

Cultural Roots and Knowledge

by Jamie Haft

Chief Oren Lyons opened with a story about attending a major New York City museum exhibition that juxtaposed European art, including abstract expressionism, with indigenous creation from around the world: "It was astonishing how much was taken from the indigenous art to be what you call modern art." Studying the faces of the museum patrons, Lyons remarked, "I could see they were stunned because they had just been educated!" How is it that only certain aesthetics are valued, while others are overlooked? What are the biases of the current dominant pedagogies and epistemologies that result in such closed mindedness?

As an undergraduate training to be a professional actor in a hermetic studio at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, I received subtle and persistent messages to lose the traces of my culture. It seemed a professional actor needed to become an instrument capable of playing any tune, regardless. To make matters worse, I was becoming increasingly stressed about the financial burden the high cost of tuition was placing on my family, and disillusioned at the prospect of performing for only elite audiences predominant in the US professional theater scene. I was just about to drop out of school when I met Professor Jan Cohen-Cruz, who was teaching an introduction to community-based performance.

During that year's spring break, I traveled to Whitesburg, Kentucky for a weeklong immersion in community-based art making. I found the plays of Appalshop's Roadside Theater more powerful and authentic than anything I'd seen on mainstream stages. The Appalshop and Roadside artists were performing their own culture, and, as I was drawn into the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects of their traditions, I began to feel the possibilities of creation springing from my own roots.

I grew up conscious that I was a grandchild of a Holocaust survivor, but I never knew the story. Not long after the trip, I learned how my grandfather, Harry Haft, survived Auschwitz as an entertainer for the Nazis, and I realized part of my impulse for social justice was connected to my legacy as the last generation to personally know a Holocaust survivor. Now I better understand how many other students feel their identities, drawn from their cultural roots, are a motivation for their creative and civic work, an understanding reflected in the video series I am producing, *The New Activists: Students in Community*.

The majority of arts funding presently goes to institutions that focus primarily on the elite aspect of the Western European canon and serve audiences that are predominantly white and wealthy (Sidford 2011, 1). In a democracy like ours, why is there not a level playing field where people from all cultures have an equal opportunity to express themselves, develop, and, inevitably, cross-pollinate? Adopted in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms this principle of cultural equity: "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (United Nations General Assembly, Article 27, Section 1). During the Appalshop immersion, I learned some of the fascinating ways Roadside Theater creates new intercultural plays with its longstanding ensemble partners Idiwanan An Chawe in the Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico; Pregones

Theater in the Bronx; and New Orleans' African American Junebug Productions.

To resist the cultural stereotypes that pervade mass popular culture, such intercultural performances depend on deep, authentic roots in each respective culture being enacted.

My transition to becoming a *civic* actor was not all joy. I felt shame as I dropped out of the traditional acting conservatory, even though it was to pursue theater that is of, by, and for community. I figured the people who knew me in high school (where, after all, I was voted most likely to become famous) would think that my new pursuit was a fallback plan. How could I explain such theater to my Broadway-obsessed friends?

Cantor emphatically describes how our dominant mode of education contributes to such closed mindedness: "It's almost like education has become how do you strain out all the humility, all the sense of doubt, all the complexity, all the *not* knowing something, and at the end of the day, you give someone a PhD and tenure because they know something!" Cecilia Orphan testifies to the pressure on graduate students to become experts on a narrow topic. Articles in the media advise young people to "make a name, develop a personal brand," which can be incongruent with the collaborative work I want to do. We need to understand why the present dominant culture invariably elevates the genius of the individual artist (or expert) over what folklorist Alan Lomax described, in "An Appeal for Cultural Equity" (1972), as the inherent genius of every cultural community.

Cantor called for Imagining America to "redouble its efforts to say that the arts, humanities, and design disciplines, broadly defined, can put this country and world back on the right path to democratic process." To that end, higher education would need to teach and value a full range of cultural and artistic expression; presently diverse ways of knowing are too often buried under market-driven imperatives and their technocratic delivery systems. It's hard enough for communities to lose the talent of students who go away to school, but then to have that educational experience strip them of their cultural identities, that's a one-two knockout punch for the health of communities that Lyons believes is key to the survival of our species.

For many, institutional transformation is an important theme for revitalizing community-based, grassroots democracy. In his 1965 essay "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," Bayard Rustin argues: "It is institutions—social, political, and economic institutions—which are the ultimate molders of collective sentiments. Let these institutions be reconstructed *today*, and let the ineluctable gradualism of history govern the formation of a new psychology." How can Imagining America best contribute to a transformation of the culture of arts and humanities departments to recognize diverse knowers and knowledge? Will Imagining America develop equitable partnerships with flagship community-based cultural institutions which are in danger of becoming extinct, as Dudley Cocke documents in his essay, "The Unreported Arts Recession of 1997"? Doesn't a more just and peaceful future for all of us depend in significant measure on our willingness to foster a global pluralism that deeply respects cultural roots and tradition bearers?

Works Cited

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