Multicultural Lessons from the Americas: The Afro Experience and the Benefits of Difference

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Tom,
I have read Alison's paper on Afro-American culture and multiculturalism; she has done about three drafts, and I think it is time to give her our seal of approval. Alison is very intelligent and I know she has given a lot of thought to this project. Please accept this e-mail as my approval.
Sincerely, Michael Handelsman (Romance Languages)
Multicultural Lessons from the Americas

The Afro Experience and the Benefits of "Difference"

by Alison Bartel
Well, I have come here, comrades, to bring the voice of one of the groups confined to that circle, which has suffered; perhaps more than any other, from the injustice of men; which for centuries has seen its muscles paralysed by slavery, which for centuries has had its intelligence paralysed, far from any culture which might liberate and enlighten it. I come, I repeat, as one exploited and persecuted, but also as a man who cares for his freedom and knows, like his racial brothers, that only by breaking down the walls that exist between the present and the future, can he achieve it completely. I come as a black man...

-Nicolás Guillén
Politically, economically, and culturally, the United States has always defined itself as a land that brings individuals together, with a common goal, a common voice, and a common identity. Unification has been a primary concern of U.S. society since its foundation, and has been reinforced by countless images.

"E pluribus unum", meaning "Out of many, one", (Takaki 3), is a motto of the United States; democracy provides a political structure in which a single decision comes from the voices of the many. Long regarded as the "land of opportunity", a national economy is in large part formed from the combined efforts of thousands of private business owners and millions of workers, always with room for more.

Even more pervasive is the favorite image North Americans use to describe their culture, the melting pot. By definition, a melting pot is "a country, city, or region in which immigrants of various racial and cultural backgrounds are assimilated" ("Melting pot"), where assimilation has the sociological definition of "the acceptance by one social group or community of cultural traits normally associated with another" ("Assimilation"). Streams of immigrants of countless different ethnic backgrounds have poured into this single territory and made it their own. In the country that functions "for the common good", these immigrants have also made themselves "Americans".

If a true definition of the word "nation" could be "a body of persons associated with a particular territory,
usually organized under a government, and possessing a distinctive cultural and social way of life" ("Nation"), the United States, in a historical sense, can be seen to embody the term to its fullest degree. Why then have so many voices been raised of late to contradict American unity?

This homogeneous nation "possessing a distinctive cultural and social way of life" has been threatened recently. Traditionally repressed disparate social forces have been clamoring for recognition in a variety of ways, from the widespread demands for recognition of the validity of same sex marriages to the furious and horrifying explosion of ethnic strife that was the Los Angeles Riot of 1992.

Even scholars and educators have joined the fray, claiming that the United States' entire educational system needs to be altered to include marginal ethnic voices. Multiculturalism is almost a "buzzword", implying a re-evaluation of everything North America has culturally held near-and-dear to encompass aspects from all ethnic perspectives. Conflicts and contradictions are inevitable with multiculturalism, with so many perspectives to be reconciled. Why then would some Americans stand in favor of a system so destructive to our sense of national unity, so conducive to chaos?

Perhaps a more appropriate question would be: Why would dissenting voices even exist, if the U.S. is so patently unified? If all of these glittering ideals held for so long are really true, how could Americans turn to
multiculturalism?

The answer lies in the realization that the United States never was, and never will be culturally homogeneous. Multiculturalism is ubiquitous because it exists in North America's society and also, history.

Paul Gilroy, a black British author, scoffs at attempts to isolate the history of European settlers from the Africans, "Indians", and Asians they mistreated, and in page 5 of his book, *The Black Atlantic*, criticizes the "unthinking assumption that cultures always flow into patterns congruent with the borders of essentially homogeneous nation states".

North America is seen as European in ancestry, and by extension, "white". However, considerable sources list Pedro Nino, Columbus' pilot, as an African (Gilroy 16). Asian immigrants arrived in droves before many of the later European groups (Takaki 7). The early European settlers that eventually established their cultures as dominant ingredients in the current "American" culture did so at the expense of those that populated the land before them. Though their numbers are greatly reduced, Native Americans still make up part of this country.

Recognition of these very true parts of our history only makes our identity more true and accurate, and not in any way less "American". Indeed, versions of history in schoolbooks that misrepresent or fail to mention anything at odds with what Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicano author, refers to as "the hammer blow of dominant norteamericano culture"
Many scholars condemn the new attention and efforts given to establishing diverse elements within the dominant culture because they fear that this "multiplicity of cultures is threatening to rend our social fabric" (Takaki 3). However, the truth of this social fabric is that it has always been comprised of many different threads. A multicultural perspective tends to give unity to our nation, by acknowledging the different parts of our history, the contributions from diverse ethnic sources. The U.S. identity is not reduced or tarnished, but rather enriched by these additions.

My own experience provides evidence to dispute the claim that a multicultural perspective leads to disunity. I have spent hours researching and reading accounts of "American" history very different from the ones I learned in elementary school. As a result of this knowledge, am I less "American", less "white"?

My studies have not taught me that as a young white female of European heritage living in the United States that what I physically reflect is wrong or bad. It was not necessary for me to "unlearn" my "whiteness", only to adjust it.

Perhaps most importantly, in these studies of mine one lesson has been made very clear: By listening to these singular, specific voices, one can arrive at a universal understanding of a modern multicultural society. Ronald Takaki, an Asian American author, urges us to use a
comparative perspective "while scrutinizing our specific pieces...in order to see the rich and complex portrait they compose" (6). Details do not have to be ignored to understand something as a whole; rather, it is the details that should be explored to truly understand in a universal way.

Richard Wright, one of the first black writers to receive worldwide attention, urged his fellow black Americans on a trajectory of this sort. He claimed that:

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must possess and understand it. And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society (Addison 320).

This consciousness of the "blackness" that separated "Negro" writers from other writers was necessary, according to Wright. With the recognition of this difference, one can transcend it; this may seem paradoxical at first, but is actually quite logical. After a specific ethnic exploration, one finds the ability to see the complexity of modern society. These words serve as a well-stated explanation of the path many writers of marginalized groups have chosen, to stress how important the inclusion of their voices is to a true national identity.
This challenge that Wright faced, to affirm African-ness, has been experienced by black writers throughout the Western tradition. "Like much of the reality of oppressed peoples, the Black Americas have been obscured in a cloud of distorted history, outdated notions of culture and nationhood, denial and self-denial" (NACLA 15). Peoples of African heritage have been among the most excluded ethnic groups of the history of not only North America but Latin America as well.

Here, however, the history of ethnic relations seems quite different. Latin America has a history filled with racial mixing. During the colonial period, almost entire generations of children were born with one Spanish or Portuguese parent and one parent of indigenous blood. Numerous Africans were brought to the New World as slaves, adding even more somatic racial variety.

The ethnic and cultural fusion that resulted from the mixture of these peoples is known as mestizaje. The term refers to a sort of racial democracy; Latin Americans usually align themselves along national boundaries and claims to specific racial heritage are rare. Commonly explained as a society without race, it would therefore seem that racial prejudice would not exist.

This, however, is not the case. With the exception of Haiti and a few isolated communities of Afro-Hispanics, African heritage within Latin America is almost universally denigrated and denied. While superficially insisting to be colorblind, in reality, most cultures punish African-ness in
both its physical appearance and cultural manifestations in society. Religions and languages linked to an African past are usually shunned by the "homogeneous" dominant societies as forces subversive to the national unity.

Differences in appearance of mulattoes, or those of a clear white and black racial mixture, and Hispanics with mostly traditional African features, usually correspond with socioeconomic position. "Lightening", of both skin tone and physical traits, is universally applauded and many largely African communities, such as Port-au-Prince, are ruled by a mulatto elite.

Sadly, this discrimination often leads Latin Americans to an even more insidious prejudice, that of racism against one's own self. As Gloria Anzaldúa explains, "Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture", (16). The racism of a nation is manifested in its language; citizens learn to term nappy hair as "bad hair" and to escape identifying African heritage by instead claiming to be medium or dark Indians. Without positive reactions to anything African allowed by the culture, the only incentive for those of African descent is to deny history, heritage, and identity. While this is obviously a denial of one's past, even more damaging is the denial to one's present.

One can see then, that the deliberate omission of specific ethnic elements is a characteristic of both the
Americas and that the pain of this denial is experienced by many of those of non-European heritage. The aforementioned challenge to black American authors that Wright answers so comprehensively has been answered by many of his Latin American contemporaries, because the same destruction to self-identity and self-pride have been experienced by them all. Martha K. Cobb has been quoted as drawing a relationship between the Spanish-speaking Americas and the self-awareness of black people universally, because "there is a pattern in the African contact with Western civilization that, despite differences of language and lifestyle, can be traced wherever black men and women have been situated" (Jackson a 1).

This kinship has given coherence to not only the separate voices and explanations of identity from writers of the two continents, but added to the identities of the peoples themselves. Ralph Ellison, a U.S. black author of great renown, explains that "It is not culture which binds the peoples who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an identity of passions...we are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation", (Gilroy 111).

Nicolás Guillén, a black Cuban poet that achieved prominence in the first half of the twentieth century and is still widely read, was one of the first Latin American writers to provide a response to this same challenge that Wright later faced. He acknowledged his African heritage and affirmed the worth of this acknowledgement on a national
and universal level. The words of the epigraph used earlier were part of his address to the Second International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, held in Spain in July 1937. He provided an inestimable value to this conference peopled with great diversity; despite the racial and cultural discrimination that he had experienced his entire life, he went "to bring the voice...as a black man" (Sardinha 39).

The body of work completed by Guillén provides a perfect example of the insistence earlier expressed by Richard Wright of the necessity of coming to terms with one's ethnic specificity to arrive at the eventual goal of this "consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society" (Addison 320). African heritage, though marginalized and in submission to European modelled society, is nonetheless an important part of Cuban national identity.

To put it simply, through affirmations of his Afro-Cuban heritage, Nicolás Guillén sought an affirmation of all Cubans. He began with a collection of poetry entitled Motivos de son, published in April 1930, which was dedicated to recreating the rhythm and form of African music and speech. A major theme was the celebration of the typical African physical traits: wide lips, flattened noses, nappy hair, and obviously, dark skin, and also an affirmation of the beauty that these traits inherently possess.

Next came Sóngoro Cosongo, in October 1931, in which he expanded his address to include the Cuban in general. In
this collection, the focus is the mulato, or racial mixture of "black" and "white". Here is also an affirmation of Africa, but in a comprehension of how the heritage exists in a modern mestizaje society: not the African, but the Afro-Cuban. The voice of the poet does nothing to detract from Cuba; he merely offers a mixed, and true, picture of Cuban nationality.

Nicolás Guillén forms an important, early part of a literary movement peopled by writers "who see themselves not only as blacks but as thoroughly Hispanized blacks writing a black language out of racial, nationalistic, and patriotic dedication. They believe, in short, that their language is the language of a people as representative of the larger society as any other" (Jackson b 54). Guillén is widely regarded as one of the finest Cuban poets, and by using his black poetry to create genuine Cuban poetry, "Guillén moved from black pride to national pride" (28).

As Guillén was "committed to aiding the oppressed of the world in their struggle for freedom" (Sardinha 34), much of his later poetry was directed to an even larger audience. From the collection "Sones para Turistas" published in May 1937, he addresses a wealthy American tourist with the admonition:

Although I am a poor black man;
I know that all is not right with the world...
Who invited you?
When you return
to New York,
send me poor people
poor like me,
poor like me,
poor like me.

To them will I give my hand,
and with them shall I sing,
for the song that they know
is the same one that I do.
(Sardinha 33)

In this poem, one can see how black literature is a literature of universality. Usually linked to the struggle for liberty and human dignity, the literature of the black experience applies to all. "This is really what black literature teaches: knowing oneself through one's own models and examples, both in literature and in the real life literature reflects" (Jackson b 121).

All of us as individuals have the right to affirm the heritage that shaped our identity, but we should thereafter be committed to putting that identity in its rightful place in our society. As Wright, with his call to transcend Negro nationalism, and Guillén, with his address of not just black people but poor people, both eventually explained, particularity to a black perspective is just as pointless a goal as the current white particularity favored by both of America's cultures. A dedication to one's heritage at the expense of all others does little to provide an understanding of the modern cultural climate. What is needed is an acknowledgement of specific identities as they contribute to a universal perspective.

Where all these specific identities fit into the universal perspective is a complex issue, however. How to mediate between the current cultural European ideal favored in both the Americas and the "subversive" dissenting voices
that these specific identities provide is currently among the most pressing challenges for writers, legislators, educators, people everywhere.

The conflicts must be addressed and resolved, however, because an acceptance of varied cultural perspectives is invaluable to modern society, providing not only a more accurate contemporary identity, but also a comprehensive history. History offers us a sort of mirror and is an image of our identity. By accommodating stories from various sources, this mirror can reflect who we really are, and give each person the opportunity to recognize her/himself.

As Gloria Anzaldúa warns, "Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A misinformed people is a subjugated people" (86). Takaki speaks of a Mexican who sadly remarked in 1874 that "it is very natural that the history written by the victim does not altogether chime with the story of the victor" (Takaki 15). With such separations, due to the conflicting perspectives of disparate groups brought suddenly into close proximity, it is not surprising that many fear any mention of multiculturalism.

However, what is not recognized is the lack of unity that a single viewpoint of history is unable to reconcile. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed from his jail cell: "We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny" (Takaki 7). Twenty years later, Howell Raines admitted in the introduction to his chronicle
of the Civil Rights Movement that "of all the lessons Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to teach us, the hardest for white Southerners to understand was that the Civil Rights Movement would free us, too", (Raines 23). By entering the struggle to understand their society from a different perspective, white Southerners could understand the universality of not only southern blacks, not only Americans, but all human existence.

It is obvious that cultures have never existed hermetically sealed from one another; all nations and by extension, their peoples, have very diverse roots. It is time for both Americas to acknowledge the different shores responsible for their formations, because the denied histories refuse to be contained. Latin America can heed the cry of its literary greats, just America can heed its own. As Takaki relates, "Of every hue and caste am I," sang Whitman. "I resist any thing better than my own diversity", (428).
Works Cited


