

**Barbie Builds a Multicultural Center:  
The Problem of Commodification, Racial Inequity, and  
Social Justice in Late Capitalism**

by Hermon George, Jr., Ph.D.

Professor of Africana Studies

University of Northern Colorado

Greeley, Colorado

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**I. Introduction**

According to author Ann du Cille, Americans buy Barbie dolls at the rate of one every second.<sup>1</sup> Du Cille recounts that the doll was originally modeled after a German-made doll named “Bild Lilli,” that Barbie, first sold in 1959, deliberately blurs the line between child’s play and adult sex fantasy, and that, if Barbie were life-size, her measurements would be 36-18-33, and that she would not have enough body fat to menstruate regularly.<sup>2</sup>

Though Barbie’s critics have long panned the doll’s alleged negative influence on the development of self-esteem among little girls, I am interested in a different aspect of the doll’s history.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, in response to the 1960’s era challenge of Black Power, Mattel—Barbie’s maker—introduced a line of black dolls. First came “Colored Francie” in 1967, introduced as Barbie’s “MODern younger cousin.” Then, “Christie,” Barbie’s friend, introduced in 1968, selling until 1985. In 1980, Mattel introduced black dolls called “Barbie.” Finally, in 1991, Mattel introduced “Shani,” a Barbie-like black doll, her friends “Asha,” and “Nichelle,” and their male friend “Jamal,” in 1992.<sup>4</sup>

However, du Cille maintains that Mattel, in manufacturing black dolls, does not, can not, and does not want to reproduce real blackness but only “certain signifiers” of blackness that can be made marketable—thick lips, broader noses, wider hips. Since black Barbies are made from the same mold as white Barbies, du Cille contends that Mattel, and big business generally,

thrive[s] on a heterogeneity that is cheaply reducible to its lowest common denominator—an assembly-line or off-the-rack difference that is actually sameness mass-reproduced in a variety of colors, flavors, fabrics, and other interchangeable options.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to expressing a deep skepticism as to whether genuine difference can *ever* be reproduced in the marketplace, du Cille notes that *the profit motive* constrains corporate initiatives to reproduce difference. In doll-making, one-of-a-kind, limited edition dolls can cost from several hundred to \$20,000.<sup>6</sup> Real world heterogeneity is expensive. So, corporations like Mattel settle on a strategy using “reproducible denominators” to represent heterogeneity.<sup>7</sup> Mattel’s black dolls are used to represent multiculturalism in an “additive [advertising] campaign that augments but does not necessarily alter the Eurocentric status quo.”<sup>8</sup>

Du Cille also observes that American society, like American corporations, has failed to resolve “America’s pre-eminent national narrative,” race. Instead, Americans have settled for “the commodification of alterity—the selling and buying of difference.”<sup>9</sup> The unsuitability of this approach should be obvious: making Barbie black neither resolves those issues associated with her abnormally thin, contradictorily sexualized plastic body (i.e., a fully formed torso and a genital-less bottom), nor answers questions about the authenticity of representations of blackness which employ stereotypes (i.e., “signifiers”).

Similarly, representations of multiculturalism which rely upon merely enhancing the American status quo are unlikely to resolve basic questions of social justice. Rather, a productive approach to multiculturalism will necessarily entail the *redefinition* of basic terms of the American social contract: equality, justice, community, and democracy. Such an approach may be described as *transformative*.

## **II. “Inclusive Exclusion” at UNC: A Special Kind of Diversity**

Diversity at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) has “a long, troubled history.”<sup>10</sup> Though Afro-Americans and Latinos attended UNC as early as the 1920s (UNC was established as a State Normal School in 1889), serious university-wide initiatives (after several name changes, State Normal School became the University of Northern Colorado in 1970) aimed at racial diversity did not begin until the 1960s.

For example, the Department of Black Studies was organized on 1969. A baccalaureate degree in Black Studies was approved in 1972. In 1981, the department was reduced to a program, and combined with Women’s Studies and Anthropology. The first doctorate-in-hand, full-time tenure-track appointments in the unit did not occur until 1985. Departmental status was regained in 1991, and a name change, to Africana Studies, was effected in 1994.

*Throughout the unit’s entire history, it has been consistently underfunded and understaffed.* It has been included as a part of the university’s nomenclature, but excluded from access to key decision-making arenas of budget and staffing. This form of “inclusive exclusion” typifies the approach to multiculturalism and diversity favored by institutions and businesses. Real power and access remain safely out of the hands of people of color, while their mere presence is trumpeted in corporate brochures and literature as important signs of diversity.<sup>11</sup>

The brief history of Black Studies at UNC recounted above recapitulates the history of every major racial or gender diversity initiative at UNC: the Hispanic Studies Department, the Women’s Studies Program, and the four cultural centers—the Cesar Chavez Center, the Marcus Garvey Center, the Asian/Pacific Americans Student Services Center, and the Native American Student Services Center. None have ever been adequately funded, nor adequately staffed.

### **III. Recent History at UNC: From “A Plan for the Future” to “Commitment to Diversity I”**

In 1982, UNC’s Board of Trustees (BOT) approved a policy called “A Plan for the Future,” which, in addition to providing for a major reduction-in-force (RIF) of the faculty and staff, also set the institution on a path designed to increase the representation of people of color at UNC as faculty, staff, and students. In 1984, “A Plan for the Future,” was superseded by a new policy, “Commitment to Diversity I.”

“Commitment to Diversity I” established university-wide goals in student recruitment, retention, and graduation, in academic administration, affirmative action, academic programs, and cultural sensitivity. Primary responsibility for achieving the document’s 26 major goals was lodged with the Assistant to the President for Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity (APAA/EO), a position which no longer exists at UNC. A major impetus to, and model for, this university policy was a “Position Paper to the UNC Board of Trustees” submitted by the Black and Hispanic Coalition in Spring 1983.<sup>12</sup>

By late 1989, real progress in meeting diversity goals at UNC seemed to be at hand. As the Black/Hispanic Coalition was able to declare in a memorandum to then President Robert Dickeson:

The university currently faces a multitude of opportunities. With regard to diversity in education, multiculturalism, and educational reform in general. The last ten years [c. 1979–1989] have brought about positive changes: The Commitment to Diversity, the creation of Hispanic Studies, the establishment of the Garvey Center and the Hispanic Cultural Center, the publication of the literary journal *Confluencia*, and the establishment of a multicultural course requirement

within general education. By building on this decade of positive change, UNC can now begin to make significant, enduring, and creative reforms with respect to...people [of color] and diversity in education.<sup>13</sup>

However, the next ten years [c. 1989–1999] would see the retrenchment of many of these initiatives. Especially significant was the appointment of Hank Brown to UNC’s presidency in July 1998.

#### **IV. Recent History, continued: from “Commitment to Diversity II” to “Charting the Future”**

In May 1997, UNC’s BOT approved “Commitment to Diversity II.” The policy contained 42 specific policy goals, easily the most significant of which was the establishment of the position of Assistant Vice President for Academic and Multicultural Affairs (AVPAMA) within an Office of Academic and Multicultural Affairs (OMA).<sup>14</sup> The AVPAMA was specifically charged with

university responsibility for all diversity efforts and...report[ing] as a regular agenda item to each regular meeting of the UNC Board of Trustees on the progress of actions outlined in this document...<sup>15</sup>

This policy was adopted under the interim presidency of Howard Skinner, from June 1996 to June 1998. Hank Brown, former U.S. Senator (R-CO, 1990–1996), expressed interest in the job, but only if it were given to him, and not competitively recruited in a national search. The BOT accommodated his request.<sup>16</sup>

When it became clear that Brown would be appointed president, the Black/Latino Coalition (BLC) began a series of public and private meetings with him, to apprise him of the concerns of people of color at UNC, and to urge that the AVPAMA position be filled. For six

months, from May 1998 to November 1998, Brown resisted Board policy, insisting that there was no money for the position, and that what money there was, was better spent on cultural programming. These arguments were effectively parried, and Brown eventually agreed to fill the position and to allow the BLC representation on the Search and Screen Committee and in the job description process.<sup>17</sup>

Though Brown eventually filled the position in Spring 1999, he reneged on his promise to facilitate BLC input, and then lied about. Eventually, Brown would recommend the closure of the four cultural centers (APASS and NASS were established in February 1996) in favor of their consolidation (“the Barbie solution”).

Brown’s successor, Kay Norton, also a member of Greeley’s “Monfort Mafia,” succeeded Brown as president in July 2002. She immediately set about rolling back many of the gains that people of color had made at UNC. As we in the BLC observed,

Beginning with former UNC President Hank Brown [1998–2002] and continuing with Norton, there have been ‘clear and deliberate’ actions which establish a pattern and practice that constitute a direct assault on the presence and programs of people of color at UNC, as indicated by the following facts: The budgets of the cultural centers have been slashed to near zero; the vice president for multicultural affairs \*...was dismissed, and this position, office, and budget have been eliminated; the number of Black and Latino students and faculty of color has decreased; the number of Black and Hispanic administrators above the level of department chair was six, and now there are none; Hispanic Studies will be eliminated; the four cultural centers will be abolished; and the multicultural studies requirement for General Education will be removed.<sup>18</sup>

\* [Administratively, the AVPAMA title had the word “academic” removed from its purview under President Hank Brown. No explanation for this change was ever given.]

“Charting the Future” (CTF) has been nothing short of a disaster for people of color at UNC. Under the guise of facing a budgetary crisis brought on by a 25% shortfall in state funding c. 2003–2004, President Norton began a review of UNC on September 18, 2003. She called the review “Charting the Future.”

A first draft was produced by a Design Team (*no students, no faculty*) on March 8, 2004. It called for the abolition of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the creation of two additional Vice Presidents, boosting the number from 4 to 6. A second draft version was presented to the BOT on May 3, 2004, and unanimously approved.<sup>19</sup>

Student and faculty dissatisfaction with the entire top-down, administrator-controlled process of “Charting the Future” was widespread. At a tightly-controlled forum (one of only two) for campus comment on the first draft of CTF, a sizeable contingent of students voiced their displeasure with the threatened closure of the cultural centers, symbolically representing the centers’ fate as ending up in a discarded refrigerator box, dubbed “Nortonville Marcus Garvey Cultural Center 2004.”<sup>20</sup> Later that semester (Spring 2004), students held a march and mock funeral, complete with a coffin borne aloft in which “Diversity at UNC” was buried. The coffin was eventually presented to President Norton’s office.<sup>21</sup> The second draft of CTF now proposed to audit the cultural centers to determine their “effectiveness.”

## **V. Barbie’s “Dream House”: Multiculturalism at UNC**

The plan to consolidate the four cultural centers first surfaced under President Brown, and was incorporated into the first draft of “Charting the Future.” A single facility with four compartments was to be built out of a remodeled Lab School (Bishop-Lehr Hall). When state

funds began to dry up, UNC's major capital construction campaign was suspended, but not abandoned.

The administration defends the notion of consolidating the centers on the grounds of budgetary efficiency and centralization of related student services. These arguments assume that something called "Afro-American culture," "Asian culture," "Latino culture," and "Native American culture" can be neatly packaged in a homogenous container (i.e., a remodeled Bishop-Lehr) which allows for the expression of heterogeneous signifiers of these cultures, all neatly reproducible (e.g., posters, cultural artifacts, statues, pictures, books, videos, photographs, etc.). In such an approach to multiculturalism, difference is represented by the lowest common denominators of peoples of color *without* any concern for their authenticity, uniqueness, agency, and communal consciousness.

In this approach to multiculturalism, the differences of peoples of color have simply to be added to the American melting pot, or stew. It is *additive multiculturalism*, by which no major change is contemplated as necessary *other than* the superficial adding of stereotypical representations of the Racial Other.

Additive multiculturalism grows out of a long sociological and socio-political tradition of Anglo-conformity, assimilation, Anglo-Saxon Judeo Christian cultural hegemony, and white supremacy/racism. It refuses to interrogate inequality, preferring instead to celebrate the joys of the Social Darwinist, capitalist social order. Like Barbie, additive multiculturalism is only able to render difference by obliterating it, and reproducing it as inauthentic fundamental sameness. In this discourse, history is erased, silence and evasion abound, and deracialization and friendship orthodoxy are deployed as "race talk."<sup>22</sup>

## **VI. A Better Way: Transformative Multiculturalism**

UNC can no more destroy the four separate cultural centers and preserve authentic cultural difference on campus than Mattel can render black Barbies made from white Barbie's mold authentically black. The achievement of multiculturalism requires a more profound change.

Only a transformative approach to the problem of diversity under late capitalism offers prospects for realistic solutions. The cultural centers only represent the latest stage in the centuries-long quest of people of color and the dispossessed in American society for authenticity, uniqueness, agency, and communal consciousness. The fulfillment of these preconditions for the attainment of the full humanity of the Racial Other can be accomplished in no other way than through a redefinition of the basic terms of the American Social Contract.

Democracy, equality, justice, and community can no longer be satisfactorily defined in racially stilted, patriarchal, class-exploitative, or white-normed ways. *Democracy* cannot continue to mean a political order in which only 50% of those eligible bother to vote, those without \$20 million cannot run for the highest office in the land, the two major political parties are ideological clones both beholden to Mammon, and agenda items favored by the majority (e.g., Social Security, National Health Care) become "non-decisions." *Equality* cannot continue to mean rich white defendants routinely go free, punishment for taking a white life is more severe than punishment for taking a black life, procedural definitions mask substantive inequality, and access to legal rights is abrogated by penury. *Justice* cannot continue to mean that rich corporations are allowed to pay a declining share of the U.S. tax burden, police and prosecutorial misconduct are haphazardly monitored if ever corrected, and women continue to earn 72 cents for every dollar that a white man makes. And, *community* cannot continue to mean racially and economically stratified residential enclaves, gated communities for the paranoid

wealthy, the resegregation of America's schools, and the illusion of racial integration as propagated in cyberspace and in the electronic ether by giant media corporations.

Only *transformative multiculturalism* accepts the challenge to build a genuinely equalitarian society upon the rocky soil of the current American society. *Democracy* must mean a consistent democracy in which political and economic power are redistributed, breaking up inherited monopolies of both. *Equality* must mean the abolition of the Electoral College in favor of a system of direct popular voting, with the proportional representation of multiple political parties. *Justice* must mean the elimination of all gender, racial, and class bias from the nation's courts, a rigorous affirmative action program applied to the nation's judiciary, legislative, and executive branches of governance (federal, state, and local), the end of white privilege, and debating of the question of reparations for slavery. And *community* must mean rewarding those who build truly integrated communities, planning transportation links which break the racial and economic alienation of suburbia and the central city, monitoring the racial composition of public institutions and spaces, and encouraging a willingness to sacrifice some personal liberty for the sake of the greater good of creating, sustaining, and reproducing healthy, multi-class, multi-racial neighborhoods.

At UNC, the prospects for the commodification of culture are poor, despite the University's recent tilt toward trade-school-ism. Manufacturing difference through homogenized cultural centers will only reduce these consolidated centers to the equivalent of Mattel's master mould for the Barbie doll: a white-featured, unrealistically-proportioned misrepresentation of difference characterized by stereotype.<sup>23</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ann du Cille, *Skin Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996) p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Du Cille, pp. 19, 22.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Anna Quindlen, “Barbie at 35,” *New York Times*, September 10, 1994, p. 19, cited in du Cille, p. 179, n16.

<sup>4</sup> Du Cille, pp. 32, 34, 36, 49.

<sup>5</sup> Du Cille, p. 27. The quote is from p. 43.

<sup>6</sup> Du Cille, p. 182, n56.

<sup>7</sup> Du Cille, p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Du Cille, p. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Du Cille, pp. 1, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hermon George, Jr., *et al.*, *Report Card on Social Justice and Diversity* [at the University of Northern Colorado, 2004] (Greeley: Summit Organizing Committee, 2004). p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> UNC’s home page on the web is a perfect illustration of this technique. See [www.unco.edu](http://www.unco.edu).

<sup>12</sup> In author’s personal collection. The author is also an officer of UNC’s Black-Latino Coalition.

<sup>13</sup> Black/Hispanic Coalition memo to President Robert Dickeson and Executive Staff,

“Commitment to Diversity II,” December 13, 1989; in author’s personal collection.

<sup>14</sup> Commitment to Diversity II, May 9, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *supra cit.*

<sup>16</sup> The circumstances of Brown’s appointment to the presidency of UNC did not bode well for the university’s affirmative action policies, people of color, student and faculty participation in decision-making, or cultural diversity initiatives. After private contact in December 1996 to

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assess Brown's availability for the UNC presidency, the Board of Trustees named him as the *sole* candidate of its presidential search in October 1997. (*Brown had made clear that he did not wish to compete for the job in a national search, but wanted the job handed to him.*) Student and faculty objections noted the lack of a national search, Brown's inexperience in higher education, and his opposition to affirmative action, women's issues, and spending on the arts. After a series of orchestrated "open forums" with the university community at which Brown spoke, and the delivery of a 1,200 signature petition by students demanding a national search, Brown was named UNC president unanimously anyway by the Board of Trustees, November 17, 1997. He took office July 1, 1998.

Much of this history is recounted in the following: Eric Brown, "UNC wants Hank," *The Greeley Tribune*, October 17, 1997, pp. A1, A14; Sharon Dunn, "Some faculty members outraged," *The Greeley Tribune*, October 17, 1997, p. A1; Brian Weber, "UNC picks Brown for president," *The Rocky Mountain News*, October 17, 1997, pp. 1A, 12A; Sharon Dunn, "UNC offer excites Brown," *The Greeley Tribune*, October 18, 1997, pp. A1, A7; Anne Cumming, "Students vs. Brown: some urging national search for a new UNC president," *The Greeley Tribune*, October 23, 1997, p. A1; Bridget Houlihan, "Students question validity of board's sole candidate," *The Mirror*, (UNC's student newspaper—H.G.), October 24, 1997, p. 1; Sharon Dunn, "Recruitment, retention keys for minorities [sic], Brown says," *The Greeley Tribune*, October 25, 1997, pp. A1, A10; "Brown addresses questions from university community," *The Mirror*, October 29, 1997, p. 1; Bridge Houlihan, "Majority of council mores for a nationwide presidential search," *The Mirror*, October 31, 1997, p. 2; Eric Brown, "Colleges turn to politicians: Top jobs require fundraising, PR skills, some say," *The Greeley Tribune*, November

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9, 1997, pp. A1, A14; \_\_\_\_\_, “Debate over Brown’s candidacy rages,” *The Greeley Tribune*, November 16, 1997, pp. A1, A12; Donovan Henderson, “State officials praise choice,” *The Greeley Tribune*, November 17, 1997, p. A5; Bill Scanlon, “Brown takes top job at UNC: Former senator is appointed president despite faculty, student complaints,” *The Rocky Mountain News*, November 18, 1997, p. 8A; Henry Dubroff, “Party lines dissolved for UNC deal to happen,” *The Denver Business Journal*, November 24, 1997, available at <http://www.bizjournals.com/Denver/stories/1997/11/24/newscolumn/.html?t=printable>, accessed June 11, 2005; and Christopher Shea and Scott Heller, “Peer Review: Mixed Reaction Greet New U. of Northern Colorado President,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 1998, p. A48. My thanks to Teresa Solis and Tom Mink for their assistance in reconstructing this history.

<sup>17</sup> Hermon George, Jr., and Roberto Cordova, “UNC position important for many reasons,” *The Greeley Tribune*, April 8, 1999, and \_\_\_\_\_, “UNC administration slow to conform to 1997, ‘Commitment to Diversity Plan.’” *The Mirror*, April 26, 1999.

<sup>18</sup> Hermon George, Jr., and Roberto Cordova, “Charting the future omits minorities,” *The Mirror*, March 25, 2004. The “Monfort Mafia” and its control of Greeley, Colorado are dissected in Carol Andreas, *Meatpackers and Beef Barons: Company Town in a Global Economy* (Niwot, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> *University of Northern Colorado Self-Study Report* (Greeley: UNC, July 2004) pp. xix–xxi.

<sup>20</sup> Julio Ochoa, “Student Feedback: Message to UNC administration: Don’t cut cultural centers’ funding,” *The Greeley Tribune*, March 11, 2004, pp. A1, A12.

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica Anderson, “Mourning Diversity: Students carry coffin to Norton’s office to protest proposed changes,” *The Mirror*, April 16, 2004, pp. 1, 3.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the political implications of friendship orthodoxy and deracialization as “race talk,” see my “The Antidote to ‘The Great Backlash’: A Reinvigorated Black Political Consensus,” *The Black Scholar*, forthcoming.

<sup>23</sup> Du Cille notes that Shani, the black Barbie doll introduced in 1991, only *appears* to be differently proportioned than Barbie. Made from the same mould as white Barbie, Shani actually has slightly narrower hips. See du Cille, pp. 49–50, 53–54.