A CRITIQUE OF MARTÍN ALCOFF’S IDENTITY POLITICS
ON POWER AND UNIVERSALITY
Tina Chanter

As philosophers we are in the business of attempting to formulate theories that help us to navigate the world effectively, and to reflect on it as incisively and as critically as we can. As such, part of our job is to assess how well certain concepts do the work we ask of them, and to propose alternatives if certain concepts prove to be untenable. Social and political philosophy is invested in finding the best conceptual tools available for, among other things, reflecting on and theorizing about the effect that constructs such as race, gender, sexuality, and class have on the way people live their lives. Linda Martín Alcoff is committed to the view that identity politics can ground effective critiques of racism and gender. Her understanding of identity politics is embedded in an account that urges us to rehabilitate concepts such as universal humanism, truth, and objectivity, and to accord to race and gender a fundamental status. In contrast to Martín Alcoff, theorists such as Judith Butler have provided trenchant critiques of identity politics. In the latter part of this essay, I will focus explicitly on Martín Alcoff’s critique of Butler, both because I think it seriously misrepresents Butler’s analysis, and because it is central to Martín Alcoff’s overall defense of identity politics. Before turning to the critique of Butler, I will argue that Martín Alcoff’s endorsement of universal humanism and her appeal to the foundational status of race and gender need to be brought into question. After specifying how Martín Alcoff understands race, and reviewing her own explication of identity politics, I will examine how the politics of identity has functioned historically, pointing out the limitations of its usefulness. Here I draw on the work of Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Elizabeth Spelman, among others. The main focus of my remarks will be to demonstrate that the notion of identity politics that Martín Alcoff espouses—namely, one that is committed to universality, truth, objectivity, and a version of foundationalism—lacks an appropriately nuanced conception of the operation of power.

Why We Need to be Wary of Invoking Universal Humanism, Truth, and Objectivity

In order to be intelligible as a subject or to be accorded full humanity, one has to qualify as a subject who is legible or comprehensible in terms of a set of ideals which historically have been articulated and interpreted by a privileged sector of society. Those who have legislated the meaning of humanity have espoused ideals that are ostensibly universal, such as equality and rationality, but in fact have had highly selective applicability. It turns out that some subjects have been more equal than others. As a case in point, while Enlightenment thinkers were able to advocate universal human rights, they were also able to justify certain exemptions, a practice that did not appear to compromise the alleged universality of their ideas. A series of racialized and sexist assumptions about the inherent inferiority of slaves, the primitive status of the colonized subject, or the irrationality of women cast doubt on their potential to realize the values that were taken to embody the highest virtues of humanity. Such doubt served as the pretext to deny rights to those whose capacity to be self-governing was put into question. To challenge such exclusions is not only to contest the specific deprivation of rights, it is also to call into question the agency of legitimation, which purports to extend universal rights, but which in fact reserves rights for a select group in a highly specific and discriminatory manner.

Such legitimation is not limited to legal or formal constraints. It also extends to patterns of institutional discrimination that dictate which activities are recognized as valuable, worthy, or reflective of the traits deemed to be properly human, and who is granted access to those activities. While certain sectors of the
population (often women and minorities) have typically been confined to activities that have not been highly valued or remunerated—housework, manual, and service labor, for instance—other demographic groups have enjoyed their freedom from such menial activities. Having been released from such activities, those sectors of the population have been able to engage in pursuits that have been construed as more fully human. Those who have been denied the opportunity to develop skills that are culturally valued—intellectual, artistic, entrepreneurial, legislative—have often been construed as naturally unsuited for those activities. At stake, then, is not just the effort to be recognized as a subject worthy of rights and opportunities, but also the effort to rework the very terms according to which recognition is granted or withheld.

The process of extending rights to subjects that were formerly denied such rights is at the same time a way of granting subjects legitimacy, an accommodation that functions through the variation of norms and through their consolidation. If it is granted that the extension of rights to certain subjects involves the reworking of norms, and if the norms by which one is granted recognition are a means of granting legitimacy to subjects, there is a need to attend to how the operation of power renders certain subjects intelligible, and others unintelligible.\(^2\) Once it is understood that whether one is recognized as a subject is bound up with normative assumptions about the viability of subjectivity, it should be clear that appeals to the “objectivity” or “truth” of values assumed to underwrite “universal humanism” (VI 209) are not merely beside the point, but that they obfuscate the need to demythologize the alleged neutrality of discourses that systematically favor some subjects over others.\(^3\) At the same time, it would be naïve to assume that power operates in such a way as to establish a clear hierarchy between those who have it and those who do not. Before developing this point, I will indicate in the next section some common ground between Martín Alcoff’s concept of race and my own, pointing to some slippage in her account, before reviewing her concept of identity points.

**Race as a Social Concept and Martín Alcoff’s Understanding of Identity Politics**

The following passage demonstrates an important area of agreement between Martín Alcoff’s understanding of race and my own. In her article “Philosophy and Social Identity,” she provides the following account of the social reality of race:

Race tends toward opening up or shutting down job prospects, career possibilities, available places to live, potential friends and lovers, reactions from police, credence from jurors, and presumptions by one’s students. Race may not correlate with clinal variations, but it persistently correlates with statistically overwhelming significance in wage levels, unemployment levels, poverty levels, and the likelihood of incarceration. As of 1992, black and Latino men working full-time in the U.S. earned an average of 68% of what white mean earned, while black and Latina women earned 59%. As of 1995, Latino and black unemployment rates were more than double that of whites.\(^4\)

It is worth noting that while in this 1997 article Martín Alcoff invokes not only the social reality of race, but also “phenotypic race” as “never completely absent” (76), in her later work, she has refined this position, I think correctly, so that she now construes the reality of race to be purely social:

I will take race to be a very real aspect of social identity, one that is marked on the body through learned perceptual practices of visual categorization, with significant sociological and political effects as well as a psychological impact on self-formation. All of this is true despite the fact that race is a historically variable phenomenon and subject to change. But changing the meanings of race is not susceptible to individual agency, only collective.\(^5\)

To the extent that Martín Alcoff presents race as an entirely social phenomenon I agree with her. I suspect that many other continental philosophers who have kept abreast of recent debates concerning the concept of race would also be sympathetic to the conception of race Martín Alcoff leans toward. I want to empha-
size this point, since I think there is an important slippage that is effected at one point in Martín Alcoff’s analysis that works to eclipse this common ground. She effects a slippage between (a) “anti-essentialists,” (b) “arguments against racial identity,” and (c) “anti-race arguments” (PRI 71), three ideas that I think it is crucial to understand as conceptually distinct from one another. Here is the context in which this slippage is effected:

If I did not have any sympathy for the anti-essentialist, my concern with the persistent paradox of the relevance of race would not be felt so strongly. It is because the arguments against racial identity have merit that the paradox is a paradox and not simply an error. But in the face of these anti-race arguments, we need a better position than one that merely relies on the withering away of racial categorization. (PRI 71)

In this passage, the implication is that those who argue against racial identity are espousing anti-race arguments. Yet this is far from the case. Many, like myself, who want to maintain the salience of race as a social category—and are therefore far from arguing against the significance of the concept of race (although we would certainly discredit any argument that tried to assert the biological reality of race)—nonetheless have serious reservations about identity politics, a concept that is central to Martín Alcoff. I therefore want to consider exactly what is at stake for Martín Alcoff in this term, and what is at stake for those who are not invested in the concept of “racial identity” and do not promote identity politics.

The idea of identity politics has become a highly contested term of late. Just as Martín Alcoff makes reclaiming truth her project (as we will see further), so she wants to reclaim identity politics. Let’s look briefly at the history of the term “identity politics”—and how it has devolved into a much more open-ended and less determinate notion, one that can apparently accommodate precisely the arguments that used to be its polar opposite. If one of the earliest reference points for the term was the Combahee River Collective, one of the first theorists to give a philosophical account of identity politics was Diana Fuss, who emphasizes that there is a “causal” relationship between identity and politics such that “identity necessarily [Fuss’s emphasis] determines a particular kind of politics.” Among others, in support or her point, Fuss cites Barbara Smith, who says, “we have an identity and therefore a politics” (ibid.). According to Fuss, “the term identity politics refers to the tendency to base [my emphasis] one’s politics on a sense of personal identity—as gay, as Jewish, as Black, as female” (97). She goes on to say, “Identity . . . has been endorsed . . . as a working theoretical base upon which to build a cohesive and visible political community” (97) and asks, is “identity politics” based on a “shared essence” (98)? It is worth noting that in “A Black Feminist Statement,” The Combahee River Collective associated identity politics with a politics that, they say, “comes directly out of our own identity,” but that they also issued one of the first calls for an “interlocking” analysis, and saw themselves as “struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression.” It is also important that Cherríe Moraga specifies that “the radical Feminist must extend her own ‘identity’ politics to include her ‘identity’ as oppressor as well” (quoted in ES 99), a statement that acknowledges that, even if someone is oppressed in certain respects, there might well be other respects in which, far from being oppressed, the same person might be positioned as privileged. This acknowledgment should clue us into one of the theoretical difficulties of making identity one’s central category of analysis. Insofar as the very concept of identity is associated with “unified, stable identities” (ES 100), we should be alerted to its potential dangers, namely, that it seems to militate against the idea that oppression occurs from multiple sources and multiple directions, and that not all those belonging to a group that identifies itself around one particular source of oppression or domination will be affected by other oppressive structures. So, for example, a white woman might be affected by sexism, but not by homophobia, or a black woman might be affected by racism, but not by classism, and so on. As Jodi Dean puts it, “the assumption that a particular identity dictates a particular politics overlooks internal differences, stifling diversity and dissent.”

Notwithstanding the history to which I have pointed, the term identity politics has been appropriated by theorists such as David Ingram...
and applied much more loosely, so that it refers simply to “a broad range of struggles in which identity is at least partly at stake.” Notice that the causal link that was explicitly espoused by the Combahee River Collective, by Smith, and emphasized by Fuss is now absent. In both Ingram and Martín Alcoff, what we find is a re-definition of the term identity politics, such that many of the objections that were first made against the term are now incorporated into their own understanding of it. So, for example, having first associated the critique of “the authentic subject conceived by humanism” with Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault, Martín Alcoff later distances herself from the idea of authenticity when she quotes Mohanty approvingly as follows: “Given a realist theory of social or cultural identity, [Mohanty] goes on to say, ‘experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities.’” This is just one example of many instances in Martín Alcoff’s work, where aspects of the very postmodern or poststructuralist theorists that she dismisses then find their way into her own account. Now, there is nothing wrong with redefining your position, but when a term like “identity politics” comes to operate so divergently from its original meaning that it is all but unrecognizable, it is legitimate to ask, why still call it “identity politics”? Are we still talking about the same thing? What is really at stake in the term?

With these questions in mind, let me turn to Martín Alcoff’s own understanding of the term. In “Philosophy and Social Identity,” Martín Alcoff embraces an “understanding of identity in terms of perspective” (PRI 74), which, she says, “suggests a definition of identity as a social location, a location within a social structure and marked vis-à-vis other locations which gives the identity its specificity” (ibid.). Let me turn to her earlier article, “Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,” to which Martín Alcoff directs the reader in a footnote “for further elucidation of this point” (PRI 174n29). Here we find a series of claims, in the first of which Martín Alcoff distances identity politics from the idea of objectivity, and understands it rather as problematizing the relation between identity and politics: “As I see it, the concept of identity politics does not presuppose a prepackaged set of objective needs or political implications but problematizes the connection of identity and politics and introduces identity as a factor in any political analysis” (CFPS 433). Notice how far this is from the causal relation so central to Fuss’s understanding of the term. Second, Martín Alcoff directs us toward positionality, which she understands as historical and in terms of non-essentialism, claiming that, “if we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure” (ibid.). Third, she reiterates the importance of understanding gender as position, and adds to her rejection of ahistoricism and essentialism a refusal of nature, biology, and universalism: “gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical, or essential and yet . . . gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically” (ibid.). Elaborating what it means “to identify women by their position within [a] network of relations” Martín Alcoff asserts that women’s “position within the network lacks power and mobility and requires radical change” (434) and follows this up by saying “it is simply not possible to interpret our society in such a way that women have more power or equal power relative to men” (435). Yet the purchase of the claim that women “lack power” depends upon which women we are talking about. What does it mean to claim that gender is not “universal, ahistorical, or essential” if not that some women are positioned differently in relation to their gender than others, and that race is a powerful way of positioning women differently? Martín Alcoff’s own more recent work on Latina women would presumably concede the following point—or even require its acknowledgement—namely, that privileged white women quite often have more power than Latino/as and other racialized minorities. If we take seriously Foucault’s analysis of power, and if we avoid stereotyping women as passive victims, then it is clear that to simply assert that women lack power in relation to men is hardly adequate. If power is not merely a monolithic, unilateral, prohibitive,
negative force, but rather strategic, local, multiple, and productive, and if we construe feminist activism in terms of sites of resistance, then we also need to be careful about making blanket statements that women “lack power,” since such statements tend to eclipse precisely the kind of intersectional analysis that Martín Alcoff, elsewhere, advocates.

Given Martín Alcoff’s evocation of a notion of race that relies on a social definition, it is instructive to note that Martín Alcoff is skeptical in this earlier article about relying on a purely social understanding of gender; in fact, she makes her unease about it a major part of her argument against poststructuralist (which she argues are nominalist) conceptions of gender: “If gender is simply a social construct, the need and even the possibility of a feminist politics becomes immediately problematic. What can we demand in the name of women if ‘women’ do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do? How can we speak out against sexism as detrimental to the interests of women if the category is a fiction? How can we demand legal abortions, adequate child care, or wages based on comparable worth without invoking the concept of ‘woman’” (CFPS 420)? Two related concerns surface in this passage, concerns that recur in Martín Alcoff’s work, which I want to follow up. The first is the idea of women’s mythical existence, and the second is the fictional status of the category of women.

Turning to two other articles, one on post-ethnic identity, and another in which Martín Alcoff offers a critique of Nancy Fraser, we find a development of these points. In “Against ‘Post-Ethnic’ Futures,” Martín Alcoff worries about the emphasis in thinkers such as Fraser, Wendy Brown, and (despite her earlier approval of him) Paul Gilroy, to whom she attributes the belief “that most oppressed identities were forged in their current articulations by the oppressors, not the oppressed.”19 She adds that for such theorists, “ethnic identity claims almost always involve a bad faith or inconsistency about their contingent social construction.” The suggestions that identities are forged by oppressors, rather than the oppressed, and that they involve bad faith, expand upon the idea that identity is mythical, an idea that Simone de Beauvoir famously elaborated in terms of the myth of woman. Against this view, Martín Alcoff tells us, “I am arguing for the objective nature of ethnic categories as against the idea that they are illusions foisted on us by faulty conceptual schemes” (APEF ms.5). Identity categories, then, are not mythical or illusory, but rather objective. Let me note here that their objectivity seems to run counter to the importance of perspective that we have seen Martín Alcoff explicitly endorse.

If Martín Alcoff is suspicious of the language of myth and illusion, she is also worried about the language of fiction and invention. For Fraser, on Martín Alcoff’s account, identities are “invented rather than real.”20 Picking up on her earlier argument, Martín Alcoff wants to emphasize the reality, rather than the fictional, illusory, or invented nature of identities. Martín Alcoff attributes to Fraser “the view that identity politics has an inevitable logic to it that destines it toward fracturing coalitions, toward border patrol around identity categories, toward internal conservatism and conformism.” (FRRI ms. 4). Let me again refer back to Fuss, whose account of identity politics raises similar questions.

What, then, are we left with as regards to the differences between Martín Alcoff’s understanding of identity politics, and the views from which she borrows, but from which she wants to dissociate herself? Positionality, perspective, and historical situatedness are all built into her understanding of identity politics, but she still espouses at least a limited form of objectivity, aligns herself with “realism” and appeals to “truth.”21 While I cannot go into the details of how exactly she understands realism, Martín Alcoff attributes to what she regards as the reality of race if not a metaphysical then certainly an ontological status. One of the questions Martín Alcoff’s appeal to truth leaves me with is the apparent inconsistency this presents with her appreciative assessment of Gilroy, in which Martín Alcoff observes: “Gilroy claims that a critique of modernity that is entirely immanent is insufficient. That is, a critique which uses the Enlightenment’s concepts of reason and liberation to critique its practices and its self-understandings will not go deeply enough” (PRI 74). Martín Alcoff does not mention that the notion of truth is also dear to the Enlightenment, and that, as such, it too would fall prey to
the argument about immanence. Surely, for the sake of consistency, Martín Alcoff should subject her own appeal to truth to the same argument? Yet, far from being prepared to put into question the value of appealing to truth for the same reasons that she approves of Gilroy’s gesture in relation to Enlightenment concepts of reason and liberation, Martín Alcoff repeatedly insists on the importance of “truth claim[s]” (PRI 68) not only in this article but throughout her work. In her article “Against Post-Ethnic Futures,” for example, Martín Alcoff says,

As Chandra Mohanty and others have shown, however, if we can only give plural and disjointed, non-competing and thus relativist histories which are not to be judged by their truth-value, we cannot hope to explain the intersections of identity by which diverse group experiences affect each other (Mohanty 1991).

In the same article, Martín Alcoff says, “I question whether any conclusions that we would draw from an approach that eliminates the question of truth could be as fully adequate as an approach that also raised the question of truth” (APEF 13).

In an article entitled “Reclaiming Truth”—as the title suggests—Martín Alcoff issues a resounding plea not to allow truth to fall by the wayside: “what about truth?” she intones, and goes on to criticize the “retreat from truth” in favor of “narrative, to be judged by its effects in the present on discourses and practices.”22 But, Martín Alcoff continues, distancing herself from the appeal to narrative, or rather encompassing that appeal within her own attempt to reclaim truth, “a narrative can be true or false: narratives tell a story about the world. Even fictional narratives offer accounts about true things indirectly: true ways in which human beings can respond to each other, can be affected by a given experience, can fall into trouble, or pull themselves out of trouble” (RT 15).

Rather than collapsing or reducing the value of narrative to that of philosophical, referential truth, my own view is that narrative illuminates philosophy precisely to the extent that it refuses to be reduced to philosophical categories. That is, narrative does not aspire to any of the concepts usually associated with truth, to objectivity, or universalism. It is precisely the idiosyncratic, the specificity, the singularity that it celebrates. If there is a sense in which we recognize the “truth” of a narrative, such truth has nothing to do with verisimilitude or referentiality as such—it is not that we are able to match the character or plot with some event that we know has really happened. Rather, a novel or a short story rings true in the sense that it strikes a chord with us, inflames our imagination, bringing to life characters previously unknown to us, transporting us to epochs, or countries, or regions unfamiliar to us. It might well be that a character resembles people we have met, people we know, or that a plot might trigger a memory. Yet the essential point, it seems to me, is not the appeal that narrative makes to truth in this trivial sense, but rather the ability that narrative has to transport us, its ability precisely to take us out of ourselves, beyond our everyday reality. The magic of a good novel is precisely the capacity it has to distract us from the problems we confront in daily life, its seductive power to impose on us its own reality, so that we lose ourselves in its narrative, and forget the tensions of the day.23 Any attempt to insist that the novel must also carry with it a function of enrichment, whether this amounts to confirming a truth we already know about the world, or showing us more clearly a truth that we only dimly gleaned before, will ultimately fall prey both to realist assumptions about philosophy and a realist view of art. Moralist arguments about the need for art to conform to an ethical worldview tend to go hand in hand with such views. At issue here in my view is the need to preserve the specificity of art and philosophy, not to assume a hierarchy between the two, whereby philosophy is higher than art, or art is higher than philosophy. The view that art can show us more adequately what philosophy can only attempt to capture subordinates philosophy to art, while the idea that what narrative is really trying to accomplish is an accurate or truthful rendition of what the world is really like makes art into the handmaiden of philosophy. In my view philosophers can learn from artists, but artists can also learn from philosophers, and this is precisely because they do not have the same aims, and therefore can mutually benefit from one another.

Of course the realism would not be a problem for Martín Alcoff, who explicitly endorses
it. The question this leaves me with is what does the appeal to realism mean? Is it anything more than an appeal to the “realities of social conditions” (APEF ms. 5), and if so, in what does it consist? Towards the beginning of this response I elicited what I take to be some common ground between us, namely the social reality of race, and then I briefly explored the ways in which Martín Alcoff exhibits ambivalence about the social reality of race (and, in her earlier work, about gender). I noted a slippage in her work that works against acknowledging this common ground, and in my discussion of her conception of identity politics I identified areas in which Martín Alcoff drives a wedge between her own analysis and those of poststructuralists, from whom she borrows, even while she exhibits a dismissive attitude toward them. In the remainder of this essay I will first review how the term identity politics has functioned for other theorists, paying attention both to its history and to its limitations, and then turn my focus to Visible Identities, which further exhibits the problem I have already identified in Martín Alcoff’s work, namely a failure to reap the consequences of Foucault’s understanding of the dynamics of power.

The Uses and Abuses of Identity Politics

Having outlined Martín Alcoff’s understanding of identity politics, I now want to turn attention to its historical application, and to how it has functioned for other theorists. In particular, I shall draw on Williams Crenshaw’s discussion of identity politics, both because it highlights the usefulness and the limitations of this approach, and because it serves to contextualize historically how such politics have functioned. In what follows, my aim is to consolidate the claim I have already introduced, namely that the dynamics of power need to be attended to, and that such attention undermines attempts to resuscitate any notion of universality that appeals to objectivity and truth.

Given that identity politics are intrinsically related to struggles to achieve specific rights, they have necessarily tended to compartmentalize race, gender, and sexuality as abstract categories. Such abstraction carries with it the danger of oversimplification, such that it is difficult to take account of differences at a number of levels. If a group of western women organizes around the identity “women,” that identity tends by default to privilege middle class, white and heterosexual identity, and to erase the significance of experiences of working class, raced, and gay women as non-normative. Unless racialized, classed, and sexualized differences are explicitly and thematically emphasized and theorized, dominant conceptions will play themselves out within feminism, replicating the broader social structures at work in society. To organize around women’s identity, and to treat race, class, and sexuality as if they functioned neutrally, is therefore to invisibly privilege those women for whom race, class and sexuality are not particularly problematic, and to ignore the fact that “many women’s experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class.” What is called for, then, is not an analysis that treats identities as if they are separable from one another, or “mutually exclusive” of one another, in which one is forced to choose which identity one organizes around—race, class, gender, or sexuality—but rather an “intersectional” analysis. Identity politics are understood in terms of individuals organizing themselves politically around a group identity in order to lobby for rights. Through a process of “politicization” women who have been victimized by domestic violence or rape, for example, have organized as groups, speaking out, protecting, and empowering themselves. By identifying with other women in similar situations, women have been able to give voice to their experience, gain strength from one another, and construe their situations not as merely personal aberrations, but as part of a structural pattern of domination. As Williams Crenshaw points out, in an analysis that explores both the strengths and the weaknesses of identity politics, identity politics can render public that which was previously seen as private or familial: “recognizing as social and systemic what was formerly perceived as isolated and individual has also characterized the identity politics of African-Americans, other people of color, and gays and lesbians, among others” (MM 279).

Implicit in such struggles for political rights, precisely insofar as a group identifies it-
self as lacking certain rights to which it aspires—the right to live lives free of violence, or free of discrimination on the basis of one’s sexed or raced identity or one’s sexuality, is the ambition to eradicate or abolish the identity around which one is organizing. At least the elimination of one’s identity becomes a goal to the extent that it has been used as a ground of oppression. At the same time, inasmuch as group identification becomes a source of power, strength, and pride, one does not want to abandon one’s identity, but rather to embrace and celebrate it. Notice, however, that as soon as the positive aspects of identity politics begin to transform from a negative specification as the ground on which to mount claims to obtain political rights of which a given group is currently deprived to a more positive conception, a tension begins to emerge, one that I would argue impinges on the effectiveness of identity as an organizing category, at the same time as it bears witness to the ways in which a subject exceeds the logic of non-contradiction. The shift from construing identity as a common ground on the basis of which to assert some kind of rights claim to construing identity as a cause for celebration is at the same time a shift in how the concept of identity is understood. Blackness, queerness, or intersexuality is no longer to be perceived as derogatory, as grounds for discrimination, marginalization, or exclusion, but as something to embrace and of which to be proud.

This shift is significant. Its significance is bound up with the contestation that is enacted with prevailing power regimes, a contest that is not limited to offering a new description of identity. What is being contested is not merely the negative valence of the description; it is not simply that by offering a new, positive, description of myself I am opposing myself to another, negative description. By redefining myself in terms that oppose a previous description, I am also contesting the power of that description to define me. Two significant factors of this project of contestation are important. First, I am contesting the terms of the debate, and in doing so, I am attempting to change the prevailing terms by which my identity is posited by others. My intervention is not limited to a gesture that merely claims, “I am not x, rather I am y,” but extends to a normative claim about the power invested in those who have hitherto defined me. This intervention is an attempt to change the terms of the debate, it is an attempt to alter the power structures that have facilitated the detrimental ways in which negative descriptions have functioned to contain me. Second, once the oppositional nature of this intervention is acknowledged, it becomes clear that the power of others to name or designate me as inferior on the basis of my race, class, gender, or sexuality is being put into question. What is uncovered, then, is a history of oppression, a temporal dynamic that I am acknowledging as having had the power to constitute me in certain ways that have been detrimental, but which I am at the same time attempting to subvert. It becomes clear, then, that in the very gesture by which I agree to recognize myself as a subject that has been constituted in pernicious ways by a discourse that is imposed upon me, I am at the same time engaged in a struggle to find the resources by which to contest that discourse. My acknowledgment functions therefore both as a way of exposing the naturalized status that hegemonic discourse had acquired over me, and as a way of denaturalizing that discourse, which—from being universal—is rendered contingent, and historical. Yet, so long as we conceive of this dynamic in ways that remain oblivious to the danger of simply reversing the dynamic, such that I suspend an oppressive gesture to contain me only by claiming that I have the power to define the other in relation to me, and not vice versa, we refuse to think about the ways in which power often reinvents itself by finding new targets. So long as the aggrieved group insists on casting itself as either innocent and devoid of power, or as all-powerful if it manages to successfully oppose its adversaries, the traditional power dynamics will not have been transformed, but only reiterated. As often as not, the social progress of one identity group comes at the expense of the oppression of another; power does not dissipate, but it shifts its contours. This is why it is wise to be skeptical about narratives of “progress” (see VI 209), to ask whose progress is at stake and who pays the cost of that progress. To imagine that feminism has benefited all women equally is to ignore the historical record, which shows that it has benefited some women more than others, and that its beneficiaries have tended to

ON POWER AND UNIVERSALITY

51
be those not burdened by racism, classism, and other salient structurally and institutionally embedded prejudices. To imagine that anti-racism has succeeded across the board, is to naively discount class, sexuality, or gender as having played no role in determining which voices are heard, and which are drowned out.

To claim that race and gender are fundamental is to repeat this error in a way that remains blind to the dynamics of class and sexuality.

In challenging negative stereotypes about race and sexuality, the move to subvert whatever negative connotation a particular, marginalized identity might have had is a statement that says: blacks (or women, or gays) are not what you thought we were. We are proud to be what we are—and what we are is something very different from how you imagined us. Our identities are not what you took them to be. We are not inferior, degenerate types that fall short of the idealized (white, middle class, heterosexual) norm. We are just as good as you—just as capable of making informed judgments, just as able to successfully execute or perform a job/profession and therefore deserving of equal pay for such execution, just as worthy of marriage. As Martín Alcoff’s appeal to “universal humanism” makes clear, the rhetoric of sameness is what drives such arguments. The claim amounts to a concession: we might be black, we might be women, we might be gay, but in all important respects, we are just like you.

Here the difficulties of identity politics, especially versions that embrace “universal humanism,” begin to emerge. While embracing womanhood might have served as a crucial organizing platform for women in the early days of feminism, the ostensible universality of such appeals even in these early stages of feminism proved to be compromised. Just as the earlier declaration of universal rights turned out to enfranchise only white, male landholders, so the embrace of feminism was limited to a highly circumscribed and privileged constituency. The insistence with which identity politics formulates a common or universal ground of sameness appears to cause just as many problems as it solves. Its replication of strategies that purport to apply to all members of a given group equally, but in fact systematically privilege certain members of the designated group cannot be disguised by disclaimers that concede a range of “mistakes” associated with identity politics, but refuse to acknowledge the way in which such mistakes are structurally built into models that embrace universality. To acknowledge the possibility of tendencies such as “internal policing for uniformity, dehistoricized, and rigid accounts of identity, the refusal to consider the possibility of coalition across differences” (VI 36) but to insist that they do not “necessarily” follow from identity politics is to ignore the work that universality is doing for this account. Even if the appeal to universality is relaxed, we still have to contend with the assertion that race and gender are “fundamental”—a claim that militates against construing the significance of sexuality or class as equally important. To concede that “Social identities can and do operate as interest groups” but to insist that this is “not what identities essentially are” (VI 41) is to divorce one’s understanding of identity politics from the history of struggles that have delineated them.

Part of the problem is the vagueness with which the term “identity” functions for Martín Alcoff in *Visible Identities*. Whereas in her earlier work it was possible to adumbrate her conception of identity, in *Visible Identities*—although identity is the central and organizing term of the book—it functions so amorphously that its coherence seems to be achieved as a result of the attempt to mount a defense against anyone who has criticized identity politics, rather than as a philosophically productive concept.31 Given their proliferation, it would be impossible to review the multifarious claims that are made about identity. Suffice it to say that to have an identity is simply to “exist,” but it is also to “represent our material ties to historical events and social structures” (VI 287). At the same time, it is said to be a concept that is used in “common practice” (VI 290), and as such it reflects “what many people believe” (VI 7). The problem with such vagueness is that a history of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity has characterized beliefs about identity, so that how a term functions in common practice can be dramatically at odds with how it might be mobilized as a productive concept within social and political philosophy.

Precisely to the extent that identity politics insists “we are all the same,” that gender (or
race, or sexuality) is the relevant aspect of a group’s identity, the aspect around which a group organizes itself, they also and necessarily fall short of reflecting the complexity of either a given group or a given individual’s lived experience. As Wendy Brown puts it, “identity politics permits a sense of situation—and often a sense of filiation and community—without requiring profound comprehension of the world in which one is situated.” Identity politics necessarily oversimplifies the subjects it tries to represent. While identities have become rallying points around which groups have mobilized in order to lobby for rights, they are also liable to be conceptualized as discrete from one another in ways that ignore the lived complexity of race, gender, and sexuality, often forcing a black woman, for example, to choose which aspect of her experience—her race or her gender—is the most important. The expectation that such a choice should be made is misguided.

As theorists such as Elizabeth Spelman have shown, attempts to answer the question as to whether racial or gender-based oppression is more fundamental are misconceived. Such attempts assume that racism and sexism function independently of one another, as if sexism and racism had “different ‘objects,’” when in fact the experiences of black women demonstrate the inadequacy of continuing to articulate racial and gender oppression as if they were parallel to one another, as if they could be compared to one another, or added on to one another. To suggest that “Black women experience one form of oppression, as Blacks (the same thing Black men experience) and that they experience another form of oppression, as women (the same thing white women experience)” is to fail to account for the fact that the very ideas that have passed muster as feminine stereotypes are themselves infused with racial assumptions. The stereotypical “image of the ‘feminine’ woman as fair, delicate, and in need of support and protection by men” was itself a traditional image that applied much more readily to white, western women than it did to the experience of African American women. Quoting Angela Davis, Spelman points out that “the alleged benefits of the ideology of femininity did not accrue” to the Black female slave—she was expected to toil in the fields for just as long and hard as the Black male was (GR 270). The sexism to which a female slave was subjected is not something that can be analytically separated from the racism to which she was subjected, but was rather informed by racism. For the black woman, then, “what sexism means and how it works is modulated by racism,” and “what racism means is modulated by sexism” (276). This modulation makes the sexism that is experienced by black women qualitatively different from that experienced by white women, and the racism black women experience qualitatively different from the racism experienced by black men, a qualitative difference that resists an additive model. When Martín Alcoff speaks of black and white workers as being exploited to different “degrees” (VI 27), she appears not to have moved beyond the additive model. Similarly, the claim that both race and gender are “fundamental” (VI 16) neglects to articulate the dynamic whereby one informs the other, such that Spelman calls for, and fails to conceive of how sexuality and class modulate these “fundamental” aspects of identity. Although Martín Alcoff problematizes the use of analogies, acknowledging that we “cannot make simple analogies” (VI 286), she repeatedly falls back on them, appealing to the “commonality between raced and gendered identities” (VI 288), even going as far as to title a section “Is Sex like Race?” (VI 164–66). Indeed the entire project of Visible Identities is animated by a structural, analogical argument that compares race and gender, while dissociating these aspects of identity from class. To claim that “class works through,” rather than alongside, “race, ethnicity, and gender,” which “remain the most telling predictors of social power and success” (VI viii) is inadequate to a genuine discourse of intersectionality. If “race and gender” remain the “primary focus” (VI 10), then class and sexuality will necessarily be secondary, inferior, or subordinate. This kind of foundationalist discourse is precisely what Butler, Spelman, Davis, and Williams Crenshaw, along with many other race and gender theorists, have been trying to push beyond for a long time.

The tensions that arise from retaining an exclusive emphasis of one aspect of identity come into sharper focus when the consequences of how such an approach can lead organizations that are ostensibly devoted to im-

ON POWER AND UNIVERSALITY

53
proving all women’s lives to operate according to policies that discriminate against non-white women. Williams Crenshaw discusses such a policy decision that might well have proved disastrous for a particular woman, a Latina who was in danger, but who was denied access to a women’s shelter due to a policy that required women to participate in a support group. Since it was judged that this particular woman lacked the requisite English language skills to effectively participate in such a group, she was not admitted to the shelter—a decision that might have cost her life. When battered women shelters are administered in ways that fail to accommodate the diverse needs of women, the issue of identity politics holds significance that goes well beyond academic niceties. It can become quite literally, as Williams Crenshaw shows, a matter of life and death, a matter of “who will survive—and who will not” (MM 289). Williams Crenshaw calls for an intersectional approach that fosters coalitions, a call that is intended to ameliorate the sometimes disastrous effects of failing to attend to diverse aspects of identity and to how they inform and modulate one another.

While Williams Crenshaw argues for the retention of identity politics, while at the same time calling for its modification by way of an intersectional approach, her own argument brings to light problems that appear insurmountable, and which suggest that the category of identity cannot do the work feminism and other movements intended to combat oppression require of it. “With particular regard to problems confronting women of color, when identity politics fail us, as they frequently do... it is because the descriptive content of... categories and the narratives on which they are based have privileged some experiences and excluded others” (MM 299). Given the limitations of identity politics, the options seem to be either to contest the exclusivity and privilege of the categories and narratives utilized, or, more radically, to contest the very concept of identity, as itself in need of critique. If theorists such as Williams Crenshaw and Martín Alcoff adopt the first approach, theorists such as Butler and Brown adopt the second, suggesting that identity is itself an effect of regulatory norms, and that the demand for a coherent, unified, and stable subject of feminism is a demand that polices gender in a way that renders unintelligible genders that do not conform to heteronormative assumptions.

A Response to Martín Alcoff’s Critique of Butler

Judith Butler is represented in Martín Alcoff’s account as a theorist who thinks that identity functions oppressively, that it is a constraint. Although Martín Alcoff addresses other aspects of critiques of identity (see VI 80), and discusses other theorists who problematize identity politics (VI 28–36), she singles out for special attention the view that identities are basically forms of “constraint” (VI 287). Martín Alcoff makes Butler representative of those who critique identity as “inherently constraining on individual freedom because it is imposed from the outside” (VI 44). Not only does Martín Alcoff characterize Butler’s “critique of social identities” as if it amounted to a rejection of the idea that such identities are “imposed on the individual;” Martín Alcoff goes as far as suggesting that Butler’s work is pathological in its desire for “the foundational fantasy of absolute autonomy” (VI 66). The “pathology that Butler’s work seems to exhibit... is the desire for such autonomy that structures and motivates her critique of social identities” (VI 66). For Martín Alcoff, “The bottom line for the postmodern approach to identity”—of which she takes Butler to be exemplary (without addressing the fact that the desire for autonomy is hardly characteristic of postmodern thinkers)—“is that identities are subjugating and cannot be a cornerstone of progressive politics” (VI 79). Engaging in a debate about whether or not Butler’s work exhibits a pathological desire for absolute autonomy would be in bad taste, particularly when no evidence is adduced for the suggestion that it does. Rather than deploying such counterproductive tactics, I will simply allow the comments about pathology to stand for themselves, and limit myself to the less grandiose and hyperbolic claims that Martín Alcoff makes.

Butler explicitly distances herself from the terminology that Martín Alcoff attributes to her, including the apparently innocuous term “individual” (PLP 11): “It makes little sense to treat ‘the individual’ as an intelligible term if individuals are said to acquire their intelligi-
bility by becoming subjects. Paradoxically, no intelligible reference to individuals or their becoming can take place without a prior reference to their status as subjects” (PLP 11). We have seen how, in order to acquire legitimacy, subjects must conform to the prevailing norms of intelligibility, an imperative that might require a contestation of those norms. At the same time, as we will see further, norms do not simply compel, constrain, or enforce; they also produce, enable, and facilitate.

Butler rarely uses the term identity. When she does it is to point out that the “singular notion of identity” is “a misnomer,” or to point to the “necessary limits of identity politics.” She calls for a “critique of the categories of identity that contemporary juridical structures engender, naturalize, and immobilize” (GT 7). In fact, Butler states explicitly that “the identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics” (GT 8), suggesting that identity itself is an “effect of a regulatory practice” (GT 24). Butler suggests that we need to be wary of embracing identity categories even when we do so for the purposes of liberation: “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.” If there is an anxiety about being categorized, about the confining discourse of identity politics, underlying this anxiety is a questioning about the nature of power. To acquiesce to a label that defines one’s identity is to risk being colonized, and therefore stabilized, in the name of an apparently liberating politics. What is at stake is not only that a new kind of policing might prove to be just as confining as the discourse from which it takes itself to be liberated, but the rethinking of the very dynamics of power.

Rather than employing terms such as identity, then, Butler prefers terms such as subjectivity and subjectivation. As she points out, the latter term is a translation of assujetissement (PLP 11), and it is precisely the double valence of this term that Butler exploits. Power is understood both as that which is “exerted on a subject” and as that which is “assumed by a subject” (PLP 11). The very idea that Martín Alcoff takes to be the governing characteristic of Butler’s critique of identity politics, namely, that identity is constraining, far from being the last word Butler has to say on the subject, conforms rather to the traditional conception of power that Butler, along with Foucault to some extent (although Butler pushes him on precisely this point), seeks to go beyond. Indeed, a major project of her work is to demonstrate the inadequacy of precisely the assumptions about the operation of power that Martín Alcoff attributes to her. Specifying this negative conception of power as merely partial, Butler points also to the productive, facilitating, or enabling aspect of power when she says, “We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegated to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are” (PLP 2). Power is not merely subordinating, it is also formative of subjects.

Butler invokes a Foucauldian inspired model of the subject to argue that the subject of feminism is not given in advance but is produced as a fiction, which then becomes naturalized. Subjects are legitimated according to regimes of power that operate in ways that privilege maleness, whiteness, and heterosexuality. Subjects who fail to conform to these standards to which legitimacy accrues become culturally illegible or incoherent. The very idea of gender identity is thus achieved performatively, and the naturalized status that certain identities acquire needs to be subjected to “a critical genealogy of its own legitimating practices” (GT 7).

I hope to have made it clear why Butler thinks it is necessary to go beyond a politics that is based on the demand for “visibility” and “recognition,” a demand that is “haunted by an inassimilable remainder” (PLP 29). It is not enough for subjects to become visible or to be recognized, where previously they remained invisible and unrecognized, but the very terms according to which visibility and recognition are granted must undergo revision. To under-
stand this is to obviate appeals to truth, objectivity, universality, and foundationalism, appeals that assume that such concepts remain uncontaminated by their history, a history that has operated in exclusionary ways. The ways in which subjects remain in excess of a power that is not fully determinative of them, nor of which they are fully determinative (see PLP 17), marks both the inability of power to specify the subject exhaustively and the ability of the subject to take up, reshape, and redirect power so that power assumes “another form and direction” (PLP 21). To the extent that advocates of identity politics remain beholden to the redirection of power, they acquiesce to its operation, with all the attendant risks that accompany such reiterations.

Let me end by gesturing toward why the language of identity politics and the politics of recognition is inadequate by citing a couple of passages from Patchen Markell’s *Bound by Recognition*:

the root of injustice in relations of identity and difference is not identity as such but rather the effort to make identity—the as-yet-unfinished and unpredictable story of one’s life—into the ground of an impossible sovereignty over one’s own future.40

While the politics of recognition is . . . admirably devoted to the goal of overcoming injustice, it tends to treat injustice simply as a systematic failure to cognize and respect the identity of the other” and “fails to acknowledge the possibility that those failures of cognition and respect are . . . driven in the first instance by the project of securing one’s own independence or sovereignty rather than by ignorance of, or mere malice toward, others.41

What I find helpful about Markell’s analysis is that, rather than focus on identity, he focuses on a structural problem, and that is the illusion of sovereignty that underlies such concepts as identity, which, try as we might to divorce them from the philosophical apparatus that gave rise to them, are ensconced in atomistic assumptions that make it very hard, if not impossible, to make them work as effectively in discourses concerned with relieving social oppression as some of us might wish them to be.42

ENDNOTES

1. While Martín Alcoff acknowledges that “universalist humanism was based on a supposedly innate but unevenly developed capacity to reason” and as such has been implicated in “colonialist arrogance, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 274, she wants to retain the idea of a universalist humanism. Yet at the same time she wants to supplement this appeal by pointing to the importance of variables, most fundamentally that of race (see ibid., 278). Henceforth cited as VI.

2. The fact that Martín Alcoff sees no contradiction in embracing universal humanism while at the same time espousing the “ineliminable importance of culture and history and the context of power” (*Visible Identities*, 209) raises the question of what universal humanism could possibly mean—its content appears to have been emptied out to such an extent that it is all but impossible to specify, beyond establishing that there are “connections” (278) between humans, and that race is the most important one.43

3. Martín Alcoff equivocates in her appeal to universality, sometimes embracing it, and at other times distancing herself from it. It is hard to see the slippage that occurs by embracing it in some regards, but not in others as anything other than an acknowledgement, albeit not one that is thematized, of the redundancy of the appeal. See for example *Visible Identities*, 288.


13. The article is included in Visible Identities in a reworked form. In this version, the following is added “and argues for a reflexive analysis of how any given identity may affect one’s action, beliefs, and politics” (147).

14. It is worth noting that there is some equivocation over the question of objectivity. In another article, Martín Alcoff states, “I am arguing for the objective nature of ethnic categories as against the idea that they are illusions foisted on us by faulty conceptual schemes.” “Against ‘Post-ethnic’ Futures,” 5. Private manuscript; henceforth cited as APEF.

15. This sentence is rewritten as follows in Visible Identities: “If we combine the concept of identity politics with a conception of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of the subject as non-essentialized and emergent from historical experience and yet objectively located in describably social structures and relations” (Visible Identities, 147).

16. In Visible Identities, Martín Alcoff recasts this claim as follows: “Gender identity is not exhaustively determined by biology; it is not ahistorical or universally the same. Thus there is no gender essence all women share. But gender is, among other things, a position one occupies and from which one can act politically” (147–48).

17. In Visible Identities, the first part of this quotation remains in tact (116), while the second part is deleted.


20. “Fraser on Redistribution, Recognition, and Identity,” private manuscript, 4. Henceforth cited as FRRI.

21. Also see the discussion of ontology in “Philosophy and Racial Identity,” 69.


23. This is where Levinas’s view of the work of art is valuable, although I do not necessarily endorse all his views on art.

24. In the previous section I referred to Diana Fuss, and by doing so, I might be said to have stacked the deck against identity politics, insofar as she provides a critique of it. By focusing in this section on Williams Crenshaw, who utilizes the concept but at the same time acknowledges its shortcomings, my intention is to round out my account of identity politics. My hope is both to show why identity politics has been taken seriously, and to demonstrate that its inherent problems make it imperative that any appeal to it is accompanied by a genuinely intersectional approach. My argument is that the adoption of such an approach will demonstrate the need to move beyond the terms of identity politics.


26. While Martín Alcoff calls for an intersectional analysis, as we will see, such an analysis is compromised by her appeal to the “fundamental” status of race and gender.


28. Butler says that “agency may well consist in opposing and transforming the social terms by which it is spawned” (ibid., 29).

29. This is what is at stake in what Butler refers to as the “temporal paradox” (ibid., 30).

30. This is one way of showing why Martín Alcoff’s claim that Butler’s approach is “ahistorical” is
misguided. Butler is not simply taking over theories from Althusser or Foucault, and still less is she rendering them ahistorical. Rather, she is employing certain ideas of theirs, reframing them, and mobilizing them in a way that not only applies them to political problems that they themselves did not engage, but in doing so she is showing how even their own theoretical interventions are liable to succumb to a process of naturalization.

31. In contrast to Manuel Castells, for example, who distinguishes between the following different senses of identity, “legitimizing identity,” “resistance identity” and “project identity,” Martín Alcoff makes numerous claims about identity, which she understands in a wide variety of ways at different points in her text, without clarifying how she is using the term. See Castells, The Power of Identity, vol. 2: The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 8.


33. Martín Alcoff would contest that her notion of identity politics is based on envisaging aspects of identity as discrete from one another, but as we will see, her analogical treatment of race and gender assumes their separation, and thus attests to the fact that her account relies on precisely the mutual exclusion of these concepts that at another level her discourse refutes.


35. Ibid.


37. While Martín Alcoff does not cite Butler’s Gender Trouble, and thus does not engage with the critique Butler provides of identity politics in this early work, she makes the claim, without giving any textual reference for it, that for Butler “identity is one’s public self, based on publicly recognized categories, whereas subjectivity is one’s lived self, or true self, or thinking self, and so on” (Visible Identities, 78). Yet, at the same time, Martín Alcoff critiques Butler as if she were discussing identity when in fact Butler’s discussion refers to the subject.


39. Martín Alcoff acknowledges that Butler draws on the term subjectivation (Visible Identities, 76), she does not allow the nuances of this term, or the uses Butler makes of it, to compromise her view that Butler is an example of those who think that social identities are “simply foisted on people from the outside” (ibid., 287).


41. Ibid., 112.

42. There are many issues that could have been taken up here, but which I have had to forgo due to space limitations. These include the slippage effected in Martín Alcoff between acknowledgment and recognition in Hegel, and the failure to reap the implications of a theory of interpellation for identity.