

New York City Writing Project NEWSLETTER

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A Note from the Editors

Not so long ago, the arithmetic of American civil rights was kindergarten-simple: black people, at least most of them, were the oppressed class, and whites, a good many of them, were the oppressors. America added a and b, found the sum abhorrent, and in 1965 factored in a revolutionary new x. It was called affirmative action.

Michael Wines, *New York Times*, 7/23/95

Through affirmative action, we Americans made a commitment to support equal opportunity which lead to somewhat greater diversity in schools and in the workplace. Now, thirty years later, many Americans are reconsidering this commitment.

Why is this happening? Our diversity as a nation has always produced tension and hostility, and we have always been ambivalent about strategies to redress historic wrongs. Every generation and every individual has had to debate anew and act upon the perils and possibilities associated with accommodating or resisting multiculturalism. To maintain a pluralistic democracy, we must continue the discourse and re-examine our approaches to reducing prejudice and affirming diversity.

In this newsletter we have included pieces that help us stay mindful of these issues. In the first article, Dr. Manning Marable, a professor of history and political science at Columbia University, and Director of the Institute for Research in African-American Studies, lays the groundwork and provides a context for the theme of this issue.

In the following articles, teachers reflect on personal and classroom experiences. Martin Haber argues for a Comparative Religion curriculum as a way to teach tolerance and respect for difference. Eugene Clark deconstructs assumptions made by his 3rd grade students about language, identity and privilege, while Emily Terte examines her school's policy on classroom grouping and how it raises questions about her own beliefs with respect to diversity and inclusion. In our *Teachers as Writers* column, Ann Bingham describes a vivid childhood experience with Jim Crow laws of the 1950's. We also include Alexander Vostok's reflections on *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende and Robin Cohen's review of Abraham Rodriguez's books about the Bronx.

The Newsletter is interested in hearing from you. If you have any ideas or pieces of writing about your classroom practice, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us.

Urban Education: Rethinking Possibilities

In the fall of 1994, the Institute for Literacy Studies sponsored a conference on urban education at which Dr. Manning Marable gave the keynote address. What follows are excerpts from his talk where he looks at issues of multiculturalism beginning with definitions of the term itself.

In charting the contours and challenges of urban education in the 1990's, especially in the context of New York City, I would like to cover four interrelated themes. My vantage point is not as an educator as much as that of political sociologist, historian and social critic of the black experience, and more generally, of the status of people of color, working people and poor people, as that status relates to the issues of literacy and learning.

I want to discuss the controversial debate surrounding "multiculturalism" and diversity within education institutions. Critics of multiculturalism have linked the concept with the concurrent controversy surrounding "political correctness" on campuses and in public school curricula. But we need to go beyond conservative rhetoric to define multiculturalism in relationship with the deconstruction of racial discrimination within our society. There are at least four divergent models or varieties of "multiculturalism" within educational institutions today.

For any oppressed people, questions of culture and identity are linked to the structure of power and privilege within society. Culture is the textured pattern of collective memory, the critical consciousness and aspirations of a people. When culture is constructed in the context of oppression, it may become an act of resistance.

This is why the national debate over "multiculturalism" assumes such critical significance within political circles, as well as in the context of the arts. With the demise of the Cold War, American conservatives have been denied the threat of Communism as the ideological glue which could unify the voices of racism and reaction.

Led by Reagan Secretary of Education William Bennett and former presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, conservatives have launched a "cultural war" against an unholy host of so-called new subversives, such as the proponents of "political correctness," affirmative action, black studies, gay and lesbian issues, feminism, and worst of all, "multiculturalism." But what white conservatives really are attempting to do

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is to preserve the idea of white male privilege. They understand that a more culturally diverse society threatens the traditional structures of white power and authority.

DEFINING MULTICULTURALISM

A working definition of multiculturalism begins with the recognition that our nation's cultural heritage does not begin and end with the intellectual and aesthetic products of western Europe. Multiculturalism rejects the model of cultural assimilation and social conformity which, within the context of our schools, has often relegated African-Americans, Latinos and other people of color to the cultural slums. The mythical "melting pot," in which a diverse number of ethnic antecedents were blended into a non-racist and thoroughly homogenized blend of cultures, never existed. Assimilation always assumed that the price of admission to America's cultural democracy for racial and ethnic minorities was the surrender of those things which truly made us unique: our languages and traditions, our foods and folkways, our religions and even our names. We were taught to honor the "dead white males" whose names are carved above our libraries and whose texts are still mandatory assignments in Western Civilization courses.

The cultural foundations of the United States draw much of their creativity and originality from African, Latino, American Indian and Asian elements. Multiculturalism suggests that the cross-cultural literacy and awareness of these diverse groups is critical in understanding the essence of the American experience "from the bottom up."

Part of the general confusion about the concept of multiculturalism is that there are strikingly different and sometimes conflicting interpretations about its meaning. Within the U.S. there are at least four major interpretations of "multiculturalism," reflecting the widely diverse ethnic, racial and social class composition of the nation. In very simplistic terms, these contradictory interpretations are "corporate multiculturalism," "liberal multiculturalism," "racial autonomy," or "minority group identity," and "radical democratic multiculturalism."

Corporate multiculturalism seeks to highlight the cultural and social diversity of America's population, making managers and corporate executives more sensitive to differences such as race, gender, age, language, physical ability, and sexual orientation in the labor force. A number of major corporations regularly sponsor special programs honoring Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birthday, or the Mexican-American holiday, "Cinco de Mayo." Others hold

"multicultural audits" for their staff and personnel, workshops and training sessions emphasizing awareness and sensitivity to people of color, women and others.

The major reasons for this multicultural metamorphosis among dozens of America's largest corporations can be summarized in two phrases: "minority markets" and "labor force demographics." The value of the African-American consumer market in the U.S. exceeds \$300 billion annually; the Spanish-speaking consumer market is not far behind, at \$240 billion annually. Since the early 1960's, there has been substantial evidence from marketing researchers indicating that African-Americans and Latinos have strikingly different buying habits than whites. To reach this growing consumer market, white corporations are now forced to do much more than produce advertisements featuring black, Asian-American and Hispanic actors displaying their products. Multicultural marketing utilizes elements of minority cultures in order to appeal directly to nonwhite consumers.

As the overall labor force becomes increasingly Asian, Latino, Caribbean and African-American, the pressure increases on corporations to hire greater numbers of nonwhites managers and executives, and to distribute their product through minority-owned firms. Of course, nowhere in the discourse of corporate multiculturalism is the idea that "racism" is not an accidental element of corporate social relations. Instead, the basic concept is to "celebrate diversity" of all kinds and varieties, while criticizing no one. Troubling concepts like "exploitation," "racism," "sexism," and "homophobia" are rarely mentioned.

Liberal multiculturalism, by contrast, is explicitly anti-racist, and takes for granted that educational institutions have a powerful social responsibility to deconstruct the ideology of human inequality. It is genuinely concerned with educational psychology, curriculum theory and cultural criticism. But like corporate multiculturalism, it does not adequately or fully address the inequalities of power, resources and privilege which separate most Latinos, African Americans and many Asian Americans from the great majority of white upper and middle class Americans. It does not conceive of itself as a praxis, a theory which seeks to transform the reality of unequal power relations. Rather, it attempts to articulate the perceived interests of minority groups to increase their influence within the existing mainstream. In short, liberal multiculturalism is "liberalism" within the framework of cultural diversity and pluralism. The most articulate and influential proponent of this perspective is Henry Louis Gates, Harvard University's Director of African-American Studies.

The third model of multiculturalism is racial autonomy, or what might be termed "minority group identity." Here, advocates of diversity praise the artifacts, rituals and histories of non-Western people as "original," "unique," and even superior to those of western Europe and white America. They juxtapose the destructive discrimination of "Eurocentrism" with the necessity to construct a counter hegemonic ideological and cultural world view. For many people of African descent, this has been translated into the cultural and educational movement called "Afrocentrism." First developed as a theoretical concept by Temple University scholar Molefi Asante, Afrocentrism has quickly inspired a virtual explosion of children's books, curriculum guides, cultural, historical, and educational textbooks, and literary works.

Newsletter Staff

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The strengths of the Afrocentric perspective and analysis are undeniable: the fostering of pride, group solidarity and self-respect among blacks themselves; a richer appreciation for African languages, art, music, ancient philosophies and cultural traditions; a commitment to unearth and to describe the genius and creativity of blacks in the context of a racist and unforgiving America. As a paradigm for understanding and reinterpreting the contours of the African experience, Afrocentrism also advances an internationalist perspective, drawing correlation between black communities from Lagos to Los Angeles, from Brooklyn's Bedford Stuyvesant to London's Brixton.

The contradictions and weaknesses of Afrocentrism are just as striking. Although frequently discussed in the context of multiculturalism, in many respects Afrocentrism is theoretically and programmatically at odds with the larger trend toward pluralism and educational diversity. Conceptually, many Afrocentrists have absolutely no desire to engage in a critical discourse with white America, at any level. They retreat into a bipolar model of racial relations, which delineates the contours of the black experience from a photographic negative of whiteness. In effect, this "freezes" the meaning of culture, reducing the dynamics and multiple currents of interpersonal and group interaction to a rigid set of historical categories. Afrocentrism rarely explores the profound cultural dynamics of Creolization and multiple identities of nationalism and ethnicity found

throughout the black world, from the Hispanicized blackness of the Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Colombians, to the vast complexities of race in Cuba and Brazil, to the distinctions and tensions separating rural conservative Christian blacks in the Mississippi Delta and the cosmopolitan, urban, secular, Hip-Hop culture of young blacks in Watts, Harlem, and Chicago's South Side. But the most serious weakness of Afrocentrism is its general failure to integrate the insights of cultural difference drawn from the perspectives of gender, sexual orientation, and class. It has no theory of power which goes beyond a racialized description of how whites, as a monolithic category, benefit materially, psychologically and politically from institutional racism. Thus, rather than seeking allies across the boundaries of race, gender and class, most Afrocentrists approach the world as the main character in Ralph Ellison's classic novel, *Invisible Man*: enclosed inside a windowless room filled with thousands of glowing light bulbs—illumination without vision.

Finally, there is the insurgent movement toward "radical democratic multiculturalism," or what might be described more accurately as a transformationist cultural critique. These educators, artists, and performers, writers and scholars are inspired by the legacy of W.E.B. DuBois and Paul Robeson. They emphasize the parallels between the cultural experiences of America's minority groups with oppressed people throughout the world. Discussions of culture are always linked to the question of power, and the ways in

which ideology and aesthetics are used to dominate or control oppressed people. The goal of the radical democratic multiculturalists is not the liberal inclusion of representative numbers of blacks, Latinos and others into the literary canon, media and cultural mainstream, but the democratic restructuring of the system of cultural and political power itself. It is to rethink the entire history of this country, redefining its heritage in order to lay claim to its future. It is to redefine "America" itself. Scholars in this current include Princeton University philosopher Cornel West, feminists bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins, legal scholars Patricia Williams and Lani Guinier, anthropologist Keith Mullings, and political theorist James Jennings.

The urgent necessity for multicultural dialogue and encounter within the institutions of American culture can be illustrated by the pervasiveness and resiliency of racial stereotypes and intolerance

among millions of white Americans. In 1993, a national survey of over 2,200 American adults was funded by the National Science Foundation, which was designed to measure contemporary racial attitudes. The study's directors, including Stanford University political scientist Paul Sniderman and University of California at Berkeley professors Philip Tetlock and Anthony Tyler, stated that "the most striking result of the survey is the sheer frequency with which negative characterizations

of blacks are quite openly expressed throughout the white general population." Not surprisingly, white conservatives had little reluctance in expressing their prejudices about African-Americans. But what surprised researchers was the deep racial hostility expressed by white liberals.

How do we explain the persistence of racism and inequality in American life as we enter the twenty-first century? Nobel laureate Toni Morrison explains that race remains "hidden and covered," obscured from the light of a frank and honest analysis. Instead of using overtly racist epithets, Americans who believe in the inferiority of people of color rely on "code words" and subtle innuendoes to justify discrimination.

But the dilemma is deeper than prejudicial language or attitudes. The burden of discrimination is translated into radically different perceptions of the world, which separates white, upper and middle class America from the vast majority of black, brown and poor people. This division even transcends the racial bifurcation outlined by the 1968 report of the Kerner Commission, which warned that America was rapidly moving toward two unequal societies—one black and one white. A more accurate description of the current racial and class impasse is to speak of two "parallel universes," in which individuals and groups coexist in the same social, political and cultural space, but perceive phenomena in sharply divergent ways.

What surprised researchers was the deep racial hostility expressed by white liberals

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MOVING BEYOND THE CRISIS

"Rethinking the possibilities" for diversity in education requires the initiation of innovative programs. For example, universities and school systems should consider setting aside certain percentages of their activities or lecture budgets to establish permanent minority visiting scholars and artist programs. African-American, Latino and white students need to interact with scholars, writers, artists, and intellectuals of color on a regular basis, in order to transcend negative stereotypes about minority academic performance, ability and excellence.

Transcending the restrictive boundaries of diversity means going beyond the old concepts of "minorities" and "majority groups." We must settle for nothing less than the fundamental restructuring of what is termed the "mainstream" of education, to fully reflect the richness of religious, cultural, social and ethnic complexity which is part of America.

Going beyond the traditional definitions of diversity means fostering a cultural dialogue between representatives of various ethnic groups in our public schools and within communities, which leads to genuine exchange, sharing and cultural learning. Since the demise of "color-blind" integration in the 1960's, it has not been overwhelmingly popular to support the ideal of multiracial and interreligious dialogue. Universities and public schools must go out of their way to create such spaces for cultural interaction and mutual learning. As things now stand in most places, too often we find young people of different ethnic backgrounds relating to one another at polite distances, never really coming to terms with the similarities and divergences they have with other groups. We shouldn't have to apologize for saying that we truly learn to appreciate and to value what is unique and original in our own culture when we take the time to really learn what is valuable and creative in someone else's culture. The greatest cultural gifts in the world are created in the imaginative space generated by the synthesis of several divergent aesthetic sensibilities and cultural traditions.

Can we envision a democratic society in which equality of both opportunity and actual material conditions for racial and ethnic minorities are a reality rather than a "dream deferred," in the words of black poet Langston Hughes? Can we conceive of an educational environment in which multicultural interaction, exchange and dialogue is the norm, rather than the exception? It is time to go beyond the older ideas on diversity, to change the power relations between people of color, women and the traditional groups which have dominated society. By redefining the mission and core of our education, we can begin to move people who have experienced oppression from the periphery to the center of society. It is up to all of us to transform "deferred dreams" into multicultural realities. The problem of the twenty-first century is the challenge of multicultural democracy.

Manning Marable
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Teaching Tolerance

Martin Haber, a teacher at John Dewey High School in Brooklyn, argues that in a multicultural, multireligious society, teaching about religion is not only a way to teach and promote tolerance, but also necessary to understanding the world in which we live.

"The history of Man is inseparable from the history of Religion."

"We cannot know the world's cultures without knowing something about the faiths that influenced them."

"It might be said that one's education is not complete without a study of Comparative Religion."

Believe it or not, the above statements are from the U.S. Supreme Court's 1962/63 decision *banning* prayer and devotional Bible readings in the nation's public schools. I begin with these quotations because they point to the fact that comparative religion should, from the start, be separated in our thinking from the actual *practice* of any, or any set of, religious rites or observances, of any one or another religion. On the other hand, we should, and in a world so greatly influenced by its ramifications, indeed we *must*, teach *about* religions, and about religion as a concept in a democratic land. I argue, furthermore, that we must teach about religion in a way that will give our students, and ourselves, a deeper and fuller understanding and appreciation for the religions of the world, so that we are better students, teachers and, ultimately, better human beings.

Religion is practiced in the homes of many of our students in New York City, so there is a rich fund of direct experience to tap into. This makes the topic accessible and immediate in a way that too few topics are for our "T.V. Nation" students. And this availability makes it all the more absurd that religion is today, as it has been at crucial times in our country's past, the "Great Unmentionable" in public schools. Sadly, when teachers do get the gumption and the agreement from their higher-ups to teach about the subject, or when religion slips into a unit in, say, the social studies area, its critical influence on world history and culture (let alone American history and culture!) is slighted in commonly-used texts on political science, sociology, and literature. It is important to discuss sources of reliable information available to educators, as well as how we can develop unbiased, life-affirming material for our classrooms, in the course of our discussion of the meaning of comparative religion education.

I first became seriously interested in teaching comparative religion about two years ago, when John Dewey High School inaugurated a weekly club meeting time and asked teachers to propose clubs they would be interested in heading. I thought of the countless times I'd explained, to students I'd met over the years that, though I am Jewish, I only wear "that funny cap" on my head when I go to the synagogue, the Jewish house of worship, and that "that funny cap" is worn in the same way of showing respect before God that Muslims wear *their* skullcaps; that, yes, many very observant Jews wear *payess*, and that this Jewish "look" is one interpretation

of the same Biblical injunction against cutting a man's "sidelocks" which is followed by Rastafarians, or style-conscious non-Rastafarians, who wear dreadlocks. And, because many of the most inquisitive of my questioners were black and Latino, and because many have families who are adherents of Islam, I would find myself talking about the comparative dietary rules of Jews and Muslims. Issues like dress, wigs, and habits would arise, and ideas fostered in the home would come to the fore, along with those I myself learned growing up.

I would invariably and repeatedly encounter stereotypical associations and, often unconsciously-voiced, rude and antagonistic remarks. These ranged from how Jews "smelled funny" or simply "stank," to theorizing about bizarre sexual practices, especially among the Hasidim. I found that when I waved these notions off, and showed some hurt feelings doing it, my students laughed nervously, but, at the same time, tended to be open to "learn the truth," or at least the more important realities of the beliefs and practices I felt equipped to tell them about. In fact, Christian students were often more informed than I was about certain tracts and passages in the Torah, but were nonetheless interested in hearing about Jesus' Judaism, about the historical Jesus, and about the ideas of Messianism for Jews as compared with those for Christians. These conversations would often revolve around holiday observances, for it is clear that few young people know why they are given a day off here and three days there. "Holy days" have become generic in their minds, whether they are of patriotic or religious origin, or, as with some nationwide holidays, show elements of both; being off from school for teachers as well as for students has become all that matters. I hoped to change that by informing my students about the meaning and the importance of such major observances as the Jewish "Days of Awe," the Chinese New Year, Ramadan, and Christmas.

So I thought that a Comparative Religion Club would be the best way to talk about such things, experience our different backgrounds, and ultimately, to realize the commonalities, along with the differences, beneath them all. I welcomed agnostics and

atheists too, although one girl who knew she doubted God's existence, didn't know which, if any, term she or her belief system fell under!

The club started out with some promise, but, sadly, it has dwindled away with its second year. A few of my "star" members graduated, and it is an option to stay or "get free" from school during the club meeting time; I have also been more lax in promoting the club than I was when we started. But the bitter truth I come back to in explaining the club's drop in popularity is that religion is a very touchy subject in our schools and for our students, even at the end of the twentieth century. When a colleague, a science teacher who is a biblical history/archaeology buff, recently posted advertisements around the teachers' main office for a "Birth-of-Jesus-Marathon" of videos and discussions, they were, we learned later, instantly taken

down—by none other than the school's principal! The same teacher, incidentally, went through hell trying to teach a mini-course on biblical archaeology as part of an earth science curriculum and although he did it, he had an ongoing battle with his own chairman, not to mention many other teachers and administrators, over the very idea of offering such a course—and this at a supposedly progressive public high school, named for the most progressive-minded of education theorists.

PROVIDING A FRAMEWORK

The real question these days is no longer, "Should I teach about religion?" but rather, "What should I teach, and how?" Religion, in its across-the-curriculum connection to social studies, literature, science, art and music, with its prominence in the headlines, and behind the events that propel entire countries and peoples into, and out of, war and peace, with states and school districts issuing new mandates and guidelines for inclusion all across the nation; the subject is, undeniably, a vital-as-ever part of a complete education. According to Charles C. Haynes, a founder of The First Liberty Institute, and presently a visiting scholar at The Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, a teacher determined to discuss religion must first discuss the concept of religious liberty. This, he claims, is the civic framework for teaching about religion, and it is backed by the Supreme Court ruling of 1962/63, which states that public schools may "neither promote nor inhibit religious belief or non-belief." It should be emphasized, when talking over these civic allowances, that a curriculum may not include religious indoctrination in any form, and that includes hostility to religion. "Force-feeding" like that would constitute state sponsorship of religion, and would

violate the freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment.

Still, in the present environment, with the politically "hot" topic of school prayer (not to mention abortion rights) swinging before the warring sides of the issue like a pendulum, not everyone accepts this definition of religious liberty, or, for that matter, the right to teach about religion. The

notion of religious liberty is sure to make the Neo-Puritans unhappy, as they are now quite busy attacking the nation's schools for neglecting religion! And the Moral Majority/Christian Right will surely continue to label anything that is not Christian-centered education "secular humanism," and will bring the situation down to the level of an *Inherit the Wind* scenario, 1995-style.

Taking all this into account, both conservatives and liberals agree that the role of religion should be better represented in the public school curriculum. Both groups realize that the only way, ethically and constitutionally, that the public schools can teach this subject is objectively. The purpose which all parties must keep in mind is that of students understanding the traditions of others, while

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continued . . .

recognizing the role of religion in human affairs. And we educators must tolerate and listen to critics, while steadfastly protecting this country's heritage of intellectual freedom. While doing this, educators will, almost accidentally, bring to their students an awareness that feelings are integral to learning and to growth; they will be teaching tolerance while teaching religion! The purpose of public education is, after all, to prepare students for full and responsible participation in our society, and in our pluralistic democracy. This is an acquired skill which requires the ability to think critically, the capacity to understand contradictions, and the largesse to respect differing points of view. The choice in this debate over whether or not to teach this subject is clear, once you study the facts: on one side, the suppression of critical thought, a setting of examples of intolerance, and the ultimate replacement of public education with sectarian beliefs; on the other side, a realization of the "3 R's" of religious liberty—Rights, Responsibilities, and Respect, while the classroom becomes a vehicle for promoting tolerance and religious freedom for all.

WHAT SHOULD I TEACH AND HOW?

Once the civic framework is understood, and students are more relaxed with their freedom to study and to learn about comparative religion, a teacher has a wide range of topics to explore. I like to start by defining the term itself. According to Webster, religion is: 1) a set of beliefs concerning the cause, nature, and purpose of the universe; 2) an organized system of belief in and worship of God or gods; 3) something one believes in, or follows, *devotedly*.

Comparative is: 1) of, pertaining to, or preceding by, comparison; 2) relative to.

After this formal definition, I give my class a quote from Stephen Gaskin, who founded the hippie commune in Tennessee called The Farm:

"Religion is a *generic* term for how we relate to our Universe and how God and our Universe relate to us, and what is our proper relationship and perspective in the Universe... There shouldn't be anything deeper than your religion. Your religion is how you really get along with folks—not what you may claim your religion is... Your religion ought to make a difference in your daily life; it ought to make it easier for you, not in the sense that you don't have to try, but that it *make sense to you*. If you're not getting along with your kid (or your parent), it ought to help you out with your kid (or parent); it ought to help you out during childbirth; it ought to help you during the death of somebody who's close to you. It ought to help you through the heavy passages of life."

And, in a typewritten circle around a human navel, he says: "I think there is only one church, and your membership button in it is your bellybutton."

In yet one more remark I like, he said: "Religion only seems different if you're dealing with a retailer. If you deal with a wholesaler, they all get it from the same distributor."

After playing around with these formal and informal remarks, I like next to ask students to brainstorm, and write down what they think "religion" means, or should mean, and/or who, or what God, or god, is, as they see Him, Her or It! Once this is done, we make a list of our own family religion(s), and of all the religions we've ever

heard of. We differentiate between religions and philosophies. We name cults and what they seem to represent. We list the words for all the different houses of worship we've heard of, or know of, in our neighborhoods. We discuss the divisions within the divisions of religions: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform movements in Judaism; Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant in Christianity, etc... We talk about the Mormons, and other American homegrown religions, and spend a good deal of time on Native American and Meso-American religion and spirituality, and its Caribbean legacy, transferred to the U.S. mainland via immigration. We get into the negative aspects of the more fanatical revivalist-type movements, like Jim Jones' Jonestown tragedy, and David Koresh and the Branch Davidian debacle. We talk a lot about concepts of holy births/magic births, as well as concepts of the afterlife/heaven and hell/eternity/reincarnation. We delve into issues as diverse as:

- yoga and meditation as founded in ancient Eastern religious principles
- martial arts, and how religion plays a dominant role in them
- mythology, the origin of religion, the Greek and Latin roots of words associated with religion
- fertility gods and goddesses, the use of gender in religion, the worship of animals and nature
- how the calendar developed along religious lines
- astrology and new age
- religion as a business
- right-to-life vs. pro-choice advocates
- Communism, atheism, agnosticism, iconoclasm
- the holy men and women in religion (rabbis, nuns, etc...) and how they function.

The list could go on indefinitely, since the topic is so vast. The important thing is to get everybody thinking and listening to each other and to their own hearts and minds. Who knows— maybe a student or two will really learn something they'll keep with them for years to come— once they perceive that, when discussing religion, "there really is no danger here," just misconceptions and misunderstandings born from *lack* of discussion!

Anyone interested in a reading list on comparative religion, please send a self-addressed stamped envelope to the Newsletter.

Martin Haber
John Dewey HS

Multiple Cultures Multiple Languages

Eugene Clark talks about his experience as an elementary school teacher faced with issues of language, communication and identity among the children in his class, and how these issues came into play in a teacher inquiry group.

"One who knows only her own generation remains always a child."
Unknown

"Mista Clock speaks Spanish?! Ain't he BLACK?" blurted Shavon when she heard me respond to Carlos' question in the first weeks of school. Either I spoke Spanish or I was black. For Shavon, these were two options that could not be combined. She did not see the possibility of black Spanish speakers because she held the two cultures (African-American and Latino) as separate. Her thinking mimics the way we in Western culture tend to polarize issues.

"¿De donde eres?" asked Carlos. As he asked that question, I realized that every Spanish speaking eight-year-old in room 401 was listening carefully for whether they would have the privilege of private conversations across the room that year. I responded, "Soy de San Diego, California, Carlos. ¿Porque me preguntas?"

I began that day raising my students' awareness of multiple cultures and languages by letting a few of the Spanish speakers teach the class how to say, "Where are you from?" Shavon's comment showed how important it is to offer students more than the bipolar views predominant in popular culture. Such concrete notions as liberal/conservative, black/white, good/bad, rich/poor, and male/female do not foster win-win styles of communication where multiple needs are recognized and multiple solutions accepted in problem-solving. Instead, polarity maintains a win-lose paradigm, and, as a result, Shavon can only see these two cultures in competition, not in cooperation.

As I observed the behavior of my students during my first year as a New York City public school teacher, I formed two goals for myself:

Give students the tools they will need to make informed independent decisions.

Give students the knowledge they will use to find success (spiritual, material, emotional, psychological, physical) in a modern, global society.

To this end, I saw that their interpersonal communication skills left the most room for improvement. Without such skills, they will not be able to negotiate, show affection, resolve conflict, or innovate change effectively. The "knowledge" and the "tools" mentioned in my goals as a teacher refer, in part, to communication skills. Often times, students show that they lack even the basic ability to tell another person how they feel.

"When I count to zero, the straighter line will get to eat their lunches in the classroom! Ten. Nine. Eight..." Excitement at lunchtime electrifies the bodies of my third graders as they

struggle to remain in control, stand, push in their chairs, and walk to the lines at the door. Many are already thinking about the playground and cannot contain their beautiful laughter and energized bolting.

Andre and Joe are two such boys so I try to get my class outside fast. The longer it takes to line up...

"Don't push me, man!" frowns Joe. He shoves Andre hard against the wall, needing the touch of Andre's violent response.

"I didn't, Joe! You better stop playin'!" Andre's eight-year-old chest swells a foot above Joe's chest. His arms float away from his body in a challenge.

Joe cocks a tight fist and hurls it up at Andre's face. Luckily I catch his strong little arm before it connects. The heavy drops of water well deep in his eyes: "I'm gonna kill you! You fuckin' jerk!" Now he gasps, sobbing; tears soak his face. I hug him as the class watches, silenced by Joseph's almost daily display of emotion.

We naturally seek effective communication in our earliest years. Yet, as we grow, this tendency seems to fade. If students have the power to tell how they feel, express emotions, and ask questions, they will be able to explore prejudices and ask for help—two things they are not good at as a group. Those who lead our societies have maintained this search and mastered effective communication.

Certain rules of communication help my students talk and listen to each other with better understanding. The more one seeks to understand or truly listen to another, the better able the first will be to respond in a mutually beneficial way. I tell them:

1. Talk straight to someone. You can't talk down to someone (or up to someone either). Your perceived power relationship with someone must be equal, or communication will be shut off. Messages and ideas will be filtered through lenses of fear, anger, distrust, or hate by the one perceiving less power.
2. Use neutral language. Put-downs, "you" statements, and aggressive language stifle understanding. Create trust in your speech. Speak in nonthreatening tones.
3. Use language that is mutually understood. Use common images, phrases, and ideas to express yourself. Communication will be blocked when ideas are not clear.
4. Speak concretely. Assumptions and generalizations will not convey your real meaning.

Once they have been exposed to these ideas and begin to practice them, we are unable to return to the issue of bipolar thinking, or seeing a situation as having only two dimensions. I need to bring Shavon towards recognizing the possibility that she (and I)

continued...

can speak Spanish (or any other new language including, for her, Standard English), and further, that we should speak Spanish. Once she realizes how people miscommunicate, we can make a transition to a discussion of language. How many different languages do we speak in our class? Do we all speak the same way? What is the best way for me to talk to you?

I can not only motivate Shavon to learn Spanish now, but also address her acquisition and use of Standard English. I can begin giving my students an invaluable tool for success—multilingualism. Multilingual students derive both self-esteem and a deeper understanding and tolerance of other cultures from their knowledge of a second language. Children who cannot speak the dominant language in a society fluently have lower self-esteem because they feel on the outside, that they do not belong to the larger group. Further, lower self-esteem has been equated with lower achievement. Lower achievement brings fewer choices. The opposite is true for speakers of more than one language, if one of the languages they speak is the dominant one. If the languages of the multilingual student don't include the dominant one, esteem will still be higher than the monolingual student because knowledge of another language is exposure to another culture. Wider exposure will bring experience which will bring esteem. A few months after Shavon's analysis of my cultural identity...

The once white collar of my shirt nearly choked me, not because my tie was too tight, but because blood swelled in my neck as I fought to control Joe and Andre using only my voice.

"Joe!!!!!(pause, breath, recharge) Andre!!!!" I screamed over the roar of 30 bundled up third graders, still trying to decide whether I preferred the razor sharp freeze that cut easily through my jackets and sweaters to the stifling 100 degree steam bath in my room created by the overzealous custodians shovelling coal in the basement of our school.

Pop quiz: Negative 10 degrees outside. School is not cancelled. Who shows up? Bingo! About 10 teachers, the secretary, the principal, and all 1800 students. So this morning my 16 students and I have guests: 5 extra fourth graders and 9 extra third graders, three of whom are from the bilingual class across the hall.

Joe and Andre (not surprisingly) got caught up in the excitement and confusion of the snowy day schedule and the presence of the guests. Joe hit Andre. Andre returned with a kick. Then Joe bolted into a full speed lap around the inside of the room. Innocently victimized by the unguided energy of Joe's speeding body, Marianna crumpled to the floor crying, struck by Joe's flailing fist as he rounded the back of the room.

Shavon, who in September derided Spanish, was the first to recognize Marianna, the girl from the bilingual class across the hall, crouched behind a desk scared and crying through the mayhem. As I held Joe still with one hand and Andre with the other (I conceded to using more than voice to control them), I overheard Shavon consoling Marianna.

"¿Como estás? Me llamo Shavon," she said, reaching out a hand.

It is possible to maintain the validity of a primary language while acquiring a culturally dominant language. One way is through imparting a sense of ownership over all languages spoken by the student, both primary languages and the socially dominant one. Show students the power of any language to convince, emote, share, or muse and they will seek ownership. This means an unrestricted environment for trial and error. When students own multiple languages, they will realize the choices they have between cultures, then opportunities, then perspectives. Each instance or experience they have fits into the formation of their perspectives. The broader their perspectives, the broader their world-view.

Atop all these thoughts sits the real deal for our kids (no matter what age). When our students can use language(s) to communicate effectively, or understand cultures enough to be able to relate their meanings, they will truly have power and the ability to create opportunities. When language is limited, learning is hindered or stopped.

Take as an example a gathering of teachers for the purpose of educating each other. Their investigations of new writing processes which could be adapted to their classrooms become obscured by the writing topic itself. Language. Its relevance and their diversity of intelligences and experiences coalesce to absorb them in a unified, honest query that from the start seems to promise sought after enlightenment, a key to unlock the shackles of their time.

But this unexpected detour through knowledge splutters and chokes on the very experiences that excite them. The glorious diversity looms and grows powerful. Intellectual progress halts.

Then they realize—

Miscommunication shackles their time.

These teachers seem earnest but frustrated. Frustrated by what? Frustrated by their inability to do what Shavon, Joseph, and Andre all want to do:

To communicate.

To move towards a paradigm of multiplicity.

To be able to understand each other as students or teachers.

To teach languages with sensitivity.

We as teachers must begin the process of...

change

rusty old gear creaking

giant sea turtle crawling

we feel powerless to give

life to the gear

swiftness to the well meaning turtle

strength of will

honesty

humanity

empower us

With this lesson the key is turned.

Eugene Clark
CES 70

Divisional Grouping

Emily Terte, a teacher at the Day School, expresses concerns and raises questions about diversity in the classroom through sharing her personal experience with classroom grouping.

I have been thinking about home language as a part of a child's identity. I feel it is important to validate a child's culture and home language just as I feel it is important to validate the child as a learner and a person whose feelings and beliefs matter in the world.

As I began to think more about language and how I could apply what I had learned about Black English and English for Speakers of Other Languages and dual language immersion, I thought about the all-white, Standard English-speaking population I teach.

In the three years I have taught third grade at my present school, I have never taught a student of color. This is not because my school does not have any students of color—it does. This is strictly a matter of policy.

For the last two years, the other two third grade teachers, who are African-American and Latino, have been assigned the African-American and Spanish-speaking children. The reasoning behind this is that these teachers supposedly "share a cultural bond," or are "role models" for these children. It seems more accurate to me to say that color or linguistic abilities is the determining factor in the grouping of these classes.

When you consider that the teachers and their children do not necessarily come from carbon copy socioeconomic, family or religious backgrounds and that some of the children are of mixed ethnicities, they are as different from each other as they are from me, a white, middle-class, Jewish woman.

What if I were to insist on teaching all the Jewish children? Wouldn't that be an odd request? I question a system that judges people by their inclusion in certain groups and not by their individuality. It feels separatist and prejudicial.

This is not the first school in which I have taught. In my two previous schools, there was a greater ethnic mix of children, and I established strong relationships with the students individually as children, not as ethnic, religious or racial types.

The small population of children of color present in my school are kept together in groups so that they won't feel isolated in classes that are predominantly white. I agree with this policy because I believe that in order to create a learning environment where students feel safe and supported, they must feel comfortable in their classrooms. Depending on the personality of the child, being different may be crucial to one's growth and willingness to take risks.

By keeping the children of color together in the school I teach in now, the administration hopes to avoid this kind of situation. We actively promote a philosophy of inclusion and equality in the classroom and aspire to "multiculturalism," although the actual numbers of our student body and faculty members do not yet reflect this desire.

I know of one case in which the school's policy backfired. A little girl's mother was livid because her child and another Latino child were consistently put in the same classes year after year. This went on even after it was clear that the children didn't get along. The

mother asked that her child be separated from the other child, but the all-white administration had their policy to consider and the two stayed together. For this reason and various others, the mother pulled her child out of the school in fifth grade.

If the policy exists to serve the children, then it has to be flexible. Children should not suffer for the sake of a "politically correct" policy.

When I went into our grouping meeting at the end of this year to see the lists of children for next year's third grade classes, I received a blow that is still fresh in my memory.

It was the end of a long, hot June day. As I walked down the stairs, I thought about how much I hated these meetings, and I wasn't looking forward to this one either. I told D (another third grade teacher) I'd rather just get a list and not sit while the second grade teachers squabbled and endlessly described strengths and weaknesses of various children that I wouldn't remember by September anyway. D said that she felt there was great value to these meetings. Sure, she just had to keep track of the kids of color; she knew she'd get all of the Latinos. I'd have to keep track of all 44 possibilities.

I entered the room where there were four groups posted for the three present third grade teachers and a new teacher who would be joining us (she hadn't been hired yet). Above the first list it said, "M;" the second, "D;" and then, as my eyes scanned the blackboard looking for my name, I saw, "III," and "IV." Thoughts rushed through my mind. Was there some mistake? Wasn't there any group that seemed right for me? I had signed my contract— was this some sort of indication or intimation that I wasn't going to be invited back? What was going on? S, a second grade teacher, tactfully explained.

"Oh, these are kids of color or kids of color whose parents had specifically requested M or D."

I'm glad M and D felt as uncomfortable with this explanation as I did. "Specifically requested?" What did that mean? We don't accept requests for class placement as far as I knew. Maybe I was being naive. After all, this was a private school. Did this mean that no one had "specifically requested" that their child be placed in my class? When we questioned this, S repeated the offensive words and then gave a rundown on who had "specifically requested" M until my division director stopped her and suggested we move on.

She must have read the look on my face because she tried to placate me by saying I could choose either group III or IV. I was infuriated, but I knew I couldn't just roar out of there in a cloud of fire and smoke, so I looked at the two lists.

Group III had a little girl with Tourette's Syndrome, a neurological disease that causes uncontrollable physical and vocal tics. Teaching her would require a good deal of extra attention. Group IV had the grade-wide terror kid and another child with whom I had had difficulty when I worked with him on a mural project for the primary school musical.

As the second grade teachers ran down the lists, pointing out strong math students and weak readers, D said, "Oh, I'm so glad I have K and L in my class; I really wanted to have them." Like there was any doubt, I thought bitterly to myself.

I can understand keeping children of color from feeling isolated, but putting the African-American kids with the African-American teacher and the Latino kids with the Latino teacher without regard

continued . . .

to teaching styles, strengths and personality seems like an argument for segregation.

Once again, it is unfortunate that in my school there are so few teachers of color, limiting a child of color's chances for having a teacher of color, but that is the administration's problem. The fact of the matter is that as long as those two other teachers are teaching the same grade as I am, I will never be considered as fit a teacher for these children as they are. Is this policy fair to the children or the teachers?

The administration has supported this policy without supporting the entire faculty.

Three years ago we had a faculty workshop in which the concept of keeping the children of color together was explained. Since then there has been no discussion and no mention of the reasoning behind keeping children of color with faculty of color, although there has been faculty turnover. A workshop of this kind would have been beneficial. In order for teachers who are working together to feel united and supported and regarded as professionals, these policies must be clearly thought through and explained. Otherwise, they seem rigid and fossilized.

Although I had a choice of which group to claim, I was insulted and angry. I thought about the two groups overnight and after calming myself down, I made my choice. I knew J, the little girl with Tourette's. I knew she had been through a lot of social, emotional and physical stress and I felt for her. She had been out of school for a while last year and had worked like a demon to catch up academically and socially.

Although no one else at my school seems to acknowledge it, I am particularly sensitive and tuned into children with social and emotional problems, and I decided that for J's sake, I would take her group so that I could work closely with her.

I felt strongly that I had made a good decision for both of us and my supervisor was pleased too. It was important, she said, for J's success in school for someone really to want to work with her.

I can sympathize with J and work with her differences and encourage her and teach her what third graders need to learn. Is this because of the color of my skin or the language that I grew up hearing and speaking in my home?

I would like to believe that these policies originated with the children's welfare in mind, but they have become so rigid that a kind of blind prejudice has appeared. This leaves teachers like me wondering whether teaching is about celebrating diversity or creating it.

Emily Terte
The Day School

Book Reviews

The Writing Teachers Consortium offered an advanced seminar, Celebrating Our Diversity, at Martin Luther King Jr. High School. During the seminar, participating teachers joined book groups, each group reading and discussing a different piece of literature. What follows are two reflective pieces from these groups.

The House of the Spirits by Isabel Allende

My book group began our discussion in disbelief that *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende would be just a long string of seemingly unrelated stories as suggested in the first chapter, "Rosa the Beautiful." Danny refused to believe that all there was to the book was a liberated flow of consciousness free from logic and rational control, a kind of automatic writing consisting of stories about characters which seem as unreal as the world they live in. To Olga, *The House of the Spirits* had to be more than just an attempt at creating a magical world more beautiful than the one in which we live "Captivating! Magical!" said Candace. As we read on, we felt the overpowering presence of the artist who seemed to be resorting to strokes lacking any direction, purpose, or even a rhythm. "There must be much more to the book," I said. After all, the author is none other than the niece of Chile's assassinated, famed president, Salvador Allende.

As we read, it became clear to us that the book is an expression of both consciousness and unconsciousness, of reality as it intertwines with dreams, passions and hope. Allende weaves realism with a rich tapestry of symbols thus exposing the violence and cruelties in everyday life. There is sexual harassment, multiple rape, denigration of women, people of lower rank and class; there is also disrespect for individuality, denial of individual creativity, and lack of appreciation for learning; there is lust for power and acquisition of property; but worst of all, there is will and a flowing desire to unleash cruelty and punishment, all of which have a damnably dehumanizing effect. In shocking the reader, Allende invites people of all types to consider the deeper and better part of human nature, one that opposes disrespect, abuse and lust for injustice.

In the midst of the screams of lies a forest of symbols becomes apparent, summing up a large number of ideas and attitudes shared by countless people living throughout Latin America today. Thus Esteban Trueba, or "the Patron," as he is often referred to by subservients, is representative of a benevolent dictator who considers average citizens of his nation as helpless and ineffectual beings.

"They are like children, they can't handle responsibility. How could they know what's best for them? Without me they'd be lost—if you don't believe me, just look at what happens every time I turn my back. Everything goes to pieces and they start acting like a bunch of donkeys. They're very ignorant."

This benevolent dictator, one of the most prominent symbols in the book, quickly acquires an historical personality and is recognized as being none other than General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte, who in 1973 overthrew Chile's elected civilian government and formed a four-man junta to rule the country, abolishing the National Congress,

Chile's legislature, and outlawing all political parties. Speaking of workers and peasants, "the Patron" unabashedly expresses his views.

"They don't know how to clean their asses and they want the right to vote! How are they supposed to know about politics when they don't even know where they live? They're capable of voting for the Communists, just like the miners in the North, who might push the whole country over the brink with their strikes—and now of all times, when the price of copper is at its peak. What I would do up there is send in the troops and let some bullets fly, to teach them once and for all."

Like Pinochet of Chile, the Patron unremittingly fears labor. The mere thought that workers are capable of objectively evaluating their own condition within a structure of social relations is enough to unleash a fury of anger and violence in Esteban Trueba.

A complicated network of symbols is the main foundation upon which the imaginative work of Isabel Allende rests. As Candace put it, the author has understood and beautifully expressed those aspects of reality which cannot be told freely in a direct and simple parlance. Her comment triggered the idea that all creative literature includes symbols which not only stand for certain reality, social or psychological, but which also invites our interaction with the written word. Olga added that active, thoughtful reading includes comprehension based on strategies for interacting with the text; such strategies include readers' personal experiences.

The House of the Spirits reaches the proportions of an epic when we bring historical meaning and all our knowledge from history into our reading experience.

Alexander Vostok
Martin Luther King, Jr. HS

Two Books About the Bronx: *The Boy Without a Flag* and *Spidertown*, by Abraham Rodriguez

In *The Boy Without a Flag* by Abraham Rodriguez, only two of the stories are hopeful. In the title story the narrator, a young boy who loves to read, begins to experiment with politics. Inspired by his father's words about the crimes of imperialism, he takes a stand by refusing to salute the American flag in the assembly. After all, he's Puerto Rican. After the administration berates him, his father is called in and apologizes for his son's behavior. The narrator, simultaneously shocked and betrayed, has to come to terms with the fact that his father is less than perfect.

I was left feeling that the narrator has to come to terms with many things—drugs, poverty, sexual exploitation and crime—and that he does, successfully making it out of the Barrio. After all, he isn't the writer of this book. His father may have been less than perfect, but he was very much present in his son's life. Reading this story, I see a strength of character that enables him to succeed.

Another story "The Lotto," introduces us to Dalia and Elba, two friends. Dalia is the more serious of the two, the better student. Elba's already involved with guys, into sex, into talking about it. Dalia, afraid of being left behind, has sex with Rick, even though she's not sure she loves him. When she suspects she might be

pregnant, Dalia goes to Elba for advice. I would guess that Dalia, terrified by this experience, decides to wait before she has sex again. Elba, however, is pregnant. We learn in a later story that she has her baby alone. Eventually, she lives with the baby's father, but feels imprisoned by her desperate life. Walking out of the apartment one night to go dancing, she leaves her screaming baby behind.

What made a difference in the two girls' lives? Was Dalia's mother more hopeful than Elba's? More religious? As I read, I had hope for Dalia, thinking she would finish school and go to college. And Elba? Will she give up, give in to drugs and/or drink? We ask ourselves, a girl who can leave a baby alone, what will become of her?

In *Spidertown*, the main character, Miguel, becomes a sixteen-and-a-half-year old drug runner and for a short time Miguel enjoys this life. He has his own place, is given a car and a license, smokes grass, drinks beer, has meaningless sex, money, clothes....And then he meets a girl, Cristalena, and begins to question his low-life existence.

Miguel is a boy with a conscience, a reader of books, a boy with a brain. He's a writer. What a contrast to the people he's involved with: Spider—determined to be the top drug dealer no matter who he has to betray; Firebug—an amoral arsonist and druggie; Amelia—Firebug's sex-college student, crack-head girlfriend, who like Miguel, wants to extricate herself from this horrific life; and Cristalena—beautiful, straight, a high school student, naive about street life, but hot and very much in love with Miguel.

Both *The Boy Without a Flag* and *Spidertown* reveal the lives of teenagers in the South Bronx. Those growing up in poverty see very little means of escape—yet some do. But what about the others? As an educator, I ask myself, what makes a Miguel or a Cristalena or a Dalia different from the rest? Are their parents more caring? Better educated? More religious? Not always. Is there a teacher, a relative, a family member who made a difference in their lives? Sometimes. Government funding to education is cut. Job programs for urban youth are cut. Something major has to change before we'll see changes in the young people populating the pages of Rodriguez's books..

Robin S. Cohen
Martin Luther King, Jr. HS

Teachers as Writers

LA FETE D'ÉTAT— CE SOMMES NOUS!

I recall it being 1954. The Louisiana State Fair at Shreveport was legendary in its size and length of tenure. Some people said it was because of the relative wealth of the Ark-La-Tex (an acronymic label for the fifty mile radius which fans out from the point where the state borders of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas meet.) Others said it was because nowhere else in America could one find more suckers per acre. Whatever the real truth on that issue, the fact remains that the Louisiana State Fair at Shreveport was a major cultural, economic, social, and psychological event and experience. It was one of those events that children (and many adults) saved up for — sometimes for more than six months.

This annual early-fall rite was a whirlwind interval in local time. Individual, community, public, and private efforts and accomplishments were put on display, or parade, to be showcased, applauded, extolled, and lauded. And the attending citizenry ran headlong into a timed orgy of separating themselves from their relative wealth through indulgences in eating; coin tosses; darts and ball tosses; weight-guessing schemes; marksmanship shots at floating ducklings, gaping clowns' mouths and appearing/disappearing/reappearing targets of all manner; fortune-telling schemes; grappling hook schemes; freak shows; bandstand concerts; stage shows, and food, food, food alongside rides, rides, rides and more rides! Foods ran from the all-American corn dog on a wooden skewer and buttered popcorn to raw sugar spun into sculpted fluffs of that colorful confection so widely known as "cotton candy." And of course, there were the requisite high gloss, fire engine red, candy apples.

And the rides! Some were gentle, slow, soothing, and even romantic. Some were, due simply to their design to confront the rider with the unexpected, enough to drive a body stir-crazy. Yet others were of a nature to be short, bumpy, and jolting. In a word, everything was fun! fun! fun!

It was against the backdrop of this awesome spectacle that I first began to internalize and understand the meaning of "they" and "we" as it referred to ethnicity — as an avenue or a roadblock. If it were an avenue, you inherited a certain superiority and power. And you got to use that insinuated power and superiority to secure privileges for you and yours. Connections through that power and superiority, and through those privileges, got you good employment opportunities. Employment got you money, respectable social stature, material acquisition, and additional opportunities and privileges. If ethnicity were a roadblock, you inherited a certain impotence. That impotence made it near impossible to push back against, let alone thwart, the almost iron-clad power and superior posture of the privileged. So you came to know firsthand the consternation and frustration of being born into a strange place where the societal scheme of things and events surrounding you were geared more toward tolerating you than actually including you.

I believe it is best that I learned it all then, instead of later, because by the time that "later" rolled around, it all just might have been too much and too complex for me to grasp and understand. And

I think that having come up against "it all" with the Louisiana State Fair as the backdrop was a godsend. Because that way, I could be totally vulnerable, yet feel only sort-of-unfortunate. In my consternation, I could be curious and inquisitive without becoming enraged, hateful, or self-hating. Anyways, it was 1954. It was early fall, but "Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka" was not yet written into history. Television was still somewhat of a novelty. It was not yet showing us as we, societally, really were — film-at-eleven, PBS staples, and "real-life" sitcoms were still a ways off. America was still mostly unair-conditioned. (Things were actually much much hotter than anyone ever realized!) And, all real life was still in black and white.

So it was no wonder that the mavens of protocol for the Louisiana State Fair at Shreveport insisted on designating, and enforcing, days of attendance for "Whites Only," and "Colored Only." But what about those shades in between? We'll explore that question, and other pertinent ones, later. Right now, we will get back to the fair itself.

There was the educational side of this annual rite at Shreveport, Louisiana. On "White Only" day, schools for whites were closed. On "Colored Only" day, schools for black children and faculty were closed. Prior to the coming of the state fair, schools for both races provided classroom instruction and off-campus supervision and instruction to help students plan and prepare entries and projects: individuals and/or groups had to prepare special presentations to be put on display or entered into competition at the fairgrounds; marching units had to hone their maneuvers for participation in the "kick-off parade" to denote the fair's opening. There were the 4-H Club, FBLA, FFA, FHA, YMCA, YWCA, Book Lover's Club, Thespian Society, Student Council, Honor Society, different levels and sexes of Scouts, majorettes, drum majors, marching bands, concert bands, cheerleaders, pep squads.... And complementing all these units was an assortment of beauty queens and sweethearts, the sweethearts representing male athletic teams and other all-male clubs and organizations.

One side of this "kickoff campaign" was opened to whites only. This included the Shriners, the Lions Club, the Young Lions Club, the Kiwanis Club, the Jay-Cees, and an assortment of trade and merchant associations. There were no black counterparts to these entries. On "Colored Only" day, parade permits were not approved for similar black-only groups. Somehow, amid all the marching and trumpeting, and waving from dazzling floats and tops-down convertibles and limousines, no one seemed to notice or care that psychological warfare was being waged with a vengeance. This was the Louisiana State Fair at Shreveport, Louisiana in 1954.

Because so much excitement was in the air, because so much fun was being had, because so much education was taking place, and because so much culture and heritage were being celebrated, no one seemed to grasp, or act on, the reality of the devilish social and economic cruelty being perpetrated and perpetuated by those empowered to regulate and enforce the attendant customs surrounding the beloved annual rite called the Louisiana State Fair at Shreveport. (Or at least, that's what I thought, though I was soon to learn better.)

All along, my father had been aware of the harm being done, and how it might affect his children. It was just that when it came to the particulars of the state fair, he chose education over confrontation:

better to educate his children than to confront the system over an event which came to town only once a year. Energies had to be conserved and directed, and carefully spent — not wildly dissipated.

That year, there was some event (at this time in my life, I cannot recall exactly what it was) which was to be held on "White Only" day at the fairgrounds. My sister, two and a half years older than I, registered her hurt and frustration at being excluded by saying something like, "How come I couldn't be white?" I was surprised to hear her say that out loud. I figured she said it simply because she was upset at the time. So, to this day, I thank God that my father was present to hear her for, forthwith, I learned that he had noticed all along the cruelty spoken of above. He had simply, in his wisdom, waited for a moment of clear questioning from his children before offering up comments, answers or indoctrination. Later I would realize that this had been his technique on a host of subjects. And to this day, it is that attribute in him which I admire, appreciate, and respect most.

Prompted by my sister's self-pitying query, my father sat us all down. At first, he began asking her a series of questions. Among the first was, "What if the event was being held in a place where blacks and whites could attend on any day they chose?"

She replied, "Then it wouldn't matter."

"Why wouldn't it matter?" She was able to articulate that under such a scenario she could attend any day or every day. Our father went on with his questions and prompting in such a way that all of us were able to join in the exchange. In the end, he had guided us to a place where we were able to figure out for ourselves that it was freedom of choice and opportunity that we really wanted — not white skin.

And that brings us back to the question of those shades in between black and white. As noted above, this state fair was much more than just an interval of traditional celebration and frenzied indulgence. It was a sort of cultural adhesive that held people in their designated places in the societal scheme of things.

After all these years, I am yet unsure as to why there was a "Colored Only" day. Maybe it was just a means to inform whites (tourists, travellers) who were not aware of the local customs. It left those that fell somewhere in-between black or white in quite a quandary. They were barred from attending on "White Only" day. Yet, they felt themselves above being "relegated" to attending on "Colored Only" day. This made them very antagonistic and abusive toward the "colored people." So some of them who did come out were often too eager to manifest to the white people their equal contempt for the "coloreds." To this end, they subjected their fellow unfortunates to jeering and jostling. And sometimes they even pelted their parades. Occasionally, full-fledged fights broke out behind this friction. These individuals who found themselves adhered to the "neither black nor white" square on this societal chess board seemed to have no comprehension of the real issue at hand. They seemed not to recognize that their situation was caused by their desire to be welcomed and embraced by the very white people who outright rejected them — who, in fact, refused to make any reference at all to their existence. They seemed too myopic to notice that at the core of it all was the mean-spiritedness of those who were born to opportunity and privilege because of the comparative fairness of

their skin: a fact of birth that became the defining mold for their prejudices, practices, morals, values and schemes to divide and conquer.

As with any conclusion drawn from empirical experience, the most significant one is based on visibility. Whether the approved-upon day was for whites only or blacks only, all the booths, concession stands, rides, and such, were manned by white labor — men and women, girls and boys. On the surface, that may not mean much. But to those not born into a white skin, it means that they are somehow unfit to be allowed such opportunities, and it's all their fault.

So, underneath the surface of a false notion that everyone was equally elated, participating, and reaping in was the stark reality that it was indeed an interval in time where the wounds of being forced to live a second-class, or third-class, existence showed themselves raw and open; witness my sister's registration of her hurt, and the irrational spasmodic manifestations exhibited by those who felt left out altogether. And to think I learned and understood this complex situation when I was just under seven years of age.

To this day, I often wonder: if I had been born to some other father, what might have become of my psyche, my heart, my own humanity, my self? For our father, I think, took the hard and courageous way. He could have used the situation to spout to his progeny about the generic evilness of the white race. That was how many of the fathers around us dealt with it. He could have explained it away as just another fact of life with which we would have to learn to live. Some fathers of our friends handled it that way. He could have dismissed my sister's outburst as a simple temper tantrum. Other fathers took that option — the child was reprimanded or ignored altogether. Instead, our father demonstrated the wisdom, courage, love and patience to take advantage of the opportunity that my sister's utterance had afforded him. Because of this, I feel that his children became better people than they might otherwise have been.

To this very day I draw on what I learned from that experience. Upon occasion I hear adulation or/and condemnation in regard to the "wanna-bes." Some individual or interest group, or journalistic medium contends that this person, or that group aspires to become, or dreams of being of another ethnic distinction. In most cases I disagree wholly. For example, the white rap artist does not wish to become a black person: rather he or she simply wishes to have access to the communities that spawn this form of expression. Hence, the artist aspires to learn and adopt the manners and customs observed and practiced in those communities. This thwarts rejection and increases opportunity. The same interpretation applies in instances where the black intellectual is accused of wanting to be white — and so forth, and so on.

What is really expressed in these instances is that burning desire to get beyond those societal strictures born of the cult of separation that celebrates color of skin, and ethnicity over the commonness of humanity and culture. And I wonder — just how different might my essay be, the white rapper's life be, the black intellectual's endeavors be, if there were no need to see things in black, white or in between, in the first place? Vive la fête d'état!!!

Ann Bingham
Clara Barton HS

PROJECT NOTES

As we go to press, the summer heat has arrived (102!) and we are hoping that all of our Writing Project friends and colleagues are keeping cool and relaxed wherever they are. The summer break gives us time to pause and look back on the activities and achievements of the spring.

In June, we were sad to say goodbye to two of our colleagues: **Christine Cziko** and **Len Van de Graaff**, both of whom we are losing to the Bay Area. Len has been an active teacher-consultant these past few years, devoting much time and energy to Project activities, particularly our Saturday meeting series. As most of you know, Christine has been an important and influential NYCWP teacher-consultant from the earliest days of the Project's history. Her dedication to students and colleagues were a model for all of us, and her energy and imagination were instrumental in building our in-service work in high schools. In addition to serving as an on-site teacher-consultant for the Writing Teachers Consortium, Christine has also had a strong influence on her colleagues at Evander Childs HS where she created and maintained a successful school-based writing/study committee for teachers. Recently, she and **Betsey McGee** created a brilliant interdisciplinary curriculum for the new School for the Physical City. The departure of both of these dedicated and talented teachers is a loss for the New York City school system. But, oh how lucky Bay Area students will be!

Congratulations to long-time Writing Project member **Melanie Hammer**. Melanie's essay, "The Written Record," recently won first prize from the South Florida chapter of the National Writers Association in their annual contest. Melanie's story, "Now's the Time," was a finalist in the Authors in the Park Contest in Winter Park, Florida and will be appearing in their publication.

Melanie also joined Project members **Toby Bird**, **Jane Maher**, **Meta Plotnik** and Nassau Community College colleague **Rebecca Fraser** at the NCTE International Conference in July. Their session, "The Next Debate: To Provide the Keys to Open the Door," addressed the current political debate about open enrollment. As you may know, Toby and Heidi Atlas are now serving as co-directors of the Long Island Writing Project.

Elaine Avidon and **Sandra Texidor** joined **Mary Barr** and **Myra Barrs** at the same conference to present their work with the Primary Language Record.

Paul Allison, **Linette Moorman**, and **Linda Vereline** joined forces with **Bob Fecho** of the Philadelphia Writing Project to lead a session on interdisciplinary teaching at the Urban Sites Annual Meeting in Baltimore. **Nancy Mintz** presented her work on I-Search at the same meeting.

Two teachers from Clara Barton HS have received grants. **Matthew Clayton** has received a Fulbright grant to travel and study in China, and his colleague **John Goniatis** has received an NEH grant for study at Columbia University.

Lester Eldridge, a Spanish teacher participating in the WTC at Eastern District High School, reports that his student, **Moises Fernandez**, won a prize in the twenty-third annual Spring Poetry Festival at The City College of New York, for a poem he wrote in Spanish. The judges liked Moises' poem so much that they created a special foreign language prize for him.

Another winner of The City College Poetry Festival, **Monique Burgess**, an eleventh grader at John Jay High School, brought honor to two of her teachers, **Shelley Zipper** and **Keith Gerstenhaber**, both of the WTC.

Vincent Zangrillo, an English teacher at Forest Hills High School, has won an NEH grant for the summer to examine contemporary Italian-American literature.

Bill Hunter, A.P. of English at John Jay High School, has won an NEH grant to study Holocaust literature with Professor **Lawrence L. Langer**, and **Bryant A. Harris**, another NEH grant winner, will participate in a seminar at Amherst College on law, justice and morality. **José L. Pacanowski**, a bilingual social studies teacher at John Jay High School, has won an NEH grant called "Envisioning Democracy: The Thought of Jean Jacques Rousseau." José will spend four weeks this summer in Chambrey, France.

Kudos to **Patricia Tubridy** of JHS 180. Patricia won the Citibank Success Award from the Fund for New York City Public Education for her work as director of the Television Communication Lab at JHS 180.

Katherine Schulten was awarded a Prudential Fellowship from Children in the News. She will take a leave from her teaching at Edward R. Murrow High School to spend a year at the Columbia University School of Journalism.

The reading and writing of memoir and autobiography were the focus of two special events this spring. First, at a luncheon for the New York City Association of Assistant Principals Supervising English (NYCAAPSE), **Benita Daniels** and her student **Ping Li** of Newtown HS, **Nancy Centeno** of Franklin K. Lane HS, and **Ed Osterman**, director of the Writing Teachers Consortium, all shared their experiences of working with memoir and autobiography in the classroom. At the annual conference of Our Mutual Estate, held at Teachers College this year, **Ed Osterman** shared time with **Brenda Wallace** of Teachers College in a workshop entitled "Stories Our Lives Tell (Memoir and Autobiography)."

Under the aegis of the New York Assessment Network, **Elaine Avidon** and **Yvonne Smith** co-led a literacy workshop for parents with two teachers from the Muscota New School, **Holly Freeman**

and Vanessa Keith. Both Holly and Vanessa are participating teachers in the Elementary Teachers Network.

Congratulations to Lorraine Voros on the video she made about the work of the Elementary Teachers Network. Lorraine shot and edited the video as part of her internship in the Institute's 1994-95 Professional Development Program for teachers on sabbatical.

Belated congratulations to Marsha Slater on completing her dissertation and receiving her Ph.D. in English Education from New York University.

Various members of the New York City Writing Project contributed their thinking on the teaching of writing to the New York City Board of Education Task Force on Writing.

As always, we want to acknowledge the fine work of all of our teacher-consultants who coordinated in-service series this past spring.

Elaine Avidon, Janet Allen and Yvonne Vega coordinated a six-session basic Writing Project course for teachers at PS 130 in District 8.

Linette Moorman and Marsha Slater conducted two special workshops in writing-to-learn for English teachers at John Bowne HS.

The Writing Teachers Consortium completed its fourteenth successful year by serving teachers in Aviation/Queens Vocational High Schools, District #25 Collaborative HS, Eastern District HS, Flushing HS, Forest Hills HS, John Jay HS, Theodore Roosevelt HS, William H. Taft HS, DeWitt Clinton HS, Clara Barton HS, Martin Luther King, Jr. HS, Prospect Heights HS, and The Richard R. Green High School of Teaching. We also served teachers in the following alternative high schools: Bronx Regional, High School of Arts and Technology, High School Redirection, Lower East Side Preparatory, Middle College, Park East, and Queens International.

A hearty thank you to the corps of teacher-consultants who served their colleagues so skillfully at each of these sites. They are Joe Bellacero, DeLisa Brown, Augustina Biney, Matthew Clayton, Robin Cohen, Eileen Cuff, Christine Cziko, Nick D'Alessandro, Debra Freeman, Claudette Green, Gail Kleiner, Thomasina LaGuardia, Beverly Marcus, Barbara Martz, Barbara Matzner, Paula McCalla, Ed Osterman, Lydia Page, Lisa Rosenberg, Benyonne Schwartz, Alan Stein, Candy Systra, Gilda Tesser, Ronni Tobman-Michelen, Phyllis Witte, and Shelley Zipper.

Under the aegis of the Junior High School Writing and Learning Project, a variety of staff development activities occurred this spring.

Linda Vereline, Helen Ogden, and Sharon Rosenberg coordinated several in-service series for teachers at IS 53, JHS 180, and JHS 198 in District 27 and IS 218 in District 19.

Also at IS 218 in District 19 in Queens, Linda Vereline and Joan Fiorello, a teacher from the school, coordinated a workshop entitled "Writing on the Computer." Helen Ogden did on-site follow-up work with teachers and students which resulted in the publication of student writing.

It's been a busy summer up at Lehman. As always, there are several Writing Project and ETN courses in action.

Gail Kleiner and NYCWP Director Linette Moorman are coordinating our annual Invitational Summer Institute. Barbara Martz is assisting participants in the design of their presentations.

Ronni Tobman-Michelen and Sue Case are teaching the Open Institute. This summer its focus is the writing and reading of memoir and autobiography.

Paul Allison and Alan Stein are leading experienced Writing Project teachers through Summer 2: What's Next? In this advanced seminar, participating teachers are reflecting on and writing about classroom practice.

Barbara Batton, Louisa Cruz, Yvonne Smith, and intern Annette Purnell are leading Summer 1, a four-week seminar for 28 new ETN participants.

At Central Park East, Elaine Avidon, Liz Edelstein, and Vivian Wallace are coordinating the activities of Summer 2 for experienced ETN participants.

Amanda Gulla and April Krassner led our annual pre-summer Writing Retreat.

As a result of a NYC Goals 2000 Collaborative Grant awarded to JHS 180 in District 27, Queens, Alan Stein and Linda Vereline are coordinating a four-day seminar in team-teaching and the development of interdisciplinary curriculum. Teachers at JHS 180 will be participating. On one day of this seminar, teachers will work with the environmental center at Gateway National Recreation Area.

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