

## **Diversifying Syllabi 2016 Text Summary and Teaching Tips**

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

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**Article/Essay Title: Disidentification and the problem of Difference**

**Author: Jose Medina**

**Readability:** Easy/Moderate/Difficult

**Thesis:** Identification within a group, and solidarity between diverse groups, need not have a leveling effect that downplays the unique experiences, insights, or needs of individual groups or individual members of groups.

### **Key Definitions:**

*Family resemblance:* criteria of belongingness to a group that does not require a shared essence, or a shared characteristic. A concept that defines identity within a group as something heterogeneous and unstable. (Ludwig Wittgenstein)

*Performativity of Gender:* gender is not simply something that one is, but something that one does/ performs. (Judith Butler)

*Disidentification:* The uneasy feeling that one does not belong to the group with which one is expected to identify, a sudden or gradual awareness of one's difference from the members of that group. Disidentification may lead one to become more aware of the messiness or contingency of identity formation. The signifiers of identity may undergo destabilization ("I'm not sure what the term 'woman' means to me anymore) and demand resignification ("what do I want the term to mean? Can its meaning change? Do I still identify with this term?"). Disidentification can be "a source of resistance to the sedimentation of signifiers and as a site of rearticulation it offers a discursive occasion for hope"

*Signifiers:* terms to which a meaning must be developed, assigned, reflected upon, learned. Terms can't mean whatever we want them to mean, but at the same time, their meaning isn't fixed or stable. Meaning can be collectively subverted, renegotiated. (Originally Saussure's term, here it has been reimagined in the context of queer philosophy).

*World-traveling:* an individual's ability to draw on different identifications with a plurality of groups in different contexts. An authentic adaptation/performance of different selves or aspect of the self in different "worlds" (be they cultures, families, organizations, or places).

### **Brief Summary:**

Problem: We have identities. But we also have multiple identities, some of which seem to contradict each other, and identification within a larger group can have the effect of leveling differences within the group. Can the very act of identification be oppressive? Can political solidarity be oppressive?

In some cases, yes. (Consider “all lives matter.”) But this doesn’t mean that solidarity between different groups need be homogenizing or oppressive.

Claim: Membership in a group does not mean that one needs to share a single characteristic with every member of the group.  
The conceptual confusion to be avoided: groups have “essences”.

It’s easy for anyone to see that they don’t share an essence or a specific quality with all of the members of their family, but it might be more difficult to see that one’s identity is in *all respects* inclusive of and dependent upon difference, that one’s identity is unstable and contingent.

The “uneasy feeling that we do and do not belong to our family” is an exemplary occasion for disidentification/ identity trouble.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Article/Essay Title:** “Identity Trouble: Disidentification and the problem of difference”

**Author:** José Medina

**Possible Applications:**

- Feminist philosophy
- Philosophy of race
- Discussions of intersectionality
- Political philosophy

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- Medina cites a large number of texts (from both within and outside of philosophy), many of which would be very much worth pairing with the article.
- Responses to the article from Marilyn Frye (“Category Skepticism and its Cure”), Jorge Garcia (“Identity Confusion”), Peg O’Connor (“Identity Trouble and the Politics of Privilege”), and Medina’s own reply to these pieces. These papers are all available on Medina’s own website (<http://as.vanderbilt.edu/philosophy/bio/jose-medina>).
- Homi Bhabha on hybridity in *The Location of Culture*
- Uma Narayan “Working Together Across Differences: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice” in *Hypatia* (1998).

### **Possible Class Activities:**

- Divide up the different sections of the article and have students outline it in groups
- Pair it with a self-reflection exercise on students' own relationship to group identity. (Students don't have to share the reflection.)
- Have students listen to relevant episodes of *NPR's* podcast "Code Switch," e.g., the episode "Rep Sweats" (<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/06/22/482525049/on-the-podcast-rep-sweats-or-i-dont-know-if-i-like-this-but-i-need-it-to-win>)
- Find examples of cultural practices like the one Medina discusses in section III and have students analyze it using Medina's framework. You could also look at political strategies of social movements that have an intersectional outlook.