Redefining the American Canon: Multicultural Identities, Assimilation Ethic and American Solidarity (Section 2)

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Cultural Pluralism: William James and John Dewey

William James is the first thinker to present a pluralist idea of social life; but his pluralistic vision is fraught with a sense of diversity. James grants, with some reservation, a pluralistic vision "with a universe composed of many original principles, provided we be only allowed to believe that the divine principle remains supreme, and that the others are subordinate."[45] He sees a plural society functioning as a federation and not managed as a monarchy. James' idea was later modified and reintroduced in John Dewey's moral vision of democracy designed to uphold "the dignity and the worth of the individual." Dewey's vision emerges clearly in *Democracy and Education*; he writes:

> Through mutual respect, mutual toleration, give and take, the pooling of experiences, it is ultimately the only method by which human beings can succeed in carrying on this experiment in which we are all engaged, whether we want to be or not, the greatest experiment of humanity—that of living together in ways in which the life of each of us is at once profitable in the deepest sense of the word, profitable to himself and helpful in the building up of the individuality of others.[46]

Proponents of multiculturalism, who see unequal distribution of power, discrimination and exploitation in an unequal and unjust social order, reject Dewey's notion of "mutual toleration" in a democratic ideal. Marginalized and unequal groups espousing multiculturalism do not see themselves as helping to build the "individuality of others." In the 1920s Dewey's own student, Randolph Bourne, employed the notion of cultural pluralism to defend ethnic provincialism, something that multiculturalism is doing today.

It could be helpful to employ James' definition of pluralism once more, this time from an entirely skeptical point of view. James writes in *A Pluralistic Universe*[47] (1909) thus:

> Pragmatically interpreted, pluralism or the doctrine that it is many means only that the sundry parts of reality *may be externally related.* Everything you can think of, however vast or inclusive, has on the pluralistic view a genuinely 'internal' environment of sort or amount. Things are 'with' one another in many ways, but nothing includes everything, or dominates over everything. The word 'and' trails along after every sentence. Something always escapes. 'Ever not quite' has to be said of the best attempts made anywhere in the universe at attaining all-inclusiveness. The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective center of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity.

James believes that reality possesses both an external and an internal environment. It is possible to see an external interconnectedness in things but somewhat difficult to find an internal "all-inclusiveness." Something always escapes unification and sameness. Therefore, any "center of consciousness or

action" has its own "self-governing" system and cannot be unified. This is the problem a multicultural, pluralistic paradigm faces when it confronts the sense of community or an idea of solidarity.

A cultural pluralism that emphasizes a narrow ethnic provincialism must give way to a broad-based cultural cosmopolitanism that includes dialogue, building of human values and democratic principles. Constant change through constructive dialogue must help multiculturalism to adjust to a new social order. Both Gitlin and Hollinger agree that though cultural pluralism is a child of history it must grow and adapt itself to the changing needs of reality. Ethnicity, while retaining its separateness, must subsume a larger human society of which it is a part and, as such, must contribute to its growth and development if it wishes to survive in a wholesome way. In other words, it is not impossible to maintain an ethnic solidarity and an affiliated solidarity at the same time. We are all inheritors of an *ethnos* or historical ethnic solidarity, and we also willingly co-opt with others.

Hollinger calls this cosmopolitan capacity "postethnic," a capacity that allows us to reach out and interact with the sensibilities of "others" through our sense of "we." Hollinger's postethnicity moves optimistically ahead carrying the talisman of Henry James' "American welcome," exhorting his own people to gladly receive the new immigrants as siblings. James was perhaps not aware of the dangers inherent in such a hearty American welcome. He did not envisage the possibility that The American Scene might be wrecked at the hard rock of American white racism or besieged by the militant anger of ethnic minorities. The characteristic Jamesian exhortation, that the American "we" must develop the broadmindedness to bring the alien "they" within the institution of the extended family, echoes in Hollinger. Gitlin is more circumspect; but finally grants that the political future in America can become viable if multiple bridges are constructed between our conception of "us" and their

conception of "them."

This new line of liberal thinking on multiculturalism, exhorting the individual to eschew solidarity with an ethnic order, assumes a culturally liberated individual acting independently and holistically. But as we all know this is a mere ideal. Human beings do not invariably act in this manner. They are creatures of their own circumstance and identity. Hollinger, however, grants them the "right of exit" (Joseph Raz's phrase) from their religious, ethnic or racial communities. He believes that, by and large, people possess the ability to overcome the notion that their "grandparents are destiny." Though Hollinger agrees with Michael Sandel that our "choices and conduct" are governed by a history that we "neither summon nor command," he argues that the real concern is "how much choice" exists "in relation to given desires." Hollinger does not analyze the mechanism that controls human desire or whether this mechanism is subservient to human will. Working within the liberal tradition, Hollinger assumes an individual is in control of his desires, unencumbered by the claims of many communities that shape his identity. Furthermore, Hollinger grants that an individual not only possesses the freedom to make conscious choices, but also incorporates the cultural "otherness" in that choice.

Hollinger points at the direction ideal multiculturalism ought to take. He hopes that an ideal multicultural group "prefers voluntary to prescribed affiliations, appreciates multiple identities, pushes for communities of wide scope, recognizes the constructed character of ethno-racial groups, and accepts the formation of new groups as part of the normal life of a democratic society." Holinger's agenda can only be actualized if individuals and the groups to which they belong possess real motivation and will. Hollinger forgets that the so-called will of social/ethnic groups largely depend on a socio-economic context. Be as it may, multiculturalism in America remains both unpredictable and repressed.

Neo-Pragmatism and its Variants

Both multiculturalism and cosmopolitan pragmatism focus their attention on alterity. A distinction must be made between cosmopolitan pragmatism and the neo-pragmatism of theorists such as Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, Barbara Herrnstein Smith and the anti-foundationalist bias of pragmatist like Richard Rorty. These theorists do not see the possibility of bridging the divide with the "other" because critical constructs are developed primarily by a community (institutional and professional) and only work to strengthen its values. This is nothing unusual or new. A community will always work to safeguard its interests and those of its members if it wishes to survive. Therefore criticism is severely limited by self-interest and prejudice, preventing criticism to be an impartial arbiter of two or more competing and sometimes rival identities. Rorty's neo-pragmatism would make us believe that all interpretation is an attempt to legitimate or realize our desires.

Different hues of neo-pragmatism developed in America, include philosophers such as, Richard J. Bernstein, Jeffrey Stout, Cornel West, Henry Samuel Levinson, Hilary Putnam, Charlene Haddock Siegfried, Nancy Frazer, John McDermott and Richard Rorty; social scientists such as C. Wright Mills, Jerome Bruner, Clifford Geertz and Renato Rosaldo; literary critics such as Richard Poirier, Frank Lentricchia, Steven Mailloux, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Ross Posnock and Peter Carafiol; historians such as Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, James Livingston, James Kloppenberg, Alex Callinicos and Hollinger; legalists such as Richard Posner and Thomas C. Gray; critics such as Stanley Cavell, Martha Nussbaum, Charles Taylor and Giles Gunn. They try to understand and make sense of a world not given to the certitude of metaphysical theorizing. The Continental version of neo-pragmatism seems more theoretical and self-conscious including theorists such as Jurgen Habermas, Michael Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and Hans Joas. The alternative

pragmatism (anti theory or "against theory" discourse) of theorists and critics attempts to evaluate the success and failure of disciplines and discourses developed by human beings to combat a world of metaphysical incertitude and uncertainty.

Recently a new interdisciplinary pragmatism has developed that studies methods and concepts of our understanding of the world we live in and ourselves. It involves hybridity of cultures, impure identities, fluidity, and splitting of subject. This pragmatism, Stanley Fish believes, shies away from *Doing What Comes Naturally*,[48] but moves towards doing things through questioning well-established assumptions. Fish believes that when such change becomes inevitable critical self-consciousness becomes redundant. He writes:

> The fact that change can neither be willed nor stopped means that critical self-consciousness is at once impossible and superfluous. It is impossible because there is no action or motion of the self that exists apart from the "prevailing realm of purposes" and therefore no way of achieving distance from that realm; and it is superfluous because the prevailing realm of purposes is, in the very act of elaborating itself, turning itself into something other than it was.... The failure of critical self-consciousness is a failure without consequences since everything it would achieve—change, the undoing of the status quo, the redistribution of power and authority, the emergence of new forms of action—is already achieved by the ordinary and everyday efforts by which, in innumerable situations, large and small, each of us attempts to alter the beliefs of another.[49]

Some argue that even in a highly individualistic, open and competitive society as America we do not have the freedom to shape significant aspects of either the self or the other, what to speak of semi-modernized societies in the Third World. So many aspects of consciousness may be the result of large-scale

social and economic change that are left unsaid. We do see problems arising from philosophical perspective of individualism that acquire methodological dimensions. Undoubtedly there are inherent problems of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. In other words there exists an asymmetry of power in the capacity to construct the identity of the self. This is more important than any other element that goes in the construction of the self. Asymmetry ultimately relates to economic and cultural aspects. The whole debate is not about race relations in America but about cultures, representation and economic privilege. We need to link the issues of compulsion to choice or necessity to free will. In other words, it is a given will, not amenable to individual will, which regulates certain larger forces to change. These conditions are given as long as you have large groups undergoing social change.

There is a difference between somebody who opts out of the system and someone who wishes to change society. The second is a difficult choice. Therefore, instead of wallowing in the activities of a critical self-conscious Morris Dickstein suggests that we must question "all forms of received opinion without succumbing to radical doubt and seek to provide a general approach to a firmer knowledge in many areas without developing into a rigid methodology." We must develop firm knowledge by questioning historical opinion, and not succumb to "rigid methodology." Easier said than done.

Self and Self-knowledge: Pierce, Rorty and James

The notion of the fallibility of self has concerned religious thinkers and pragmatists for sometime now. It is possible to trace the idea of an ever-correcting self-knowledge to Charles Saunder Peirce's theory of fallibilism—the notion that any conclusion possesses the possibility of revision. However, pragmatists, such as Rorty, dismiss Pierce as "esoteric," "fantastically elaborate," and an "infuriating philosopher."[50] Nevertheless his impact persists.

William James unravels the mystery of the "sick soul" in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by maintaining that human nature is rooted in failure. And therefore "only through the personal experience of humiliation" it gives rise to that a "deeper sense of life's significance" is realized.[51] W.E.B. DuBois grapples with the problematic self; Theodor Adorno reveals the paradox of a modern preoccupation with the expression of feeling and the inability to do so; George Herbert Mead sees the self as undergoing social reconstruction; Lionel Trilling's concerns himself with the "boundaryless" self and the shift from personal sincerity to individual authenticity; Richard Sennett discusses the fall of public man and the compulsive obsession with the legitimacy of the private self; Cornel West identifies the self with Fanon's "wretched of the earth; and Rorty finds a marginalized and humiliated self. Cosmopolitan pragmatism tries to resolve, on the one hand, the problem of the self, reaching out to the "other," and on the other, preventing the self to see the "other" as surrogate.

The Problem of Otherness: Bernstein, Levinas, Derrida, Bakhtin

Richard J. Bernstein, in his book *The New Constellation*,[52] places the problem of "otherness" as a central philosophical paradigm to a theory of knowledge. He argues that self must willingly risk its assumptions and convictions in order to encounter something new and different. Our knowledge and, therefore, our understanding are always possible when we encounter the alien, the other. The only problem in this encounter, as Emmanuel Levinas points out, is that the alterity of the other gets incorporated through understanding into "sameness." The other is always at a risk of losing his identity that he so diligently wants to preserve. Furthermore, Levinas argues that since self is ethically formed it is difficult to understand how the "other" in an encounter can manage to retain his alterity. Jacques Derrida has the answer to this ques-

tion. He believes that the other preserves his alterity by acting as an alter ego. In other words Levinas develops the narrative of self and other as a reciprocal trope capable of functioning through themes of enmity, estrangement, abjection and violence. Mikhail Bakhtin sees self and other interacting from different positions and areas of reference; their interaction is never transparent. The other can never be completely understood as understanding takes place from the locus standi of the self. Bernstein, unlike Isaiah Berlin, believes that when the self invokes an ethical obligation to the other, it can either understand the "other" or understand self in relation to the "other."

Defining the self in relation to the other becomes a major preoccupation of modern pedagogy. American educational theorist Henry A. Giroux in his essay "Towards a Postmodern Pedagogy" believes that critical pedagogy must do two things. Firstly it must incorporate ways to see how "identities and subjectivities are constructed in multiple and contradictory ways." And secondly it must study "difference" between interacting groups aiding or abetting a "democratic society."[53]

A new problem arises when the self is no longer ethically obliged but instead feels animosity towards the other. Race, ethnicity, religion, gender, nation and class combine not only to see the "other" as different but threatening. When this happens, political theorist William E. Connolly believes, cultural and personal identity gets pitted against, and subsequently defined through, difference and threat from the "other." A situation of this kind invariably leads to the "dogmatization of identity" and can be resisted by a new ethics that understands difference. Connolly calls the new ethics a "care for difference." However, the preservation of cultural identity, not only through invoking the idea of difference but demonizing the other, leads at best to a hardened position and at worst to ethnic violence. Clifford Geertz's vision of self and other exerting "a genuine and reciprocal, impact on one another"

sounds far-fetched in such an atmosphere. At the close of the twentieth century, perhaps the bloodiest century in the history of mankind, we must rethink the question: What makes an individual human?

Human Solidarity

The linking up of our conception of being human and our sense of human solidarity runs deep in Western thought. Human bonds not only exist within a specific culture but also transcend it and operate inter-culturally. This was seen as an inarguable intellectual construction. Christian theology repeatedly built a notion of shared essences cutting across race, nation and gender. Social thinkers in the 19th century such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Tonnies and Emlie Durkheim replaced conventional Christianity with a religion of humanity. Nineteenth century writers such as Leo Tolstoy, George Eliot, Honore de Balzac, Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad took up themes of human feeling, human solidarity, human attributes, human desires and human mystery to give a sense of unified oneness to mankind. Today such phrases as original sin, human soul, inalienable human rights, imagio dei find few takers.

The trope of human solidarity, seen as a byproduct of Western imperialism, has been vociferously attacked in recent times by another imperialist discipline, anthropology. Geertz believes that man does not possess universal nature but universal potential that are realized in specific situations. Since man does not possess a composite universal nature it becomes difficult to appeal to a collective ethical core in moments of crisis. We constantly see scapegoats in others and, symbolically or literally, sacrifice them in the hope of eventually exorcising our own phobias, guilt-ridden fantasies and vices. Kenneth Burke, who sees a process of "vicarious atonement" at work here, has analyzed this process of exteriorization and symbolic renewal at length. Burke believes that

the scapegoat becomes a "chosen vessel" that is employed by others to "cleanse themselves" by heaping the "burden of their iniquities" on it. The violent intensity with which the ritual of displacement is conducted decides the "curative" power of the scapegoat. The victim and the residual violence become not only instrumental in restoring the individual and healing society but also fusing with each other resulting in a symbiosis. In other words we first project our guilt, mortification and inadequacy on a person then we malign and ostracize him. In this manner we regain health and wellbeing. This complex process of identity formation works in the following manner: first to malign difference, then to elevate it to the level of a religious sacrifice, and then feel empowered.

Can we escape this process of conceptualization? Is there a way out? Burke suggests that identity may be constructed not in terms of solidarity but in terms of a "fundamental kinship with the enemy," someone against whom we define ourselves. The self and other can stand facing each other like prismatic mirrors refracting unseen aspects of each other. Even while we are constructing a sense of difference we are inextricably intertwined, sharing somewhat similar histories, undergoing not altogether divergent fates. Burke goes further to suggest that aspects of the self may be seen as aspects of the other and vice versa. This implies in Derrida's logic that we ought to develop the ability to understand and appreciate the ways in which the "other" constructs itself as different aspects of the ego or "I."

Black Consciousness

This intellectual construct has oft been exemplified in Afro-American folk literature and religion. Sociologists, folklorists, ethnomusicologists, cultural historians and literary critics have repeatedly discovered a healthy preservation of Afro-American tradition in its passage through slavery into

institutional racism. This survival has to do with the ability of Afro-Americans to construct imaginative worlds in the gaps and paradoxes they saw between the white and the black worlds. The soul of Afro-American tradition remained free to traverse vast spaces it saw as unclaimed territory; and it built upon it a spiritual world of nostalgia, hope and possibilities. This gave them, on the one hand, the advantage of maintaining solidarity and on the other, going beyond it through a reciprocal relationship with the "other." In this way, as historian Lawrence W. Levine tells us in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom*,[54] Afro-Americans responded to legal slavery in ways that prevented it from turning into spiritual slavery.

Levine's book powerfully attacks the insidious liberal tradition of misrepresenting the Afro-American experience. The misrepresentation begins about the time of the Second World War with Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) and mushrooms into an industry in the Eighties—E. Franklin Frazer's *The Negro in the United States* (1957), Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963), and Franz Fannon's *Toward the African Revolution* (1988). This liberal tradition contends that the antebellum South systematically destroyed black culture in America and did not allow a distinctive black identity to emerge, an identity that was free of white cultural dominance. And it further saw a departure in black culture either as deformation or divergence from the dominant and paternalistic white culture. Levine on the contrary argues that African culture was able to retain its religious beliefs, folk traditions and rhythms gaining in the course of time a personal mastery that provided both a psychic relief and psychological control of its situation. This method provided the blacks with the ability to resist the humility of degradation by whites.

Levine argues against Glazer and Moynihan that the blacks have not lost their sense of pride, history and solidarity, but have instead forged a resilient

culture that is capable of embodying their hopes and dreams. In other words, black history does not record a gradual acculturation to dominant white lifestyles and beliefs and occasional pathological behavior, but tells the story of a creative Afro-American imagination finding expression through narrative, song, humor, hagiography, dance and religion.

Through these modes Afro-Americans established a kinship with the enemy—not through accommodation but subtle and silent acquisition. They acquired certain elements from the white culture and shaped them to suit their needs. In religious worship blacks did not merely graft African meaning to white religion. They were able to reinvent the idea of God by selective absorption of elements from the white "other" world—elements they needed to fulfil their interactions with the divine. They were able to reenact Biblical images of creation and salvation through dance, song, narrative and prayer. These ritualized reenactment of Biblical themes helped them to extend the boundaries of the spiritual world backwards till it became one with the narrative of deliverance of the Old Testament, and forward with the narratives of temporal fulfillment and beatitude of the New Testament. The Negro spirituals became "the record of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn." The spirituals, Levine contends, not only brought in aspects of an older worldview but also a sense of community. This helped in preventing individual fragmentation. "Here again," Levine states, "slave music confronts us with evidence, which indicates that, however seriously the slave system may have diminished the central communality that had bound African societies together, it was never able to destroy it totally or to leave the individual atomized and psychically defenseless before his white masters."[55]

After over three decades melting pot theorists such as sociologist Nathan

Glazer have discarded their assimilationist position upon recognizing multiculturalism as a major force defining American reality today. Glazer in his recent book entitled *We Are All Multiculturalists Now* posits that the transformative role of multiculturalism, and its offshoot Afrocentrism, has shifted the focus in American public schools from traditional Eurocentric syllabi to a diverse but confusing curriculum.[56] He finally concludes that both multiculturalists and anti-multiculturalists cannot escape the following four questions:

1. Whose truth must direct the framing of curriculum in public schools?
2. Will ethnicity undermine or strengthen national unity?
3. Will focus on social injustice increase or decrease civic disharmony?
4. Will multicultural education raise self-esteem and thereby heighten students' interest or will it generate irrelevance and ethnic fantasy?

Glazer believes that multiculturalism is an Afro-American backlash, the price America must pay for not incorporating African Americans, "in the same way and to the same degree it has incorporated so many groups."[57]

Glazer seems somewhat surprised by the victory of multiculturalism not so much in higher education but in American public schools beginning with California and New York and now spreading to school districts everywhere. American public schools established to mold American identity upon a common culture have in the last two decades shifted focus towards a multicultural curriculum that aims to foster diversity and seems unclear of American values. Multiculturalism not only subsumes the maintenance of cultural distinctiveness as the real function of schools but also highlights the oppressive majority attitude towards minority culture.

Newer brands of multiculturalism want to do radical things with American history and culture. Additive multiculturalism, as the name suggests, adds names of men and women from minority cultures, whereas trans-

formative multiculturalism wants to move away from a Eurocentric bias and attempts to rewrite American history and culture from the point of view of race and ethnicity. Before the advent of multiculturalism class division occupied centre stage and was responsible for a revision of American history. Today issues relating to workers or trade union sound suspect unless related to race or gender. Glazer wonders how women's studies find their way into multiculturalism since discrimination against women is predominantly a civil rights issue and not so much a cultural problem. However women's studies and the role of women in American history have come to stay more than perhaps the role of African Americans in the same history. Furthermore gays and Lesbian studies are beginning to occupy a place of importance in a multicultural ethos by the very argument for representation extended to women's studies. For at the root of a multicultural triumph lie the two key principles of American polity—equality and liberty. Obviously there are problems and pitfalls that multiculturalism faces in America today. Glazer believes that since the basic demand of multiculturalists is a constitutional "inclusion, not separation" American society based on a common culture may still survive.[58]

Postcolonial theory

In recent times in the United States, the notion of solidarity seems to be further eroded or redefined by the emergence of postcolonial theories of people like Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha and their relentless critics Ajaz Ahmed and Benita Parry. Postcolonial discourses develop around themes of nationality, trans-nationality and post-nationality employing diverse critical practices. Postcolonial theory, by and large, develops a critical discourse of an ideological hegemony of the colonizing other. If the colonized self wishes to free itself from this ideological subjugation it must not only resist the temptation to demonize the colonizing other, but also transcend the

rigid binary opposition that define their relationship.

II

Native American Writing: Precarious Alterity, Pragmatic Tolerance and Healthy Cooperation

> Being civilized means trying to do everything you don't want to, never doing anything you want to. It means dancing to the strings of custom and tradition; it means living in houses and never knowing or caring who is next door. These civilized white men want us to be like them—always dissatisfied, getting a hill and wanting a mountain.
>
> Thomas S. Whitecloud's (Chippewa) "Blue Winds Dancing"[59]

> Big Face did not hesitate, did not break off smiling. "It is better, we think, that fools should be judges. If people won't listen to them, no one will mind."
>
> D'Arcy McNickle, "Hard Riding"

Given the history and background of Native American writing, critical theorists see it as more suitable to a postcolonial perspective. However recent Native American writing, when approached from a historical position, fails to be convincingly categorized. Trying to overcome the limitation of a historical approach, recent criticism has tried to study the way Native American writing constructs the other. Apparently, three clear positions emerge centering upon

the theme of alterity. These positions vis-à-vis Native American writing are:

- Firstly, the trope of alterity is not just one component of identity amongst others.
- Secondly, alterity does not necessarily help to construct identity through an out-and-out opposition.
- Thirdly, alterity may help a precarious construction of identity constantly threatened by social, economic and other factors.

Seemingly, the third position looks more convincing than the first two, for obvious reasons.

Understanding Native American literature from the third perspective allows us to relinquish some conventional and simplistic ways of looking at it. One such way could be called the metaphysical approach that analyses the Indian's worldview and his place in it. From this position the Native American tradition, as reflected in its writings—that is oral (chants, ceremonies and songs), autobiographical (narratives, life histories, story cycles) and fictional (novels and lyrics)—is seen as a representation of its people's worldview. Such a view employ the researches of anthropologists and cultural historians to see in the life of tribal comminutes a harmony and symbiosis with the physical and spiritual worlds, sanctification of the spoken word, deification of the land, a deeper sense of community and collective remembering. Another conventional approach is to see the entire body of Native American literature as expressive of identical tendencies without any difference. We all know that the Navahos, Cherokees, Sioux, Osage, Langua, Pueblo, Blackfeet and Gros Ventura Indian tribes are quite different from each other; and as such their literatures are also different.

The second approach analyses Native American fiction as passing through three distinct stages of development. The first stage is assimilationist,

that is, while it rejects Indian cultural uniqueness it readily accepts white values. This stage is limited to the early part of the 20th century and includes fiction such as *Queen of the Woods* (1899) by Chief Simon Pokagon, *Wild Harvest* (1925) by Simon M. Oskison, and *Sundown* (1934) by John Joseph Mathews (Osage). Chief Pokagon tires hard to make us believe that native Americans are no different from the white Americans. Simon Oskison's develops the idea of the American dream of social success and economic wealth through sheer hard work. And Joseph Mathews is apologetic about certain Indian life styles.

One-eighth Osage, Mathews wrote only one highly autobiographical novel, *Sundown*, that laments the passage of the traditional Indian way of life in Oklahoma. The protagonist Challenge "Chal" Windzer lives up to the hope of his progressive father, goes to study at a university and does flight training in World War I. However Windzer becomes a stranger to his own community, cannot find the right work and becomes an alcoholic. The sinister oil derricks that scar the beautiful Osage landscape become symbolic of both wealth and exploitation of once Indian-owned territory. Though Windzer becomes inspired by the exemplary strength of Roan Horse, he lacks the moral fiber to achieve anything significant. He can only observe the oil town dying gradually after the Grand Frenzy is over, through a mixture of hopelessness and alcoholism.

Defeated and subdued, Indian Americans seek sustenance in their ancient traditions and ritual. During a cyclone three Osages, and Chal by default, perform their "ancient ritual of defiance and sacrifice" by riding into the eye of the storm, reaffirming their allegiance and demonstrating their bravery to their ancient Indian god Wah `Kon-Tah. Then lightning strikes a gas well causing a fire. Some soldiers try firing salvos of gunshots in an attempt to cut the flame from the jet of "roaring gas." The white Anglo-Saxons, the Indians and the

mixed-breeds watch the inferno in awe and fear. Each understand the symbolic significance in their own ways. The whites see it through the "thin man" on the hill exhorting his fellow beings to repent and be saved by Jesus. The Indians and the mixed-breeds see it as the "light of glory" emanating from the "Great Mysteries," giving them "a feeling of vague greatness and importance in the universe." Chal sees the idea of Christian repentance repugnant and moves his pony away from the scene: "Chal felt that a knot had come into his stomach, and the blood in his veins seemed to have turned to water, the water carrying some sort of poison. He turned his pony and rode away, shaking slightly." But the struggle for him is not over. He still must confront the other and challenge his own inner Indian weaknesses.

Chal feels angry with his mother because she sees his "heart" and questions his manly "courage." She knows he will do nothing significant in life. Once he decides to go to Harvard law school and become a great orator he is filled with courage. He goes to sleep under an old postoak while watching a robin feed her young. The old oak has stood there unmoved by the hustle and bustle of oil money and the departure of people once the oil reserves are exhausted. The old oak reflects a kind of "indifference" to the affairs of men and their lowly pretensions. Unconsciously Chal seeks a union with it becoming one under it during sleep.

The second stage, beginning in the late 30s, brings in the theme of rejection of the white world, at times verging on strong protest. Furthermore the desire to return to native Indian beliefs and practices, what is called the "return of the native," dominates literature of this period. This stage includes works by writers such as D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936) and N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968).

McNickle's *The Surrounded* is an enigmatic work. Set in the Flathead/Kootenai Reservation in northwest Montana the novel, on the one,

hand espouses Native American values and, on the other, encourages them to assimilate into mainstream American life by becoming Christians. The novel creates turncoats who renounce their Catholic baptism and return to the heathen pre-missionary world of their forefathers. This must be understood in the context of missionization. The commonly held view was that Indians did not possess a soul. They were rounded up, converted to Christianity and implanted with a soul. The West created the idea of the American Indian just as it invented America. The notion of westward expansion gave rise to political and demographic problems. American Indian land was taken by force and they were put into reservations. Hollywood has become the greatest enemy of Indian Americans, constantly defining who Native Americans are. It must be understood that American Indians possess different languages, different worldview and extensive philosophical constructs. Therefore dialogue becomes an important and necessary tool to understand their uniqueness and problems. In the light of this historical background it is not at all surprising to see McNickle's radicalism as both unpalatable and unacceptable to Christians in Montana, his hometown in the 30s. McNickle's own assimilation in American society has not dampened his spirit to campaign for Native American rights of self-determination. McNickle believes that when the right to determination is denied to them conflict arises.

The third stage begins in late 70s developing the theme of acceptance and understanding. The earlier confrontation and protest has mellowed into a process of reconstructing some of the shaken Native American beliefs and traditions. Three works of fiction bring out this process: James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), Leslie Mormon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), "Lullaby" of *Storyteller* (1981) and Gerald Vizenor's *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978).

Silko's *Ceremony* builds upon a five-hundred-year old history of the

Lagunas, the environment of the reservation already eroded by the threat of nuclear destruction, and the pervasive presence of evil within. Through repetition of themes Silko binds the ancient world with the modern. Events in a community are seen as repetitive and the individual senses them through a collective consciousness that is available upon recall to a selective few. Old Grandma in *Ceremony* feels that she has "heard these stories before." The only thing she feels is that "the names sound different." The now famous short story "Lullaby," included in Silko's *Storyteller* and recently in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature Volume 2*, reiterates this theme. The story has become a metaphor for the Native American predicament in the United States. The sense of material dispossession encountered by native Americans has been so intense and widespread that, had it not been for their cosmic and human philosophy they would never have been able to come out of their misery. In other words deprived of their land they were still able to maintain a relationship with it on a fundamental and cosmic level. And that has given them strength to sustain their lives and that of their community. The intrinsic relationship between Navajo culture and nature, symbolized in the song of healing or Yeibichei, is seen as inherent in the movement of the wind and snow. Assimilation seems impossible as language and culture separates.

Ayah believes that learning the language of the white man has only brought misery to her and her husband. When her children are taken away by doctors after she unwittingly signs papers, she curses her husband for having "taught her to sign her name." Then Chato falls ill and the "white rancher" throws them out of the shack. Ayah becomes "satisfied" that the "white man" has repaid Chato's "years of loyalty and work" in this fashion. Also, she is filled with a perverse sense of satisfaction that Chato's knowledge of the white man's culture still left him outside it: "All of Chato's fine-sounding English talk didn't change things." This distrust of the other exists on both

sides. The blonde woman who brings Ayah's children to meet her gets "frightened" when she sees them "jabbering excitedly in a language she did not know." Chato out of work journeys further away from his roots leading a life of ease, decadence and sloth. On government dole he becomes a drunkard and a vagabond. Though Ayah's love for her children remains she also loses her daily family and social responsibility. As both Ayah and Chato rest in sandstone mesa wrapped together, night falls. She gazes at the clouds flying like horses, at the "purity" of the stars in Orion and the moon. Then it begins to snow lightly and she is full of maternal love and human feeling. Perhaps something abides in her, a deep bond with those aspects of nature that renew and revitalize the spirit. Her relationships with her children, husband Chato and her mother have no intrinsic difference. They are one and the same to her.

"Lullaby" affirms the vitality and the therapeutic power of the oral tradition in the characters of both Ayah and Chato. The story concludes with a song that encapsulates the philosophy idyllically thus:

We are together always
We are together always
There never was a time
When this
Was not so.

It is this richness of spirit and feeling that refurbishes the present and transforms the individual to include the other. The effects of the demeaning and sordid present are washed in the communion with nature. And this comes as a surprise to the reader. The reader is ready to cry with Ayah and reach a Christian purification; but instead he finds transcendence and communion with the cosmos. The reader also wishes to lie down, drunk with disappointment, and die with Chato, but instead finds sleep and renewal. The story

escapes the ethical framework of a Christian discourse and enters the primitive cosmology of Native American metaphysics. If escape from self and others, renewal in a primitive cosmology and return to self and others, is the only way out for multiculturalism it may find many sympathizers but few takers.

Yet another, but a partly convincing explanation could be that Silko's world does not see the "other" as white but as the errant and ignorant Indian who need to be brought back to the rich resources of his cultural past through gentle persuasion. The journey back to a rejuvenation of culture is never easy. The reconstruction of the self from within, to fight the evil inside, in a world where the "other" is easily identifiable and the evil within difficult to see, is undoubtedly a courageous act. And Silko does it with equanimity and Native American poise. But this interpretation seems to possess a hidden agenda and may not seem truly convincing either aesthetically or intellectually.

James Welch draws sustenance from another Native American source, the Blackfeet and Gros Ventura traditions. Beneath the skin of a comic surrealism are serious issues that Welch handles: economic disadvantage giving rise to lack of college education which in turn destroys potential and closes possibilities of self-actualization. Economic disadvantage, dispossession and social marginalization defining ethnic identities are issues easily forgotten in America by literary critics who do not see individual freedom threatened by a liberal democracy that is pre-supposedly harnessed for individual happiness. Welch's novels poignantly share the sense of loss, escape into sex, a desire to forget through drinking and an alienation that sets in when nothing works. Both *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), show the unrealized potential of the protagonists; how they begin their life as star athletes but afterwards lead aimless and dissolute lives. The unhurried acceptance of disaster, a valorized timeless ennui, and an unperturbed attitude to essential human themes of life and death make these two novels surprisingly

distinctive. Living on the psychological fringes of white culture, Welch's protagonists shape the mood and structure of the novels by their responses. *Fools Crow* (1986) becomes a return to an accessible Indian past replete with customs and rituals that refurbish the present, but the threat of the destructive present is always there. *Indian Lawyer* (1990) allows a negative impact upon the Native American people and grapples with the theme of human degeneration and corruptibility.

Winter in the Blood is also an attempt to simultaneously explore the past and distance oneself from the debilitating effects of the present as perhaps Yellow Calf, who cohabits with the beautiful but ostracized wife of the slain Standing Bear, can do. The protagonist explores "desperate times," relives them as if he has always been a part of events that have happened before his time. He muses: "Sometimes in winter, when the wind has packed the snow and blown the clouds away, I can still hear the muttering of the people in their tepees." Yellow Calf, grandfather of the protagonist and a clandestine lover of the beautiful ex-wife of Standing Bear, allows the protagonist to understand the relationships of the past and make sense of it in the present. In response to searching questions Yellow Calf replies that: "When one is blind and old he loses track of the years.... He knows each season in its place because he can feel it, but time becomes a procession. Time feeds upon itself and grows fat.... To an old dog like myself, the only cycle begins with birth and ends in death. This is the only cycle I know."

If Silko is the hope to reverse the formation of cultural identities through symbiosis and cooperation and not through difference and violence as is evident in Welch, then her fiction stands at the center of critical discourses of identity formation. If this is the direction she is showing then this is the direction America must take. If multiculturalism, built upon Silko's wisdom, could help free individuals to work creatively with others then as Rorty affirms in

"Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism" there could exist the "possibility of as yet undreamt of, ever more diverse, forms of human happiness."

Rorty understood this in the early 80s in his now classic book *Consequences of Pragmatism Essays (1972–1980)* when the debate between scientific culture and literary culture had become pugilistic . After discussing "Philosophy in America Today" and its hidden agenda he concludes on a positive note, a note that Silko voices through her fiction:

> ... I simply want to suggest that we keep pragmatic tolerance going as long as we can—that both sides see the other as honest, if misguided, colleagues, doing their best to bring light to a dark time. In particular we should remind ourselves that although there are relations between academic politics and real politics, they are not tight enough to justify carrying the passions of the latter over into the former.[60]

Notes and References

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