

Multicultural Deconstructionism

“A crucial difference between the Western tradition and the others... [is that].... The crimes of the West have produced their own antidotes. They have provoked great movements to end slavery, to raise the status of women, to abolish torture, to combat racism, to defend freedom of inquiry and expression, to advance personal liberty and human rights.”

(Schlesinger, 1991, p. 76)

Children, especially younger ones, are a tapestry woven with real life experiences, what others have told or taught them, and what they take in with those ever-widening eyes. These eyes and ears to the soul are what the educator has to work with, and it is these eyes and ears that need to hear that we are all one in our common experience called life. To study our common experience one must have the tenacity to put together an introduction to what bonds all of us to what we call *“humanity.”*

Donna Norton has tried to help the educator in her or his goal to do just that. In her book, *Multicultural Children’s Literature*, Norton mentions that introducing the students to cultural texts has improved reading scores (p. 2) of many of her students. This is one of many positive consequences of multicultural studies. One must keep in mind that in order to say there are positive effects imbued in an activity, they are *positing* that there are negative ones that can be

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expressed as well. If one were to say that music, as an example, calms the soul, they are in effect saying that music can cause unrest to the soul as well. Some of the children involved in many violent acts such as Columbine not only had an unhealthy view of life, but had that view bolstered by the type of music they listened to. This is not to say that the music they listened to was the cause of their action, it was a combination of many factors, and the music they gravitated towards wasn't having the calming effect we wish it had.

The same can be said for multicultural studies. While one would have to be off his rocker to exclude multicultural studies just for the sake of excluding something not understood or unfamiliar to them, there is a lot to be said about those who merely accept the whole package just for the sake of *inclusion* or *political correctness*. I would argue they too would be off of their proverbial "*rocker*." So this essay will attempt to entwine what should be the glue to a healthy multicultural study while expressing some concerns as well. Of course Miss Norton has some insight into this matter, both in a positive light as well as a negative. Again, one aspect, such as positive, cannot completely foreclose the other.

For instance, an aspect of how politically correct the multicultural endeavor has become can be exemplified in Diane Ravitch's book, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups restrict What Students Learn*:

"The 2001 Houghton Mifflin literature guidelines identify certain children's books that must be **avoided**, possibly because the author was not of the same ethnic group of the main characters in the book. Some of the prohibited books have received prestigious awards, including Mary Hoffman's *Amazing Grace*, Theodore Taylor's *The Cay*, Paula Fox's *Slave Dancer*, and William Armstrong's *Souder*. Ellen Levine's *I Hate English!*, [is] about an Asian girl

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learning English, was excluded because the girl required the intervention of her Caucasian teacher to solve her problems, which was apparently offensive to the bias review panel” (2003, pp. 47-48).

Some would point out to that the educator adds some subjectivity to the matter as well, for instance, “*in 1961.... 300 student papers were graded by fifty-three graders (a total of 15,900 readings), more than one third of the papers received every possible grade. That is, 101 of the 300 papers received all nine grades: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C-, and D*” (Hirsch, 1996, p. 183). This should be a warning to teachers on how subjective an already subjective matter is.

With such a subjective study of cultures entwined with social studies or literary curriculum, a standard of some sort should be sought out. This standard may be hard to reach if the educator leans towards the socially progressive or conservative spectrum of policies. One favors “*equality of result*” in respect to large groups, the other “*individual equality of opportunity*” respectively (p. 210). Norton leans towards the progressive spectrum, but gives even the most conservative educator a tool and reference to incorporate into the classroom activity. In an imperfect world the teachers worldview would be neutral, however, even Norton agrees that “*morality includes both individual and social judgments...*”, and that teachers “*...act as moral agents*” (Norton, p. 3). So with this subjectivity in mind (*subjective* because the act of teaching involves individual and social views impacting the “*moral agent*”) let us evaluate some of the tools and literature learned and see if multiculturalism is *really* inclusive to all views, or if it is demagoguery in drag.

One aspect of the cultural crossroads deals with origins. Since about 95% of mankind currently and throughout history believes in some kind of “*God,*” the inclusion of religious thought and critical thinking becomes a topic that can invigorate in-class discussion. Creation

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myths are a way to unfold a worldview that allows for purpose and design in nature and in the life of the student. Rick Warren, author of the *Purpose Driven Life*, said this on the back of a venti (large) Starbucks coffee cup, “*You are not an accident. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. He wanted you alive and created you for a purpose.*” A disillusioned student that feels insignificant because he or she is living in everyone else’s world (parents, teachers, and the like), who feels like they have no individuality may benefit from the study of creation myths. Usually *order* is the main topic of creation myths. And for the student to understand that they are of a high order with purpose can benefit them.

This is a good way to authenticate any of the books or myths presented to us from various cultures. These stories, whether from written or oral traditions, should authenticate or lift up the individual. If the text is Gnostic in its understanding body/soul conflict, one should be weary of using that text with children of any age. A study of creation myths is a time to introduce critical thinking about nature, for instance, C. S. Lewis pointed out that to look at nature any other way than almost every culture has would be irrational:

“If the solar system was brought about by an accidental collision, then the appearance of organic life on this planet was also an accident, and the whole evolution of Man was an accident too. If so, then all our thought processes are mere accidents - the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms. And this holds for the materialists and astronomers as well as for anyone else's. But if their thoughts — i.e. of Materialism and — are merely accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give a correct account of all the other accidents. It’s like expecting that the accidental shape taken by the splash when you upset a milk-jug

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should give you a correct account of how the jug was made and why it was upset”

(1984, p. 97).

Multicultural literature is a great resource to shed light in respect to our ontology. That is a positive aspect of multicultural studies; if cultural truths are relativised however, then the moral issue becomes a negative. Without an absolute ethical norm, morality is reduced to mere preference and the world is a jungle where might makes right, which can be displayed in multicultural comparisons. This view can self-destruct, because “*You cannot make everything relative unless you are standing on the pinnacle of your own absolute*” (Kinsolving, 1993, B7)

Historian Paul Johnson in a 1985 *Readers Digest* states that without a grounding for our ethics we merely become “*nothing better than a species of fantastically clever monkeys. Our ultimate fate would be too horrible to contemplate. For the truth is that we humans are all Jekyll and Hyde creatures, and the monster within each of us is always striving to takeover*” (pp. 124-125). How would you know that the Holocaust is ultimately wrong [or evil] unless you knew what was ultimately right? If you don’t have an absolute standard for right, you can’t say that [the Holocaust] is absolutely wrong. **That’s just your opinion, and somebody else’s opinion could be, the Holocaust was the best thing in the history of mankind** (Kinsolving, 1993, B7). The above is what modern day multicultural studies teach, maybe not at the elementary level, but in the high school and university levels it is this politically correct. One cannot say one culture is morally superior to another.

Authentication of a particular text varies from genre to genre. Biographical sketches would require a keen attention to historical detail, for instance, while most Islamic schools around the world (which includes the United States) have their students read the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, such a “biographical” sketch of history simply doesn’t match up with the facts

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and shouldn't be taken seriously in class, no matter what the students religious beliefs are. Using the hypothetical Muslim student as an example, the teacher may wish to introduce rational thinking to the situation and give an example to the student of how to critically examine the claims made by such anti-Semitic literature. "*How [the educator] choose[s] to direct*" class discussion as a "*moral agent*" (Norton, p. 3) can be sticky one indeed, one that requires a worldview that doesn't "*balkanize*" cultures. However laudable that endeavor sounds, E. D. Hirsch says that "*it should **not be** the primary focus of national education. It should not be allowed to supplant or interfere with our schools' responsibility to ensure our children's mastery of American literate culture*" (1988, p. 18).

Multiculturalism has become disorganized, in that cultural relativism abounds: "*Afrocentrism*" is adopted in primarily African-American schools, and efforts to affect self-esteem in minority students who – apparently – without such curricula (codified by Westerners) lack it, removing *cultural bias* from textbooks and tests, and the silent introduction of compensatory grading (Hirsch 1996, p. 102) is what makes up a form of multiculturalism that should be rejected by educators.

This *balkanizing* of American children is one of the support beams for the pervasive ethnic separatism our campuses have come to know that are punctuated with periodic outbursts of violence. Orlando Patterson mentions what multicultural courses should be teaching when he said, "*Universities and businesses should return to the **principle of integration**, to the notion that diversity is **not something to be celebrated and promoted in its own right**, but an opportunity for mutual understanding and the furtherance of an ecumenical national culture*" (Patterson, 1995, A-13, emphasis mine). Arthur Schlesinger in a July 8, 1991 *Time* magazine

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article entitled “*The Cult of Ethnicity, Good and Bad*” codifies what many educators not only feel but see on a daily basis:

“...the attack on the ‘Eurocentric’ curriculum and the rise of the notion that history and literature should be taught **not as disciplines but as therapies** [see Norton, p. 2] whose function is to raise minority self-esteem. Group separatism crystallizes the differences, magnifies tensions, intensifies hostilities. Europe -- the unique source of the liberating ideas of democracy, civil liberties and human rights -- is portrayed as the root of all evil, and non-European cultures, their own many crimes deleted, are presented as the means of redemption.... If... the Ku Klux Klan wanted to use the schools to disable and handicap black Americans, he could hardly come up with anything more effective than the ‘Afrocentric’ curriculum. And if separatist tendencies go unchecked, the result can only be the fragmentation, resegregation and tribalization of American life” (emphasis mine)

He goes on to say that “*the point of America was not to preserve old cultures, but to forge a new American culture*” (Ibid.). How prophetic is this? because just recently on both MSNBC and Fox News this author saw stories on resegregating schools. Samuel Huntington defines in his book, *Who Are We?*, what an “*American*” is when he says immigrants “*become Americans only if they ... participate in American life, learn America's language, history and customs, absorb America's Anglo-Protestant culture, and identify primarily with America rather than with their country of birth*” (2004, p. 339). Most current philosophers of education at Columbia university disagree with the above statement.

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Multiculturalism rarely – if ever – speaks kindly of the luminaries the West has produced. High school and university studies deride Columbus for instance, going so far as renaming the Columbus Day holiday, “*Indigenous Peoples’ Day*.” What is ironic is that the crimes being attributed to Columbus were being committed by the indigenous peoples themselves. When the Spaniards arrived, the Caribs (after whom the Caribbean islands were named) were in the process of exterminating the more peaceful Arawaks. Similarly, the Aztecs practiced human sacrifice, and to a lesser extent the Mayans and Incas as well. Some North American Indian tribes practiced slavery, rape, and murder (all this Pre-Columbian).

Keep in mind that many educators, those of a different stripe than John Dewey, would say that an immigrant’s culture *is* the historical culture of the United States, another way to express this thinking is to say that English *is* their native language (Thibodaux, 1992, p. 37). When people do not assimilate, and are encouraged to celebrate their *dissimilarity*, death can sometime occur:

“Multiculturalism is not about exotic restaurants and charming street fairs. It is a code word for moral relativism. Accepting the notion that all ideas and systems are equal precludes a willingness to think critically about what surrounds us.... Patt Morrison of the *Los Angeles Times* drew back the curtain on the dark side of multiculturalism: the Iranian medical student who shot his wife in the head because she had worn trousers and left their Encino home after he ordered her not to; the Yemeni teenager in Visalia who loved Michael Jackson and makeup and who was shot to death, allegedly by a brother who felt dishonored by her conduct; the Thai man who killed a Laotian man at a Los Angeles restaurant because the

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Laotian had put his foot on a table as the Thai was singing – a deadly insult in his culture” (Bruce, 2001, p. 150-151).

The above sounds eerily similar to what Mussolini said fascism is:

“Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism by intuition.... If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories and men who claim to be bearers of an objective, immortal truth... then there is nothing more relativistic than fascistic attitudes and activity.... From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology...”

(Kreeft, 1999, p. 18)

With this kind of multiculturalism and its ethical void, many students are either told or conclude for themselves that since no civilization has ever been able to create an all encompassing moral code fit for modern man, therefore, right and wrong should be worked out by teenagers in the class setting. One educator mentions the “*merits of wife swapping, cannibalism, and teaching children to masturbate*” are topics of discussion in classrooms today (Sykes, 1995, p. 161). Clitoridectomies are still performed among some African and Arab tribes. Wife beating is considered a minor matter in India, Latin societies as well as Arab culture. Child prostitution in Buddhist nations is not uncommon, the profits of which even rivaling the GNP of those same nations. Slavery still exists in many Arab nations as well as Mauritania and the Sudan. Infanticide is practiced in parts of China.

The question then is this, “*what is a child suppose to make of these multicultural items?*” (Kilpatrick, 1992, p. 127-128) While the crimes of Western man is often paraded, it is the West who has produced their own antidotes. Where is the compulsion in Islam to change? Where is the

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compulsion in Communist China to defend life? There isn't any. Many animistic religions found in Africa are devoid of any philosophical structures that would put the "*ought*" in "*you ought not to cheat on your wife.*" It is precisely the West, rooted in its traditions that cause the *compulsion to do what is right*. True multicultural studies should include the study of what worldview (culture) is preferable or desirable for freedom. Which view puts the "*ought*" in the phrase "*you ought to protect a person's right to a fair trial.*"

So the educator may be correct in asking the following question, "*How can any culture be an absolute guide for morality if those who drive it have no transcendent reference-point?*" A professor and author put it well when he said that there is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: "*almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending*" (Bloom, 1987, p. 25). The following story should elucidate:

The story is told of a man who stopped outside a clockmaker's shop every morning on his way to work and synchronized his watch with a large clock standing in the shop window. One day, the owner of the shop got to talking to him and asked him what kind of work he did. Rather sheepishly, the man told him he was the timekeeper at a nearby factory, and that one of his responsibilities was to ring the closing bell at five o'clock every evening. As his watch kept very poor times, he synchronized it very morning with the clock in the shop window. The shop-owner, even more embarrassed, replied, "*I hate to tell you this, but the clock doesn't work very well either, and I adjust it every time I hear the factory's closing bell!*" (Ravi Zacharias?)

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When movers and shakers in any given society have no moral absolutes to guide them, how can their culture claim to have any ethical integrity? This is the main catalyst behind the political-correctness movement and the multiculturalism we find in the state schools, what's called *cultural relativism*. Shakespeare in act I, scene III of his play *Troilus Cressida* alluded to this problem when he wrote:

...right and wrong

(Between whose endless jar justice resides)

Should lose their names, and so should justice too.

Then everything includes itself in power,

And appetite, and universal wolf,

So doubly seconded with will and power,

Must make perforce an universal prey,

And last eat up himself. (116-126)

It seems to many a person that the subjectivity of multicultural studies is built upon the philosophical substrate of Jacques Derrida's postmodern thinking commonly called Deconstructionism. "Deconstructionism" as a philosophy is defined by Dictionary.com as "A philosophical movement and theory of literary criticism that questions traditional assumptions about certainty, identity, and truth; asserts that words can only refer to other words; and attempts to demonstrate how statements about any text subvert their own meanings: 'In deconstruction, the critic claims there is no meaning to be found in the actual text, but only in the various, often mutually irreconcilable, 'virtual texts' constructed by readers in their search for meaning'."

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Until recently, literature teachers and professors were fundamentally engaged in the *explication* and *interpretation* of literary works and the assessment of their significance in literary history. Thus educators and their students were principally concerned with discovering and understanding meaning. Under the pervasive influence of deconstruction, this all too basic task is rapidly giving way to (some would say has given way) the dismantling of meaning and the neglect of understanding in the interest of will: “*while the chief aim of the old method was interpretation, deconstruction sets out from the assumption that there are only misinterpretations of greater or lesser force or utility*” (Young, 1999, pp. 31-32).

In the end, Norton does a decent job, not the best job, but a decent job at staying with original intent, even asking if “*the cultural information [is] accurate*” (Norton, p. 139). Her “*Chart 2-2*” on page 54 should really be looked at by other multicultural authors who include historical biographies in their curriculum. If helping the teacher meet basic requirements was her goal, she more than assisted the educator in attaining that goal. If the goal was to use multicultural curriculum to build self-esteem, to assimilate immigrants, or any other number of utilitarian goals (e.g., engineer society), then she likewise succeeded. Still, even with her wide-eyed egalitarian outset in mind, this class has been one of the most informative yet.

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