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Some Personal Reflections on Multiculturalism

Stanton F. Biddle

I am here in a dual capacity today, first as President of LACUNY, and second as an African American librarian; I am also the National Vice President/President Elect of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. As you would expect, I have a particular interest in the topic of multiculturalism.

I would like to thank Brenda Mitchell-Powell and Mary Biggs for coming here today and sharing their thoughts on multiculturalism as a part of our discussion, "Visions and Values: Crosscurrents in Academic Librarianship." Each has given us an insightful interpretation of the issue and how it can, should, or should not impact on our performance as information professionals.

I would now like to share a couple of statements with you, and then do something I very rarely do in a professional setting; that is to discuss aspects of my personal life.

The first statement is a definition of the term "violence". It comes from a book entitled *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*. It was cited in another book, *The Black Elite: Facing the Color Line in the Twilight of the 20th Century*, by Lois Benjamin. The latter is a book, by the way, which could be the topic of a whole conference by itself. Frantz Fanon defines violence as: "Any relation, process, or condition by which an individual or a group violates the physical, social, and/or psychological integrity of another person or group." The author goes on to explain:

The proposed definition rests on several assumptions. First, violence is not simply an isolated physical act or a discrete random event. It is a relation, process, and condition undermining, exploiting, and curtailing the well-being of the victim. Second these violations are not simply moral or ethical, but also physical, social, and/or psychological. They involve demonstrable assault on, or injury of, and damage to the victim. Third, violence in any of the three domains—physical, social or psychological—has significant repercussions on the other two domains. Fourth, violence occurs not only between individuals, but also between groups and societies. Fifth, intention is less critical than consequence in most forms of violence. Any relation, process, or condition imposed by someone

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that injures the health and well being of others is by definition violent (Hussein Abdilani Bulham. New York: Plenum Press, 1985).

The second statement comes from a report issued by a New York State Commissioner of Education's Task Force on Minorities, Equality, and Excellence. The subtitle of the report which was issued in July 1989 is "A Curriculum of Inclusion." In its Executive Summary the report states that:

African Americans, Asian Americans, Puerto Ricans/Latinos, and Native Americans have all been the victims of an intellectual and education oppression that has characterized the culture and institutions of the United States and European American world for centuries. Negative characteristics, or the absence of positive references, have a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of young people of African, Asian, Latino, and Native American descent, and an equally damaging, though different, effect on young people of European American descent....

The problem is framed in its historical context of the nation developing as a preserve of European culture and values, with nearly all textbooks and popular writings omitting any mention of significant contributions from the many people from other cultures who have been part of the development of America since the beginning. Recent attempts to include in history books and social studies materials information about non-European achievements are shown to be appendages rather than integral to the main body of information. In the Report, European culture is likened to the master of a house ruling over a dinner table, himself firmly established as the head of the table and all other cultures being guests some distance down the table from the master, who has invited the others through his beneficence. When I read these words several years ago, I was struck by their familiarity with the way I have felt for a very long time.

I am an eighth generation New Yorker. At least seven generations of my family have been born, lived, died, and are buried here in the United States of America. Yet, I am sometimes considered and treated as an alien, a new comer, or something less than a full American. After over two hundred years of participation in the system, my family's contributions, and by extension, the contributions of all African Americans are undervalued, distorted, or simply ignored under our current system of education. For all practical purposes, until relatively recently, we were invisible. The place where I was born is a very small village in Allegheny County, one of those big empty counties in western New York. It is about a hundred miles south of Rochester, and a couple of miles from or the western Pennsylvania border. The town, and the county, were over 99% white. When I was growing up,

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the only other “colored” people, as we were designated then, for miles around were my aunts, uncles, and cousins. It was years before I discovered that not all colored people were my blood relatives. When dealing with the great social cultural issues of our times, a community that constitutes less than one percent of the population seems insignificant. That is, unless you happen to be that one percent. In our case that fraction of a percentage point represented who we were. Except for my family, the area I grew up in was very homogenous and very conservative. As I said, it was virtually all white, and it was also nearly all Protestant. Catholics and Jews were looked upon with great suspicion. We all believed the Catholics were going to burn in hell because they worshiped idols and graven images. We couldn’t imagine what would happen to the Jews when they died because they weren’t even Christians. I attended the same public schools in Allegheny county as had my mother, my grandparents, my great grandparents, and every other generation of my family going back to the dawn of the nineteenth century. Until we moved to Rochester, when I was in the eighth grade, I was the only African American in any of my classes. My sisters and cousins were the only other African Americans in our schools. Therefore, we got the same point of view of the world, and our place in it as our white classmates, with one exception.

I was surprised to learn in school that my family was probably descended from Africans who were brought to the New World as slaves. This didn’t really bother me at the time, because from what I learned about African, my ancestors were fortunate in being rescued, even if it involved slavery. The alternative would have been for them to have lived purposeless lives running around jungles in loin cloths, chasing wild animals, and eating each other. You are all familiar with the stereotypes we saw in the Tarzan movies. The movies made a bad situation even worse, because only the white guy, Tarzan, was able to swing through the jungles using the vines. The stupid natives had to travel everywhere on foot. He was also the only one capable of communicating with the animals, which of course always came to the rescue. I know you are going to say that these were only movies, not to be taken seriously, but to a child growing up with no balancing sources of information, the images were very real. I can still remember sitting in class when we discussed Africa and thinking of how lucky I was to be in America, regardless of the toll it may have taken on my ancestors. I think Alex Haley’s “Roots,” the television mini-series, made a major contribution to humanizing the general perception of Africa during the era of the slave trade. But even that did not touch upon the devastation of the forced removal of upwards of fifteen million inhabitants over a period of 350 years on the life and culture of the continent; or of the destruction trade brought to cities, towns, and whole civilizations.

It wasn’t until I attended college that I learned there were civilized parts of

Africa, and that there had been African civilizations long before the arrival of Europeans. Although we had studied Egypt, it was never pointed out that Egypt was in Africa, that the Egyptians were Africans, or that they were related to and mixed with the Nubians and Ethiopians as well as other groups in what we now call the Middle East. We were led to believe that the Sahara desert extended from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea. Everything north was white, civilized and European, everything south was black, primitive and African.

Recent archeological findings in Africa and independent DNA research at my alma mater, the University of California at Berkeley, have come up with some new interesting ideas about Africa's role in human development. Both have come to the conclusion that we are all descended from a common ancestor, and that ancestor originated in Africa. Therefore, it would be safe to say today that we are all people of African descent. It is just a matter of when your ancestors left the continent, two hundred years ago as some of mine did, or two hundred thousand years ago as the ancestors of modern Europeans did. It will be interesting to see how this information is incorporated into curriculum.

In school I learned about the development of Greek and Roman civilizations, and all about their contributions to the development of 'our' western, European, American culture. Along the way we heard that there were also highly developed civilization in the East—in India, China, and Japan, but they weren't as important for our purposes because our culture was derived from Europe, and along with the Europeans, we ruled the world. There were also rumors that there has been civilization in North and South America before their discovery by Christopher Columbus, but the Aztecs, Mayans, and Incas had disappeared a longtime ago, leaving no significant contributions. We needn't concern ourselves with about them, they were peripheral to 'real' civilization. Even then I thought it was presumptuous of Columbus to claim to discover a whole continent of people, but that is what the teachers and books told us. Who was I to question. You will notice that the 1992 quincentennial became the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyages of exploration rather than his discovery of America. I think we all learned a great deal about ourselves and our distorted European perception of history as we proceed through the quincentennial year. I was shocked to learn that over 90% of the native Americans who inhabit the New World were slaughtered or died from disease during the first decades of Spanish conquest.

I was surprised to learn of the African influences in the new world which preceded Columbus's arrival. Any of you who have read Ivan Van Sertima's book *They Came Before Columbus* are familiar with this information. As I said earlier, I learned the same version of American history as all of my white

classmates. I did not know how large the African population had been in colonial America, I did not know that there had been stable black communities in the North from the very earliest European settlements, even though my own family was a product of one. I did not know African Americans fought on both sides of the Revolutionary War. I did not know that African Americans fought on both sides of the Revolutionary War. I did not know African Americans fought on both sides of the Civil War or that both the Union and Confederacy had black regiments. I found out recently that my own great-great grandfather, John S. Peterson, had enlisted in the Union Army in 1853 and died in 1864 at the age of 36 at Point Lookout, Maryland, leaving behind a wife and four children. John Peterson had to enlist in a Massachusetts Regiment because the State of New York would not allow blacks to serve in white regiments, and refused to establish black ones. He had no way of knowing back then that it would be nearly a century before this country would allow only one of his descendants that privilege of offering the same sacrifice or giving his life in a non-segregated military unit. If that descendant were gay he, or she, could not serve, even today.

When I reached high school, the only black historical figures I knew of were Booker T. Washington and Dr. George Washington Carver. Washington was famous for establishing Tuskegee Institute and advocating vocational training for blacks, and Carver was famous for inventing uses of pecans, sweet potatoes, soybeans, and peanuts which saved the agricultural economy of the south following the civil war. It was in high school that I discovered Frederick Douglass, even though his body was buried less than a mile from my home in Rochester, New York. Harriet Tubman lived and died less than fifty miles away in Auburn, New York, but this was a discovery I made on my own, it was not something I learned in school.

This background gives you an idea of my perception of the world when I graduated from high school. I was well versed in European history, math, literature, art, and culture. But I knew little else. I had no idea of how involved my ancestors had been in shaping American history, and thought the contribution of other "minority" groups had been equally negligible. Unfortunately, this same kind of miseducation was still going on in many of our schools across the country until relatively recently. Many of our high school graduates, both white and black, know little more about the contribution of Africans, African Americans, or other non-European than I did thirty years ago.

This brings me back to my original point. Multiculturalism is one of the many tools we have to combat the violence that is being done to our youth by a curriculum that over-emphasizes the European nature of contemporary American history, life, and culture, and undervalues, distorts, or simply

ignores the contributions of all others. Monoculturalism undermines the self-esteem of members of so called minority groups, and gives a false sense of superiority and arrogance to members of the dominant culture. As information professionals, it is our responsibility to become active participants in efforts to correct the deficiencies of the past, and to balance biases in our collections and in the information resources we provide our patrons access to.

We must embrace cultural diversity, not because it is politically correct, but because we live in a diverse culture drawing strength from a wide range of sources. I consider myself one of the fortunate ones. I have overcome the bigotry, prejudice, and bias which was an unconscious part of my early education. I cannot blame my teachers for not teaching me things of which they themselves were not aware. I will however, blame myself, and all of you, for allowing the myths and distortions which were a part of my education to perpetuate themselves, now that we know better. Multiculturalism is one of the many tools to be employed in the endeavor. To fail to address this issue among ourselves and within the profession is to participate in an act of violence for which we will all ultimately have to pay.

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