity or Jewish identity a racial identity as well as an ethnic identity? And is African American identity an ethnic identity as well as a racial one? Until quite recently collective identities have been heavily racialized in the United States. But, of course, not all collective identities have been equally perceived as racial identities. Until recently, the term *ethnic* was taken to express a deviation from mainstream white culture, designating those who were culturally alien; and these cultural others were automatically racialized and perceived as nonwhite. Given the color coding of identities in the U.S., some ethnic groups, such as African Americans, were heavily racialized, while others, such as Irish Americans, only minimally so, with other groups, such as Hispanic Americans and Jewish Americans, falling somewhere between those extremes of racialization.

But racial classifications and the very notion of *race* have come under heavy attack in recent decades. It has been repeatedly argued that racialization is intrinsically oppressive because it involves the imposition of group identities based on skin color and perpetuates the consequences of an oppressive past of colonialism and slavery. The philosophical critique of the notion of race was elaborated by a new wave of race theorists—critical race theorists, such as Anthony Appiah (1992) and Naomi Zack (1993)—who argued that racial terms are unavoidably bound up with biological essentialism. From many corners inside and outside academia it has been insisted that racialization should be resisted; and it has also been suggested that collective identities should be formed and affirmed in terms of cultural rather than racial categories. Thus the ethnicity paradigm has emerged as the proper substitute for the race paradigm. This cultural paradigm is supposed to be more inclusive than
racial classifications, allowing for collective identities with racial heterogeneity.

As Alcoff (2000) points out, the ethnicity paradigm tries to accomplish two interrelated goals. In the first place, the move from race to ethnicity is supposed to facilitate the positive valorization of previously derided identities. In the second place, the move from race to ethnicity is supposed to confer agency on collectivities so that they can participate in the cultural construction of representations of identity and take control over their own self-image. While race is said to be something one has no control over, ethnicity is supposed to identify the subjective elements that hold groups together: historical experiences, cultural and linguistic practices, and so on. Whereas racialization involves the imposition of group identifications from the outside and, therefore, denotes a lack of agency of the racialized groups, ethnic representations of identity, by contrast, are supposed to correspond with how the members of the group self-identify and, therefore, the acceptance and use of ethnic representations are taken to indicate respect for the group and a way of valuing its cultural agency. There are indeed important advantages afforded by the ethnicity paradigm, but it would be naïve to think that using ethnic terms rather than racial ones will, by itself, be sufficient to fight racism and to eliminate prejudice, bias, and the oppression of minority groups. We need to note the dangers and obstacles that the ethnicity paradigm faces.

Ethnic terms have come to be widely used by U.S. agencies as well as by ordinary folks. But although resisting racial representations of identity and replacing them with ethnic representations may have been progress in some cases and improvement for some oppressed minority groups, the gains and advantages of the ethnicity paradigm are often exaggerated. The reality is that racial representations contaminate ethnic ones. In some cases, ethnic terms and descriptions have unavoidable racial connotations; in other cases, they just are code words for racial designations. As Alcoff (2000) points out, “African American” is often used as a racial label in a way in which “German American” or “Irish American” is never used. More interestingly yet, the same ethnic term can have a racial meaning or not, depending on whether the group to which it is applied has been racialized or not. Take, for instance, the heterogeneous ethnic group of Hispanics and the label Latino or Latina. While Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans have been considered racial (and not only cultural) others, other Hispanic groups have not. And consequently, as Alcoff puts it, “when Mexicans or Puerto Ricans are called ‘Latino/a,’ the latter category will connote racial meanings, whereas Argentinians who are called ‘Latina/o’ in the North may escape these connotations”

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3 As Alcoff puts it, the goal “is not only to change whites’ assumptions about racialized groups, but also to help alter the self-image of people in those groups themselves toward a more affirming identity, an identity in which one can take justifiable pride” (2000, 35).
The meanings of identity terms are derived from the contexts in which they are used; and if these are racialized contexts, then the terms will convey racial meanings. And how can ethnic terms help us overcome racialization if they continue to signify race? As Alcoff says, echoing Virginia Dominguez (1999), “People may speak culture but continue to think race,” for “perceived racial identity often does trump ethnic or cultural identity” (2000, 37).

The principal obstacle facing the ethnicity paradigm in its attempt to overcome the racialization of collective identities is the well-entrenched social significance of visible, bodily markers. As Alcoff argues, race is associated with “visible markers on the body that trump dress, speech, and cultural practices” (2000, 38). American perceptual habits are deeply racialized. Despite ethnicity talk, Americans quickly return to race in the perceptual practices they use in everyday life to discern how to relate to each other. Of course, we can develop new perceptual habits; but the transformation of our perceptual practices and habits requires much more than changes in word usage, it requires more radical interventions in everyday activities. So the linguistic move from race to ethnicity is not ipso facto a move away from race; and it does not automatically help to reduce the oppressions of racialization. Alcoff summarizes the important limitations of the ethnicity paradigm as follows: “At best, for people of color, ethnic identities will operate alongside racial ones in everyday interactions. At worst, ethnic identities, perhaps like ‘African American,’ will operate simply as a racial identity” (2000, 39).

Alcoff has identified two trends in the contemporary literature as promising alternatives to the naiveté of the ethnicity paradigm. One such trend can be found in race theorists like Paul Gilroy (1993), Robert Gooding-Williams (1998), and Patricia Williams (1997), who reclaim the use of the term black while trying to de-essentialize blackness and give it a cultural meaning. Instead of abandoning the concept of race and neglecting the social realities of racialization, these authors try to transform the meaning of racial categories. Arguing that we are stuck with racial categories, their strategy is to rework their meaning through new uses, analyses, and elucidations. Part of this process of resignification involves showing how racial meanings derive from historical experiences, collective memories, and shared forms of cultural expression. It is important to note that this culturalist movement within race theory tries to accomplish the central social objectives of the ethnicity paradigm—the valorization of denigrated identities and the vindication of the cultural agency of oppressed groups—by de-essentializing racial categories and rearticulating their meanings, instead of simply trying to eliminate them.

Another trend in the recent literature emphasizes the intersectionality of race and ethnicity. There are many who claim that race and ethnicity are not analytically distinct categories, that they are bound up with each
other in such a way that they cannot be separated and understood in isolation. An argument for the impossibility of sharply separating the cultural and the biological aspects of collective identities can be found in Lucius Outlaw (1996). On Outlaw’s view, there is no biological identity category without cultural significance; and there is no cultural category without biological significance. There is no neat separation between race and ethnicity along biological and cultural lines as traditionally thought. Racial and ethnic categories are interwoven in a complex network of conceptual interrelations. To emphasize this intersectionality some have found useful the concept of ethnorace coined by David Theo Goldberg (2001). In this vein, Alcoff has argued that this concept has “the advantage of bringing into play the elements of both human agency and subjectivity involved in ethnicity—that is, an identity that is the product of self-creation—at the same time that it acknowledges the uncontrolled racializing aspects associated with the visible body” (2000, 42).

My central claim in this section is that both of these trends in the contemporary literature were anticipated by Locke’s pragmatist view of collective identity. Locke’s reconstructive approach de-essentializes the concept of race and brings to the fore the crucial intersections between race and ethnicity. In this way Locke’s view avoids the rigidity of the traditional biological conception of race and the naïveté of the contemporary ethnicity paradigm. That these theoretical resources can be found in Locke has not been widely recognized by philosophers of race and ethnicity, but it has not escaped the attention of Locke’s interpreters, such as Leonard Harris (1991) and Richard Shusterman (2002). What Shusterman calls “Locke’s cultural agenda of aesthetic activism” (2002, 129) involves the cultural self-affirmation and empowerment of racial groups and the attempt to transform the very meaning of race. As Shusterman (2002) puts it, although Locke recognizes that “race typically functions [. . . ] as a classificational strategy to privilege certain cultures and social groups over others,” he “still more strongly grasps the pragmatic insight that race remains a concept of entrenched social, political, and cultural power”; and, therefore, “race must not be dismissed as mere fantasy but instead redeployed to rehabilitate its past victims” (2002, 133).4

The third section of Harris’s (1991) edited collection of Locke’s essays, entitled “Identity and Plurality,” contains papers that explore the relationship between race and culture. In these papers Locke distin-

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4 As Shusterman shows, Locke rejects biological definitions of race “in terms of blood and genetics and defines it instead as essentially cultural and ‘in terms of social and historical causes’ ” (2002, 133). Locke does use biological language in connection with race, and he refers to American Negroes as “blood descendants” of African “forefathers.” However, Shusterman explains, “for Locke, the blood link functions not on the biological level but instead as a social symbol of connection that provides special ‘cultural inspiration’ through ‘a sense of direct cultural kinship’ ” (2002, 133).
guishes between the Negro race and the Negro culture, but he shows how they have been bound together by history. In “The Concept of Race as Applied to Social Culture” Locke argues against “the unwarranted assumption of race as a determinant of culture” that he sees as pervasive in the social sciences, especially in ethnology (Harris 1991, 188–89). But he also criticizes the opposite assumption, more popular today, that culture determines race. On Locke’s view, the common erroneous assumption underlying both biologist and culturalist views is that there is a fixed relationship between race and culture and that one can be deemed an artifact, excrescence, or by-product of the other. Against this assumption, Locke argues that “though [race and culture] have at all times significant and definite relationships, they nevertheless are in no determinate way organically or causally connected” (188). The complex set of relationships between the racial and the cultural has no “constancy, historical or intrinsic”; and in the absence of a fixed “organic connection” between race and culture, there is no ground to establish “the determination of one by the other” (188). Locke describes race and culture as “important aspects of human society” with “highly variable meanings.” He develops an account of social identity that explores the complex and changing relations between these concepts. The centerpiece of this account is a dynamic view that undermines any kind of reification of identity.

As Harris emphasizes, the key feature of Locke’s account of social identity is its anti-essentialism: “Our commonalities do not exist as isolated essences but rather in relation to the ways we manifest ourselves within social life” (1991, 15). Harris argues that Locke’s account is heavily influenced by James’s view of experience, which is the basis of his critique of reification: “Analogous to James’s negation of an ‘idea’ as a fixed entity [ . . . ], Locke negated racial, ethnic, religious, and political identities as fixed identities” (21). Influenced by James, Locke bases his argument for the fluid character of identity on his conception of valuing as a dynamic force that shapes and reshapes identity structures. On Locke’s view, social identities are formed through shared valuations as they unfold under particular historical and material conditions. Locke’s Jamesian anti-essentialist philosophy is described by Harris as a radical pragmatism. This label captures well the core of Locke’s view of social identity and its insights into race and ethnicity. This view is radical in that it resists all reifications and calls for a constant critique and rearticulation of identity; and it is a thoroughgoing pragmatist perspective on collective identity that does not presuppose common features that precede common practices. A shared identity cannot be identified with a fixed set of common properties. There are no practice-independent features that we can identify as the commonalities that hold together a shared identity. On Locke’s view, whatever commonalities we may find among the members of a group result from their pragmatic engagements with common problems and from the development of shared attitudes and valuations.

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In this way Locke’s view connects with such radical pragmatist approaches to identity as Gooding-Williams’s (1998). According to Gooding-Williams, it is the problems that a certain population faces, their responses to these problems, and their political engagements that produce a group identity. From this pragmatist perspective Gooding-Williams argues against expressivist and culturalist views that predicate identity on a prepolitical notion of solidarity based on common character. He submits that a philosophical model of collective identity should be agency based, rather than character based. This description fits well the view of identity Locke started to develop from his early writings in the 1920s. In the next section I examine Locke’s account of the ethnoracial identity of the American Negro as articulated in his introduction to *The New Negro*. I argue that this account and Locke’s radical pragmatism should be understood in terms of the Deweyan concept of critical reconstruction.

3. Radical Pragmatism and the Critical Reconstruction of Collective Experience

Dewey argues that, in order to be effective, philosophical criticism must “make our desires, our strivings and our ideals [. . .] articulate” and provide the “experiential knowledge” required in order “to bring them about”; he describes this critical articulation of ideals and reconstruction of experience as an “inquiry into conditions and consequences” (1988, 312). This inquiry is both backward-looking and forward-looking: it involves the critical examination of the conditions of experience, which includes an inspection of its history, of what led up to it; but it also involves an exploration of the potentialities of experience, that is, a critical investigation of the future, of the different possibilities that are open (or can be opened) in one’s experience. So the reconstruction of experience that philosophical criticism has the duty to provide involves a two-fold task: the genealogical task of mastering the determinations of the past as they affect or condition one’s present; and the projective task of opening up possibilities and exploring one’s future. It is important to note that both of these reconstructive tasks are highly creative: they involve creative processes of seeing connections and possibilities in one’s experience. It is also important to keep in mind the engaged and interested nature of these tasks: it is the function of orienting action that structures all our reconstructive efforts. These reconstructive efforts, whether genealogical or projective, are supposed to provide direction and guidance for one’s agency, and their value lies in their experiential consequences.

When critical reconstruction is applied to the collective experiences of racial and ethnic groups, it involves an assessment of their present

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5 To emphasize this Dewey compares the critical task of the philosopher to that of the artist. See his 1988, 296–300; and his 1989, chapters 12 and 13.
situation through a critical examination and evaluation of their history and their future. But the point of directing our reconstructive efforts toward the collective experiences of groups may not be immediately obvious. What are the benefits of exploring a common past and a common future through philosophical criticism? There are two main benefits that the critical reconstruction of collective experience has to offer to racial and ethnic groups. In the first place, this reconstruction can facilitate the group’s self-understanding. Through a genealogical reconstruction of their past and a projective exploration of their future, the members of a group can construct their own self-image. But the attainment of self-understanding and the construction of a self-image are not ends in themselves; they are required for self-mastery, that is, for taking control of one’s agency. I shall use the rubric of self-empowerment to refer to this constellation of benefits (the production of self-understanding and self-mastery) facilitated by the reconstruction of collective experience.

In the second place, a genealogical and projective reconstruction is not simply valuable for the members of a group in isolation from other groups: it helps to clarify and improve interrelations among groups and, therefore, it can promote and facilitate their mutual understanding and communication. The crucial significance of these benefits cannot be overemphasized, for the betterment of the common life of different racial and ethnic groups is of paramount importance in today’s globalized world. I shall refer to this constellation of benefits as the facilitation of intercultural understanding and communication. Both constellations of benefits that the critical reconstruction of collective experience can afford are discussed in Locke’s introduction to The New Negro, which appeared in 1925 (the same year as Dewey’s Experience and Nature). There Locke argued that American Negroes had reached a crucial point in their development as a group, namely, a point where their self-empowerment had become possible and their relations with other groups could be improved.

As the opening remarks of The New Negro make clear, the self-empowerment of a group requires self-understanding, that is, the members of the group must be able to grasp their own determinations and potentialities. In this sense, the reconstruction of collective experience can be thought of as a response to the philosophical demand for self-knowledge, as answering to a social version of “Know thyself”: “Know thy community.” Just as the individual must know herself in order to acquire self-mastery, the members of a group must also know the determinations and potentialities of their common experience so that they can take control of their destiny. Both for the individual and for the group, the acquisition of self-mastery calls for a constant effort toward self-transformation and self-knowledge. It is important to note that the self-knowledge that is required for self-mastery cannot be attained by means of a passive cognition, by simply inspecting what is already there.
It requires creativity and agency. It involves making and seeing connections in one’s actions and in one’s life. It is a kind of knowledge that cannot be assimilated to the conception of knowledge as a mirror that merely reflects what is already there. This Deweyan approach to self-knowledge is clearly present in Locke’s description of self-knowledge as a task and a challenge for the New Negro. According to Locke, the Negro’s self-image should not be taken as a given; it is not simply what the members of the group happen to think of themselves, for this unreconstructed self-understanding is bound to include the internalization of images that others cast on them, and it is likely to be uncritically informed by clichés, stereotypes, and prejudices. What Locke calls the Old Negro is precisely the composite sketch formed by those images projected onto the Negro by those outside his group. This imposed self-image (often presented as the true identity of the Negro) should be resisted and unmasked as a fiction: “The Old Negro has long become more of a myth than a man, [ . . . ] a creature of moral debate and historical controversy, [ . . . ] a stock figure perpetuated as a historical fiction, [ . . . ] more of a formula than a human being, [ . . . ] a social bogey or a social burden” (1925, 3).

Locke’s distinction between the Old Negro and the New Negro is a distinction between a self-image imposed from the outside and a self-image that results from the agency of the members of the group themselves. In this way Locke draws a sharp contrast between an unreconstructed and a reconstructed self-image. The Old Negro has no agency; he is a disempowered (and disempowering) fictional figure. Locke describes him as someone talked about, who has no voice of his own (“a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized”; 1925, 3). In order to overcome this imposed self-image Negroes face the task of finding a voice of their own. The fulfillment of this task requires changes in the material conditions of life as well as changes in the group’s self-expression. Locke argues that crucial material changes in American society (industrialization, mass migration, and class diversification) have made possible a radical transformation of the collective identity of the Negro. He describes the “metamorphosis” from the Old Negro to the New Negro as follows: “By shedding the old chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation. Until recently, lacking self-understanding, we have been almost as much a problem to ourselves as we still are to others. But the decade that found us with a problem has left us with a task” (1925, 4; my emphasis). This “spiritual emancipation” consists in becoming a subject and taking control of one’s agency by breaking free from the “inner grip of prejudice” and acquiring self-knowledge. The self-knowledge and spiritual emancipation of a group require more than simply compiling ready-made images; they require that
the members of the group have experience in common and own this experience by becoming conscious and critical of it. As Locke puts it:

Hitherto American Negroes have been a race *more in name than in fact*, or to be exact, *more in sentiment than in experience*. The chief bond between them has been that of a common condition rather than a *common consciousness*; a problem in common rather than a *life in common*. In Harlem, Negro life is seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination. It is—or promises to be—a *race capital*. [1925, 7; my emphasis]

On Locke’s view, group unity and solidarity are achieved through common experience and the critical reconstruction of this experience. Herein lies the special significance of Harlem, which Locke considers to be the cradle of the New Negro. In the first place, in Harlem Negroes find a cultural space where they can share experiences and pursue common ideals: they find “a common area of contact and interaction”; “their greatest experience has been finding one another” in this common space (1925, 6–7). Locke emphasizes that the cultural richness of Harlem resides in its diversity. Harlem is not a monolithic space but an ever-volvent arena of interaction of different cultural forces. This suggests that a group’s need for common and unified experience does not require the suppression or erasure of the inner diversity of the group; and that, therefore, the task of finding a distinctive voice for the group should be understood as the task of engaging in a vibrant dialogue of congruous and complementary voices. This pluralist insight is elaborated in Locke’s idea of “unity through diversity” (see his essay under that title in Harris 1991, 133–38). In the second place, the self-empowerment of a group requires not simply having experiences in common but also, and what is more important, owning these common experiences, that is, appropriating them in a self-conscious and critical way.

Locke contends that the critical articulation of the collective experience of Negroes is the duty of “an enlightened minority”: the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. What makes these “enlightened minds” special is that they have been able to overcome prejudice and have taken a leadership role in the self-expression of the group. This intellectual elite constitutes “the advance-guard of the African peoples” and has “the mission of rehabilitating the race in world esteem” (1925, 14). The artists and intellectuals of Harlem make a special contribution

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6 Locke’s pluralism denounces “the fallacy of the block conception of race as applied to the Negro peoples” (Harris 1991, 169). For a pluralist account of collective identity that emphasizes the differences as much as the commonalities between the members of a group, see my “Identity Trouble: Disidentification and the Problem of Difference” (2003).

7 Shusterman explains this Lockean point as follows: “Esteem for the African American cultural tradition (its achievement and potential), will best be gained by putting a contemporary sample of its excellent artistic fruits on display, so that people can really feel its value in their own aesthetic experience” (2002, 137).
to the “spiritual Coming of Age” of the Negro race by giving expression to “the growing group consciousness of the dark-peoples” and by “gradually learning their common interests” (1925, 14 and 16). Locke describes Harlem as one of “those nascent centers of folk-expression and self-determination which are playing a creative part in the world today”; on his view, “Harlem has the same role to play for the New Negro as Dublin has had for the New Ireland or Prague for the New Czechoslovakia” (1925, 7).

Locke recognizes that the life and experience of the Harlem Negro is indeed very peculiar, since it takes place in one of the largest and most cosmopolitan metropolises of one of the most industrialized nations. How can the Negro life of Harlem be representative for all American Negroes (urban and rural, rich and poor, Northern and Southern), let alone for all African peoples around the globe? Locke answers: “Harlem, I grant you, isn’t typical—but it is significant, it is prophetic” (1925, 7). Harlem Negroes can play the role of leaders of the race because they have become self-conscious of their experience and they have begun to take control of their agency. On my interpretation of Locke’s view, what makes Harlem’s cultural life special (“significant” and “prophetic”) is that it can offer *exemplars of reconstructed experience*. These exemplars can be appropriated in different ways by peoples of African descent in the light of their specific contexts and histories. This critical appropriation of experience requires the genealogical and projective reconstruction discussed above. Locke makes only a few remarks about genealogical reconstruction in his references to history and tradition. But he is much more explicit about the projective side of the reconstruction of the Negro experience. He repeatedly emphasizes the need for “clarifying [. . . ] our common vision of the social tasks ahead,” so that “public opinion cannot continue to paternalize” the Negro and he can move “forward under the control largely of his own objectives” (1925, 10). It is the duty of Harlem artists and intellectuals, such as Locke himself, to give explicit articulation to these objectives.

In his discussion of the New Negro’s objectives Locke distinguishes between “those of his outer life” (that is, his life in common with members of other groups) and “those of his inner life” (that is, his life as a member of the group). The Negro’s objectives in his “outer life” are “none other than the ideals of American institutions and democracy” (1925, 10). But although these ideals are the same as those of other Americans, the Negro’s experience enriches them and contributes to a “new social understanding” and a “new democracy.” On the other hand, Locke remarks, the objectives of the Negro’s “inner life” are “yet in the process of formation,” because so far the efforts have been directed toward a negative task, namely: the “attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective” (1925, 10). But Locke emphasizes that the New Negro is finally rising “from social
disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution,” and his new “creed” is “the belief in the efficacy of collective support, in race cooperation” (1925, 11). This recently gained self-respect has been achieved by the New Negro by his taking pride in “his artistic endowments and cultural contributions, past and prospective” (1925, 15). In this process of emancipation and self-empowerment Negroes have thus focused on the cultural objectives of self-expression and self-determination: “Whatever the general effect, the present generation will have added the motives of self-expression and spiritual development to the old and still unfinished task of making material headway and progress” (1925, 15–16).

What we have seen so far should be sufficient (I hope) to establish that Locke’s account of the self-empowerment of the New Negro exhibits the essential features of the Deweyan model of reconstruction of collective experience. But does this account cast a favorable light on the Deweyan model? Locke’s account is certainly rich and inspiring, but it is also pregnant with problems. I shall briefly discuss what I consider to be the two central problems for Locke’s account. In addressing these problems, I hope to show that the account does exemplify the virtues of the Deweyan model of reconstruction and can be used as a paradigm for the self-empowerment of other racial and ethnic groups.

4. Problems and Advantages of the Reconstructive Model

The first problem that arises for the reconstructive model of collective identity I have articulated through Locke is that it seems to be open to the charge of elitism. I grant that occasionally Locke does seem to put too much faith in elites: for instance, with his claim that “the carefully maintained contacts of the enlightened minorities of [ . . . ] race groups” is “the only safeguard for mass relations” (1925, 9)—as if such contacts could not hide the segregation of the masses. I don’t want to dispute the elitist flavor of Locke’s discussion. But I do want to make clear that Locke’s view of leadership, at its core, is not elitist (at least not in an obviously objectionable sense). When Locke prepared The New Negro for publication he still supported Du Bois’s notion of the Talented Tenth, but as his social views became more radical, his thought outgrew this notion. Paralleling the evolution of Du Bois’s own thought, Locke in his later writings rejected the idea of an educated elite of leaders functioning as role models.8 But it is important to appreciate how Locke conceived of leaders in his earlier writings. In The New Negro, under the influence of Du Bois’s humanist view, he thought of leaders as organic intellectuals, that is, as community representatives and activists who can regenerate the

8 For a discussion of this evolution, see Harris 1991, 6–7.
life of the group. These leaders are not different and apart from ordinary men and women; they are themselves part of the mass, and they don’t have a static position or a fixed relation to the rest of the group.

Far from forgetting the masses, Locke talks about the common man frequently and assigns a crucial role to ordinary people in the transformation of the race. According to Locke’s account, the conditions for the possibility of self-empowerment become available to the Negro race precisely because “a transformed and transforming psychology permeates the masses” (1925, 7). And the ultimate criterion of success for this process of self-transformation is the self-empowerment of all the members of the racial group (and not just of a particular portion of it). But although the transformation of the masses is the condition for the possibility and for the success of the empowerment of the entire race, one can still object that the process of transformation itself is elitist if the masses are treated as the passive material of the process of change, which is itself controlled by an intelligentsia or “a thinking few.” But nothing could be more antithetical to Locke’s view than the idea that common men and women form a passive and uncritical mass that can only be led: “In a real sense it is the rank and file who are leading, and the leaders who are following” (1925, 7). On Locke’s view, leaders follow the path already traveled by ordinary men and women; their role is to facilitate their journey; and, therefore, they should be as vigilant of the behavior of the masses as the masses should be critical of the behavior of their leaders. So, for Locke, ordinary men and women are not just indispensable components in the self-transformation of the race; they are actually the real agents of that transformation. As he puts it, “It is the ‘man farthest down’ who is most active in getting up”; and, therefore, it is a mistake to think that leaders are simply “reading into the stirrings of a sleeping giant the dreams of an agitator”; it is “the migrating peasant” who is in control of the process of change (1925, 7).

On Du Bois’s humanist vision, leaders are educators and consciousness raisers. Like Locke’s, Du Bois’s view of leadership has been criticized as elitist. But for Du Bois leaders are not a detached elite; they occupy an instrumental and dynamic position with respect to the group. It can even be argued that Du Bois understands leadership as a transitory position that must ultimately be transcended when its function is completed, its educative and directive goals are reached, and all its potentialities exhausted (although new functions, goals, and potentialities can always arise from the changing conditions of life). For an interesting discussion of these issues, see Joy James (1997).

This is an unfortunate phrase that Locke actually does use (cf. 1925, 4), but what he goes on to say makes clear that he does not conceive of the populace as composed of utterly uncritical and unthinking masses.

This point is reminiscent of Du Bois’s warning to the common man and woman not to follow their leaders uncritically. This warning is especially clear in Du Bois’s critique of the leadership of Booker T. Washington in “The Talented Tenth,” which involves not only a critique of Washington as a leader but also, and what is more important, a critique of his followers for not being critical with their leaders.

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The issue of leadership is indeed a vexed question for any philosophy of race and ethnicity. Many questions concerning the role and status that leaders should have in racial and ethnic groups (as representatives, as educators, as role-models, as intellectual guides who shape the opinion and sensibility of the group, and so forth) still remain unanswered. There is no room here for a discussion of these questions, but I hope to have shown that there is nothing in Locke’s view that is intrinsically elitist and precludes a democratic and egalitarian answer to these questions.

The second problem that arises for Locke’s view concerns the notion of a cultural capital, on which Locke’s account of the New Negro’s self-empowerment rests. This notion has come under attack in the recent literature on race and ethnicity, which has accumulated different versions of the objection that the idea of a cultural capital as the possession of a racial or ethnic group is intrinsically exclusionary and oppressive. This objection arises for any account of race or ethnicity that appeals to a common cultural heritage of the group. In fact, some have argued that the very notions of “race” and “ethnicity” are intrinsically exclusionary and oppressive because their use preserves social injustices that are inscribed in them, rigidly separates individuals into groups, and implicitly legitimates the differential access to cultural and material resources. This is the view defended by David Hollinger in Postethnic America. According to Hollinger’s postethnic perspective, cultural objects, ideals, and institutions belong to mankind and not to any group in particular, and to claim otherwise is inherently oppressive because it tacitly justifies certain exclusions, that is, it justifies certain groups being prevented from enjoying cultural products and resources. Let me briefly discuss this critique of the notion of a cultural capital in order to elucidate how critical reconstruction can contribute to the empowerment of a group without necessarily resulting in the disempowerment of other groups.

The notion of a cultural capital refers to the range of potentialities that have been (or can be) expressed and realized by the members of a group. These potentialities need to be uncovered and appropriated through a genealogical (and projective) reconstruction, for the members of the group are not automatically aware and in control of their cultural capital. Hollinger terms the appropriation of cultural products by a particular group “the will to descend,” which he characterizes as the illegitimate aspiration of “seeking empowerment through genealogy” (2000, 126). In order to show why this genealogical empowerment should be resisted, Hollinger takes as an example the democratic and egalitarian ideals of American culture. He asks rhetorically: “Are they not European?” (2000, 125). They are indeed, but, he remarks, “it should not follow that Euro-Americans of today have a greater claim on these ideals than anyone else” (2000, 125–26). There are two important points to consider here. In the first place, note the sociopolitical aspects of the case that
Hollinger offers for consideration. Hollinger’s choice of example is revealing. This instance of “the will to descend” is unacceptable, among other things, because the group that seeks empowerment through genealogy already has all the power and, therefore, is using genealogy to legitimate its monopoly of power and to perpetuate an existing relation of domination. But would we say the same about the genealogical empowerment of disadvantaged groups that have not yet been allowed to enjoy and exploit the cultural products of their own agency? Whether or not the genealogical empowerment of a group is desirable depends on the context and the socioeconomic and political specifics of the case. The particular position of the group in question in relation to other groups is of paramount importance.

Hollinger, however, ignores this element entirely; and he goes on to argue that since the cultural appropriation of ideals and institutions is clearly wrong and exclusionary when done by Euro-Americans, it must also be so when done by other groups (regardless of their socioeconomic status and political power): “The will to descend has already been indulged, in a multitude of fields, to the benefit of Europeans and of white Americans. Correcting this need not mean cynically turning the tables and indulging this will on behalf of some other contemporary group” (2000, 127). But this is a fallacy. It doesn’t follow that genealogical empowerment is always wrong and exclusionary, unless we assume that the value of such empowerment can be assessed independently of the conditions under which it takes place and the consequences of its achievement. But should we say the same thing about the genealogical empowerment of oppressed groups and their oppressors? The value of cultural appropriation is simply not the same for groups in a position of power and for groups that have been dispossessed of their own cultural agency.

But in the second place, the key issue is whether a cultural capital is claimed as the exclusive possession of a group or as a cultural contribution of the group to society that can be used and enjoyed by other groups as well. If the appropriation of cultural products involves exclusivity, then it has the potential to be oppressive. Hollinger assumes that all instances of cultural appropriation are of this kind, but this is not necessarily the case. It is true that the language of “possession,” “capital,” “heritage,” and so on, does have those exclusionary connotations. But claiming one’s cultural products as one’s own does not have to be done to the exclusion of others; claiming one’s heritage doesn’t have to be exclusionary if one is willing to share. It is certainly possible to call attention to the link between certain ideas, artifacts, styles, institutions, and so forth, and the practices and traditions of one’s group, while offering these cultural products as contributions for the use and enjoyment of other groups in a multicultural society. This is indeed Locke’s view. Although he emphasizes the Negro’s cultural capital,
Locke does not hold an exclusionary view. What he calls the “free-trade in culture” and “the principle of cultural reciprocity” (cf. Harris 1991, 206) are supposed to speak to Hollinger’s concern. In fact, Locke could have written the following passage as a rebuttal to Hollinger:

Culture-goods, once evolved, are no longer the exclusive property of the race or people that originate them. They belong to all who can use them; and belong most to those who can use them best. But for all the limitless exchange and transplanting of culture, it cannot be artificially manufactured; it grows. And so far as I can understand history, it is always a folk-product, with the form and flavor of a particular people and place, that is to say, for all its subsequent universality, culture has root and grows in that social soil which, for want of a better term, we call “race.” [Harris 1991, 206; my emphasis]

Neglecting forms of cultural appropriation and self-affirmation that do not involve exclusivity, Hollinger comes to the conclusion that the ethnic roots of our cultural products should be de-emphasized: “At issue is how much of our appreciation for a doctrine or a work of art or an institution should be based on its perceived ethno-racial ancestry. From a postethnic perspective, the answer is, not much” (2000, 127). On Hollinger’s view, the ethnic roots of cultural products do not play an active role in their appreciation and can become obstacles to their use and enjoyment; they are something accidental to be transcended, mainly negative (biased) aspects to be overcome. In this sense Hollinger refers to examples of cultural products that, despite the ethnic specificity of their origins, have become the universal patrimony of mankind: for example, the scientific and artistic achievements of ancient Egypt. But the crucial mistake here is to think that one cannot make cultural products available universally and at the same time develop an appreciation for their ethnic ancestry, that we have to choose between these two things, that one can only be done at the expense of the other. This error gives plausibility to the claim that the cost of expanding the availability of cultural products is to detach them from their ethnic roots and to minimize the value of their ethnic aspects. But this is simply wrong. In fact, making cultural products available outside the cultural contexts in which they were developed, far from being incompatible with, actually requires an appreciation of their ethnic ancestry. Such an appreciation is a precondition for the full enjoyment and the responsible use of these products. The exploitation of cultural resources without the awareness and appreciation of their ethnic dimension is dangerous and irresponsible, for it amounts to being unwilling to control the oppressive consequences that such exploitation

12 Neither in The New Negro nor in his subsequent writings did Locke use the notion of a race capital in an exclusionary sense. He repeatedly emphasizes that the Negroes’ self-conscious appropriation and exploitation of their cultural assets will result in the enrichment of the whole of society, and that the Negroes’ cultural and artistic expressions are contributions to be enjoyed and used by everybody.
can have for the groups in which those resources originated. Hollinger's claim that "Egypt, surely, belongs to us all, and so, too, does democracy" (2000, 128) is both right and wrong. It is correct insofar as it is a way of emphasizing the availability that these cultural products have (or should have). But it is incorrect insofar as it denies the different relationships or linkages that different groups have to these products.

For better or for worse, cultural products and resources don’t belong to all of us equally. But this does not mean that we cannot all use them or enjoy them; we can, but we do so differently. For better or for worse, the cultural history of a people is inscribed (in various ways) in the ideas, artifacts, and institutions it produces. It is true that these ethnic inscriptions can become biases that have to be overcome. But in that case an appreciation for ethnic ancestry is all the more important if we want the overcoming of bias to be successful and a (real) cultural transformation to obtain. And, of course, cultural inscriptions are not always burdens for social development and progress that have to be countered and lifted; they can be (and typically are) reservoirs of possibilities that can be exploited by many groups in many different ways (sometimes in old and customary ways, sometimes in novel and creative ways). In other words, ethnic inscriptions can be resources, indeed, cultural capitals.

This nonexclusionary view of cultural capital is grounded in Locke’s dialectical view of the development of ethnic and racial groups. On this view, given the relations of mutual dependence between groups, we cannot make sense of the development of each group independently of the others. Groups develop together, they become mutually enriched or impoverished in and through their interactions. The simultaneous formations and transformations of interrelated groups are forged in their interactions and mutual adjustments. (In Deweyan language, the formation of group identity is transactional.) Groups cannot just develop independently of one another: even a self-professed isolationism makes the development of the group crucially dependent on a particular relation to and attitude toward other groups. Locke explicitly denounces the myth of social and racial separatism: "The fiction is that the life of the races is separate, and increasingly so. The fact is that they have touched too closely at the unfavorable and too lightly at the favorable levels" (1925, 9). Locke argues that the fiction of separatism is detrimental not only to the development of particular groups but also to the whole of

13 The fact that the influence of the ethnic ancestry of ideas, forms of expression, and institutions can be countered and modified should not lead us to underestimate the force and significance of this influence. The illusion that cultural products are simply detachable from their ethnic origins and portable, far from facilitating their use outside their ethnic (originating) contexts, leads to a superficial understanding of the conditions and consequences of application of these products. We need to unmask this illusion and develop a new appreciation for ethnic ancestry. This is needed precisely in order to guarantee the flexibility in the use and development of cultural resources.
society, for it renders impossible the realization of American democratic ideals: “Democracy itself is obstructed and stagnated to the extent that any of its channels are closed” (1925, 12).

On Locke’s view, the development of the New Negro involves the development of new relations among racial and ethnic groups in America. This brings us to the second benefit that the critical reconstruction of collective experience can afford, namely: the facilitation of intercultural understanding and communication. Although his account of the reconstruction of Negro life focuses quite heavily on the self-empowerment of the group, Locke also emphasizes how this reconstruction can facilitate and promote communication among groups and improve their mutual understanding. He emphasizes that the “new American attitude” the New Negro is helping to create is characterized by a “closer understanding” of the different racial and ethnic groups that compose American society (1925, 10). This “new American attitude” is to be understood interactionally, that is, as maintained by the different racial and ethnic groups in their continued communication, cultural exchanges, and mutual understanding of their respective expressive and artistic agency. Now that Negro voices are heard, now that their cultural products become available to the whole of society, now that their artistic expressions find an audience, a set of “entirely new mutual attitudes” (1925, 8) becomes possible.

It is important to note that this interactive and communicative view of the development of racial and ethnic groups in a multicultural society explores enabling conditions for the mutual enrichment of these groups, but it cannot provide a formula that guarantees success in interracial and interethnic relations. This view does not involve a naïve optimism or deterministic meliorism. It simply contends that mutual understanding makes it possible that groups support and enrich each other in their development. As Locke puts it: “It does not follow that if the Negro were better known, he would be better liked or better treated. But mutual understanding is basic for any subsequent cooperation and adjustment” (1925, 8–9). The mutual understanding of racial groups is a precondition, but not a guarantee, for the improvement of racial relations and for the pursuit of the progressive realization and fulfillment of American ideals.

To conclude this section, I want to call attention to the fundamental significance of both the social and the dialectical aspects of the pragmatist view of identity that we can find in Dewey and in Locke. In its social dimension, this pragmatist view puts the emphasis on the interrelations between personal and collective identity, making clear that self-knowledge is a social task, that is, that to know oneself is to know others with whom one shares a common history, a cultural bond, and a reservoir of experience.14 Thus, on this social view, the injunction “Know thyself” is

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14 For a full discussion of the mutual relations of dependence and support between the individual and the community in Dewey’s philosophy, see part 3 of Stuhr 1997.
translated into “Know thy community.” But there is a further complica-
tion, for, in its dialectical dimension, the pragmatist view tells us that group
identities cannot be extricated from the interrelations among groups and,
therefore, the collective identity of a group is crucially dependent on the
identity of other groups. Thus in order to know one’s community one must
know other communities as well, for one cannot fully understand the
identity of a group without understanding the identity of other groups.
With this dialectical twist, it becomes clear that the dictum “Know thy
community” presupposes the maxim “Know thy neighbors (or neighbor-
ing communities).” The upshot is that, on this view, the quest for self-
knowledge and self-mastery becomes a far-reaching exploration that goes
beyond the parochial domains of one’s own experiences or the experiences
of one’s group. This experiential exploration involves the reconstruction
and critique of the collective experience of many groups; and it requires
opening channels of interaction and paths of communication among these
groups so as to facilitate their mutual understanding.

An interesting account of the kind of experiential exploration that is
required for self-knowledge and self-mastery can be found in the writings
of Maria Lugones, a Latina philosopher whose views are very close to the
social and dialectical model discussed in this essay even though she does
not explicitly draw on the pragmatist tradition.15 Lugones (1989) argues
that the quest for self-knowledge and self-mastery requires a playful and
adventurous attitude, for such a quest is quite literally an expedition
and those who participate in it must be explorers or travelers: they must
explore new experiential domains or, as she puts it, “travel” to new
“worlds” of experience that are foreign to them. She recommends
“playfulness” and “world-traveling” as ways of overcoming the obstacles
that block cross-cultural and cross-racial understanding. On her view,
“world-traveling” involves the exploration of experiential contexts where
identities different from ours flourish; and being “playful” involves
having an experimentalist attitude with respect to one’s self and the
“worlds” one inhabits. According to Lugones, through playful explora-
tions we can develop a loving empathy toward those who are significantly
different from ourselves, thus transforming our relationship with them
and, at the same time, transforming and enlarging our own selves. The
playful attitude required by these explorations involves being willing to
take risks and being open to novelty and surprises (even destabilizing
ones). It is revealing that in her description of this attitude she uses the
concept of reconstruction:

The playful attitude involves openness to surprise, openness to being a fool,
openness to self-construction or reconstruction and to construction or

15 I am grateful to Shannon Sullivan for introducing me to the work of Maria Lugones. I
have also benefited from discussing with Shannon the pragmatist character of Lugones’s
views of identity, gender, and ethnicity.
reconstruction of the “worlds” we inhabit playfully. [. . . ] In attempting to take a hold of oneself and of one’s relation to others in a particular “world,” one may study, examine and come to understand oneself. One may then see what the possibilities for play are for the being one is in that “world.” One may even decide to inhabit that self fully in order to understand it better and find its creative possibilities. [Lugones 1989, 17; emphasis added]

“World-traveling” involves experimentation with life experiences and the critical reconstruction of these experiences and of the self who has them. As described by Lugones, experimentation and reconstruction require that we explore new cultural contexts and become acquainted with the new forms of experience and the possibilities these contexts have to offer to our life. But it is important to note that this exploration and experimentation have important constraints and limitations. Cross-cultural traveling may not be always possible; we may find insurmountable obstacles along the way in our attempts at transcultural experimentation. For example, the constraints that our embodiment imposes on our identity become important obstacles when we try to travel across genders, sexualities, races, and ethnicities. In some cases our agency may be able to remove these obstacles, but in other cases it may not. And at any rate, even when cross-cultural traveling is possible, a genuine transcultural understanding may require more than playful experimentation: it may require a deep process of transformation at the personal and interpersonal level as well as at the level of the material conditions of existence. We have to acknowledge that there are always limits to the creative reconstruction of identities, as the pragmatist emphasis on context and historical constraints reminds us (see Shusterman 2000).16

I shall conclude with a brief discussion of the social and political implications of the pragmatist approach to ethnicity developed in this essay. For this discussion I shall focus on the account of Hispanic identity developed by the Cuban poet, philosopher, and political thinker José Martí.

5. The New Hispanic

After constant waves of migration the Hispanic community has acquired a strong presence in the United States. It has already become the largest minority and the fastest-growing according to the Census Bureau, which projects that Hispanics will constitute almost a quarter of the U.S. population by the middle of the twenty-first century. Increasingly, Hispanics have acquired more socioeconomic freedoms and more opportunities for self-expression. There has been also an increasing interest in Hispanic culture by the rest of American society. And although

16 Most of what I say in this paragraph I have learned from Richard Shusterman’s discussions of ethnicity and multiculturalism. See esp. chapter 9, “Multiculturalism and the Art of Living,” of his 2000, 182–200.
Hispanic Americans have not yet produced a cultural movement comparable to the Harlem Renaissance, the socioeconomic and political conditions for the creation of the New Hispanic seem to be available: Hispanics are now in a position to create their own images and take control of their cultural agency. As with the New Negro, the first stage in this process of cultural self-affirmation is to do some repair work, that is, to fight the old images and prejudices that are imposed on Hispanics and constrain their development. The marginality of the Old Hispanic still weighs heavily in the mainstream perception of Hispanics in American society: Hispanics are still frequently perceived as foreigners and as sources of cheap labor, being all too often relegated to “those jobs Americans don’t want to do.”

As Locke recognized, the ultimate success in overcoming a situation of oppression depends on the genuine and durable transformation of the material conditions of the life of the oppressed group. But an important aspect of the process of emancipation, which accompanies and facilitates the changes in the material conditions, is the cultural transformation through which the group understands, criticizes, and expresses itself, reworking the self-images already available to the group and creating new ones. My suggestion is that a philosophical voice that can help guide this process of cultural reconstruction and creation is José Martí. As already pointed out by some critics, this classic Cuban thinker has much to offer to contemporary debates on Hispanic identity.¹⁷ It is my claim that in Martí’s view of Latin America we can find the critical and reconstructive elements of the pragmatist approach to ethnic identity; and, I submit, he should be considered the Alain Locke of the New Hispanic.¹⁸ Since there is no space here for a full overview of Martí’s account of Latin American identity, following the structure of my argument in this essay, I shall focus on the following two parts of his account: his discussion of the conditions for the self-empowerment of Latin Americans, and his arguments for the need and importance of intercultural understanding and communication.

In “Our America” from 1891 Martí argues that the self-empowerment of Latin Americans requires critical self-understanding and creative agency, which are everywhere lacking in the Hispanic world. He repeatedly warns that until Latin Americans realize that they need but lack

¹⁸ As Locke does in The New Negro, Martí talks about a collective identity that transcends national boundaries, a transnational identity shared by all Hispanic Americans. However, while Locke’s principal target audience is composed of people of African descent living in the United States, in most of his essays Martí addresses mainly Hispanic peoples outside the United States. There are important problems for any ethnic notion of transnational identity and also specific problems concerning the notion of a Pan-American identity for Hispanics (see Schutte 2000). Unfortunately, these problems are beyond the scope of this essay.
adequate knowledge and appreciation of who they are, they will not be able to find the path toward liberation, and their situation of oppression will not change. According to Martí, what stands in the way of the spiritual emancipation of Latin Americans is an induced self-hatred and distrust of their own potentialities. The other side of this negative self-image is the admiration and idealization of the European and the Yankee. As a result, what has characterized the cultural and political agency of Latin Americans is the imitation of foreign models. But, Martí remarks, “neither the European nor the Yankee could provide the key to the Spanish American riddle” (1999, 117). Latin Americans will have to find the key to this riddle by themselves; but they won’t find it until they repair their lack of self-knowledge and self-reliance and overcome their imitative tendencies.

In other words, the central task is to fight against the colonial mentality that survives in Latin American republics even after their independence: “The colony lives on the Republic.” It is this colonial mentality that is responsible for “the excessive influx of foreign ideas and formulas” and “the wicked and unpolitical disdain for the aboriginal race” (1999, 116). From colonial times Latin Americans have inherited a negative and oppressive attitude toward “the indigenous”: they “are ashamed of the mother who reared them, because she wears an Indian apron,” without realizing that “Our America [. . .] will be saved by its Indians” (1999, 112). Martí underscores that it is imperative that Latin Americans become acquainted with their own history and that they develop a new appreciation for their indigenous customs and traditions. For it is only through self-knowledge and self-respect that they will be able to find the path to their own creative agency.

On Martí’s view, the key to the emancipation of Latin America (“the key to the Spanish American riddle”) is to be found in what he calls Nature and creation. Martí characterizes as “natural” all those resources that can be found in one’s surroundings and the exploitation of these resources according to the needs and interests of the people. In Martí’s writings the term natural is often used as synonymous with “consonant with one’s environment” or “faithful to one’s context.” As he uses the term, nature includes both human and material resources;19 its opposite is not culture but artifice: the unnatural is what results from accepting images, ideas, and models that do not fit the local reality. As Martí puts it: “The struggle is not between civilization and barbarity, but between false erudition and Nature” (1999, 113). On his view, it is very important that “the new Americans” are formed “in the direct study of nature” (1999, 118). They must study the natural elements of their own environments and learn to find themselves at home in their own cultural contexts. In order to achieve this, Martí argues, educational institutions

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19 Heavily influenced by Emerson, Martí’s concept of nature fits well in the American naturalist tradition. In important respects, it is reminiscent of the Deweyan concept of nature.
must undergo transformation and pay attention to the local realities: “The European university must bow to the American university. Our Greece must take priority over the Greece which is not ours” (1999, 114). Martí describes the intellectual leader that the American university should aim to produce as “a new real man schooled for these real times in critical philosophy” (1999, 116). But the intellectual revolution that should take place at the level of the university is only one component in the wider process of transformation of the social institutions and media that educate the people: “Newspapers, universities, and schools should encourage the study of the country’s pertinent components” (1999, 114).

Being in contact with the natural elements of one’s environment and being aware of the potentialities of one’s culture are the conditions of possibility for the form of genuine agency that Martí contrasts with imitation: what he calls creation. This is how he describes his faith in the youth of Latin America, a revolutionary generation that (he claims in 1891) has begun to be in touch with its own past and identity and to be capable of creative agency:

The frock coats are still French, but thought begins to be American. The youth of America are rolling up their sleeves, digging their hands in the dough, and making it rise with the sweat of their brows. They realize that there is too much imitation, and that creation holds the key to salvation. “Create” is the password of this generation. [1999, 117; emphasis added]

In Martí’s discussions of nature and creation we find a passionate defense of the thesis of local self-government. He emphasizes that the fundamental importance of this idea is due to the creative power that government and political leaders have: “In a new nation a government means a creator” (1999, 114). Given their especially powerful form of creative agency, it is crucial that political leaders study nature and acquire knowledge of and respect for their region’s history and ethnic diversity. On this depends the emancipation of Latin American republics: “Republics have paid with oppression for their inability to recognize the true elements of their countries, to derive from them the right kind of government. [. . . ] To know one’s country and govern it with that knowledge is the only way to free it from tyranny” (1999, 113–14). Martí describes the “natural statesman” as the one who knows the natural elements of his nation and the needs and interests of its people. On his view, good self-government “is nothing more than the balance of the country’s natural elements,” which makes it possible “to reach that desirable state where each man can attain self-realization” (1999, 113). This “balance of natural elements” can only be achieved through a critical reconstruction of the people’s experience. For, it is important to note, Martí’s political view is not a mere celebration of whatever is local, indigenous, and consonant with the folk culture. As Martí puts it: “Nations should live in an atmosphere of self-criticism” (1999, 117).
Martí’s view of self-government and political emancipation has been characterized as a form of Bolivarism.20 And indeed it is Bolívar who inspired Martí’s idea that the path to liberation can only be found by those who know and respect the history of Latin America and the cultural diversity of its peoples. In “Simón Bolívar” from 1893 Martí argues that Latin America needs its own political leaders who can envision and develop original forms of government adequate to the complex and diverse realities of Latin American republics. In this piece (which is a speech in honor of Bolívar delivered to the Latin American Literary Society of New York in 1893) Martí provides a balanced assessment of the Liberator, including both praise and critique. Although heavily influenced by Bolívar, Martí’s political views are far more pluralistic and contextualist. Martí explicitly argues against Bolívar’s idea of uniting the Latin American “countries of the revolution under a distant, central government”; and he defends a “multi-headed American revolution born of the desire for local self-government” (1999, 170).

On Martí’s pluralist and contextualist view, Latin America is composed of diverse local realities with different histories and ethnic roots. The question that immediately arises for this view is the following: Where does the unity of Latin Americans reside? If the peoples of Latin America exhibit such irreducibly diverse range of ethnic characteristics and cultural agencies, how are they united? The first thing to note here is that the only unity Martí’s view of Latin America can offer is the kind of unity that is formed by heterogeneous elements, a unity that does not suppress or erase but in fact requires differences, a unity through diversity.21

But what constitutes this unity? According to Martí, what unifies the diverse peoples of Latin America is a common experience that includes indigenous and colonial elements. The core of this common experience is the experience of oppression, of being oppressed and of fighting against oppression. Latin Americans are unified in the present by a shared past and a shared hope for the future. They find their roots in a set of interrelated indigenous and nonindigenous cultures that shared the experience of being under the yoke of a colonial power and came to form a common vision of emancipation and freedom. The unity of Latin Americans is, therefore, a political unity: they are unified by their common history of oppression and their common project of liberation. As Martí puts it: “The pressing need of Our America is to show itself as it is, one in spirit and intent, swift conquerors of a suffocating past, stained only by the enriching blood drawn from the scar left upon us by our masters” (1999, 119).

20 See Nuccetelli 2002, 203–4. It has also been argued that Martí’s view of Latin American identity is deeply indebted to Bolívar. See Zea 1988, 39.
21 This Bolivarian idea of unity through diversity is at the core of contemporary accounts of Hispanic identity. See Gracia 2000 and Medina 2003. As discussed above, this is also an idea that we find in Locke. See Locke’s essay “Unity Through Diversity” in Harris 1991, 133–38.
In order to carry out the project of liberation that unifies them Latin Americans need to know who they are: they have to develop a critical self-understanding and claim an identity that is formed through their free agency. This quest for self-mastery and cultural self-affirmation involves two equally important tasks that complement and support each other. The first task has already been discussed: it is to get to know Our America in all its historical and ethnic diversity, that is, to acquire knowledge of the different local realities that compose Latin America. The second task is to get to know the neighboring nations and cultures that are in contact with Latin America and relations with which can have an impact on its free agency and affect its future. Martí writes: “Nations that do not know one another should quickly become acquainted” (1999, 111). The rationale for the task of knowing one’s neighbors involves two distinct points. The first is the conceptual, dialectical point about identity examined above. As we saw, one’s identity is dialectically bound up with the identity of others; and this applies to collective identities as well as to the identities of individuals. Accordingly, knowing the collective identity of Latin Americans requires knowing the collective identity of non–Latin Americans. It is important for Hispanics to get to know the experience and identity of other ethnic groups in America that do not share their history, customs, and traditions. In this sense Martí calls our attention to “the difference in origins, methods and interests between the two halves of the continent” (1999, 118); and he emphasizes the “risk” that this difference poses to Latin Americans given the differential power of the two halves of the continent. In particular, Martí claims that “Our America’s greatest danger” is its “formidable neighbor” (1999, 119), the United States, which is capable of blocking revolutions and undermining local self-governments. And this brings us to the second, political point contained in the rationale for knowing one’s neighbors.

The dialectical point about the need for getting to know neighboring nations and cultures acquires a special political significance when it comes to power relations. This is why the need for knowing the United States is of special importance for Latin American republics. For after achieving independence from their colonizers, these republics live under the menace of another master, an even stronger superpower whose oppression has the potential to surpass in some respects that of the colonial power of previous centuries. This is the central thesis of “The Truth about the United States” from 1894. In this essay Martí argues that “in Our America it is imperative to know the truth about the United States”; and that to know this truth and to spread it constitute the “duty” of any “good American who sees the continent’s peace and glory secure only in the frank and free development of its various native entities” (1999, 174). According to Martí, ignorance of this truth is responsible for a superficial admiration and a harmful envy of the United States in Latin American republics. He warns that the “excessive love for the North” and the “vehement desire for progress” are
based on false images and can become blind and self-destructive. Given these dangers, Martí argues that it is “urgent [...] to put before Our America the entire American truth, about the Saxon as well as the Latin, so that too much faith in foreign virtue will not weaken us in our formative years with an unmotivated and baneful distrust of what is ours” (1999, 175). In order to correct the lack of knowledge about the United States in the Hispanic world and to fight its damaging implications, he suggests the addition of a permanent section in the New York–based magazine *Patria* devoted to “Notes on the United States.”

Martí repeatedly emphasizes the crucial importance of intercultural communication and mutual understanding between the Americas. The task for us Hispanics, he argues, is to repair not only our ignorance about foreign cultures but also their ignorance about our culture: we need to learn the truth about the people of the United States as much as they need to learn the truth about us. Martí remarks that in the United States Hispanics are known only through clichés and inaccurate images that do not come from the agency of Hispanics themselves. So, he argues, we Hispanics need to make ourselves known in our own terms, we need to dismiss misconceptions and prejudices about us so that “all the violence, discord, immorality and disorder” in the United States is no longer “blamed upon the peoples of Spanish America” (1999, 176). In other words (borrowed from Locke), we have to tear down the fiction of the Old Hispanic and introduce all Americans to the New Hispanic. Hispanics need to conquer their own cultural space. They need to conquer the freedom and opportunity to create their own self-image and to find their own voice in a genuine dialogue among equals with other ethnic groups in the Americas. Through the progressive acquisition of mutual understanding and the sharing of experiences it may be possible to create a common ground and even a common project between the Americas, eventually transcending the “us and them” dialectic altogether.

22 In a poetic and comic way Martí criticizes the uncritical admiration of U.S. ideas and the uncritical impulse to implement them in order to achieve a similar progress: this admiration and this impulse make people “blind to the fact that ideas, like trees, must come from deep roots and compatible soil in order to develop a firm footing and prosper, and that a newborn baby is not given the wisdom and maturity of age merely because one glues on its smooth face a mustache and a pair of sideburns. Monsters are created that way, not nations” (1999, 174).

23 Although Martí paints a dramatic picture of the implications of the mutual ignorance of the United States and Latin America, he nevertheless has an optimistic (perhaps too optimistic) vision of a common future for the Americas after these cognitive failures are repaired, a future without racial or intercultural animosity, a future of equality and social justice based on intercultural understanding and respect. He writes: “The scorn of our formidable neighbor, who does not know us, is Our America’s greatest danger. And since the day of the visit is near, it is imperative that our neighbor knows us, and soon, so that it will not scorn us. Once it does know us, it will remove its hands out of respect. One must have faith in the best in men and distrust the worst” (1999, 119).
I want to conclude by emphasizing the importance of Martí’s suggestion of the political unity that the Americas can achieve through intercultural communication and understanding. This suggestion springs directly from the pragmatist approach to ethnicity discussed and defended in this essay. While living in New York Martí realized that the United States was becoming a microcosm of the Americas and that, within the United States, it was all the more important that different ethnic and racial groups came to understand each other and to maintain open lines of communication among themselves. The pragmatist view of ethnicity developed in this essay offers an account of how the critical reconstruction of collective experience can lead to the empowerment of ethnic and racial groups, and how it can promote and facilitate the open dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures and races in the Americas. Dewey, Locke, and Martí are of one mind in arguing that ethnic and racial groups must acquire their own voices, exercise critical control over the products of their own agency, and enjoy the freedom and necessary resources for self-expression and cultural self-affirmation. The empowerment of America’s diverse ethnic and racial groups and the genuine and continuing dialogue among them are the preconditions for a better America.

Vanderbilt University
Department of Philosophy
Nashville, TN 37240
USA
jose.m.medina@vanderbilt.edu

24 It is important to note that Martí has a very negative concept of race, which contrasts with his positive concept of ethnicity. He holds that racial distinctions are fictions artificially created out of ignorance and for the purpose of oppression: “To insist on racial divisions [. . .] is to place obstacles in the way of public and individual happiness, which can only be obtained by bringing people together as a nation” (1999, 160). He argues, on the other hand, that ethnic distinctions are real and important, and that they can greatly contribute to the individual and collective development and self-realization of people. He warns us that ethnicity is often confused with race. For example, he says about “black men who proclaim their race” that “what they are really proclaiming is the spiritual identity that distinguishes one ethnic group from another” (1999, 161). In “My Race” from 1893 he argues for racial equality and contends that this equality will ultimately lead to the disappearance of racial distinctions. This is how he anticipates the thesis in “Our America”: “There can be no racial animosity, because there are no races. The theorist and feeble thinkers string together and warm over the bookshelf races which the well-disposed observer and the fair-minded traveler vainly seek in the justice of Nature where man’s universal identity springs forth from triumphant love and the turbulent hunger for life. The soul, equal and eternal, emanates from bodies of different shapes and colors” (1999, 119).
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References


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