

My Allan Bloom Problem — and Ours · Steven Weiland

IN HIS PROVOCATIVELY TITLED ESSAY of 1963, “My Negro Problem — and Ours,” Norman Podhoretz told of putting aside his “twisted” feelings about race on behalf of his “moral convictions” about justice.¹ His widely cited confession was also prophetic, predicting the racial violence of later in the decade. Once an influential critic on behalf of black writing — he was an early and vocal supporter of James Baldwin — Podhoretz now oversees the uses of the journal *Commentary* on behalf of geopolitical and economic realism, and periodic ridicule of multi-culturalism in scholarship and the arts as just so much cultural affirmative action. But I have adopted his title and some of his stance in order to recover its candor and ambivalence in thinking about the ideas now associated with Allan Bloom’s well known *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

No doubt Bloom savored the potential in his text for a strong reaction to it and he has been favored with reviews and commentary beyond the dreams of anyone writing a book in which Plato and Heidegger figure so prominently. Peter Shaw has found Bloom’s reception among academic critics to be dominated by their “demagogic” portrait of him as anti-democratic.² Like Bloom himself, Shaw thinks that today’s conservative intellectuals are models of the separation of intellectual and political life, their opponents being mainly partisans of affirmative action, feminism, the multi-cultural curriculum, and other liberal ideas. Writers like Bloom and Shaw make it difficult for many liberal teachers and scholars to register their doubts about matters like the repudiation of the canon or the obscurity of theorizing in literary studies or historiography without appearing to have crossed over to the conservative’s unconflicted skepticism about all efforts to bring academic work — by scholars and students — closer to the realities of social, economic and cultural experience.

Rick Simonson and Scott Walker have gathered a group of essays — all but one previously published — directed in the subtitle of *Multi-Cultural Literacy* to Bloom. As they would have it, the “Opening of the American

Rick Simonson and Scott Walker, eds., *Multi-Cultural Literacy: Opening the American Mind*. St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988.

Mind” will derive from its hospitality to non-white and non-Western ideas and forms of expression. Yet Simonson and Walker report, surprisingly, that their essayists in the main claim not to have heard of Bloom’s book or even of E. D. Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy* (1987) with its now famous list of items that every educated American should know. That list prompted Simonson and Walker to include in their text a provisional list of their own of essential names, dates, places and concepts representing areas of experience and art omitted from Hirsch’s compendium. But whatever the contributors to *Multi-Cultural Literacy* don’t know, they share, I think, my—“our”—Allan Bloom problem.

OPINION AND AUTHORITY

During the now vilified 1960s (by Podhoretz, Bloom, and Shaw for example) the largest group ever entered the teaching and scholarly professions in the humanities and the social sciences. True enough, even after twenty-five years there are many who have not been able to see beyond the books and methods of their own apprenticeship. And Bloom appeals to their inertia as he does to the remnant of academic conservatives—like Shaw—whose vigor of mind must be recognized.

But there is a large group of academics, writers, and intellectuals—those perhaps more devoted to literature and other callings than to the social and educational projects of the 1960s—for whom variability and change are appealing aspects of intellectual and creative life. The problem is that they share part of Bloom’s argument as well, that part of it representing the conviction, crossing ideological lines, of the significance of art and scholarship. They know that something has been lost in recent decades to the proliferation of claims on the curriculum and to the habits of students. Their—and my—Allan Bloom problem is that however much we dislike his parochialism and mean tone we may still admire the force with which he sets out the demands of liberal learning and the claims of tradition, and we share his fear, however overstated it is, of the relativizing of all categories of knowledge. As it was put to me once by an influential federal official in the humanities: “The trouble with you and your friends is that you are always waiting for another opinion.” Precisely I thought, mindful of the simplifying consequences of Bloom’s binary metaphor detached from the actual play of ideas in the university.

Yet because liberal academics have not been candid enough to reveal *their* conflicts about the curriculum and ambivalence about changes needing to be made, Bloom was able to mobilize a point of view having the effect of radically reducing—however learned his text—a complex intellectual and professional dilemma. That is, can liberal teachers and intellectuals find a path that will reflect loyalty to Western traditions, and their distinctive forms of creative and scholarly endeavor, even as they wish to deepen these domains through attention to postmodernism theorizing and to enlarge them with the experience and ideas of non-white and non-Western minorities? Bloom presents his putative opponents as a unified force for the intellectual, educational, and cultural trends he deplors. In the question of multi-culturalism, I think, what will survive are those ideas, texts, and writers (and their relations) which represent not only the case for difference but the desirability, from within the casemaking, of enough variability, and even disagreement and ambivalence, to give what is new in the curriculum and the culture the authority of that which is old.

THE LEFT VS. THE LEFT

The setting for the debate over multi-culturalism should include unsettling, and perhaps unsettleable, differences over the idea of diversity. According to the influential anthropologist Clifford Geertz, what is at stake in the humanities and social sciences today is the “Future of Ethnocentrism.”³ He puts the issue so urgently because he fears the consequences of what he takes to be resistance to difference and, worse yet, philosophical arguments for the relative incommunicability of contrasting cultures. And he warns of cultural self-centeredness and moral narcissism justified by pragmatic ethics.

Inevitably, Geertz proposes an alternative via the goals of ethnography, its pursuit of “local knowledge,” and its working contact with variant subjectivities. “The uses of cultural diversity, its study, its description, its analysis, and its comprehension, lie less along the lines of sorting ourselves from others and others from ourselves so as to defend group integrity and sustain group loyalty than to define the terrain reason must cross if its modest rewards are to be reached and realized. This terrain is uneven, full of sudden faults and dangerous passages where accidents can happen and crossing it, or trying to, does little or nothing to smooth it out to a level,

safe unbroken plain, but simply makes visible its clefts and contours.” Consumers of such knowledge—readers, students, policy makers and others—would come to see that they are living in a “collage” of distinctive, overlapping, and perhaps even interdependent cultural traditions.

Now why should Geertz have to make what looks like an argument that might get little disagreement? Because, I think, he understands himself to be in a debate with other liberal scholars. This struggle of the left vs. the left is the one that has been neglected while attention goes to the exchanges among Bloom (and his supporters) and their liberal adversaries. Thinking of scholarly colleagues who share at least his academic politics, Geertz is prompted to admit his regret about their situation: “Unable to embrace either relativism or absolutism, the first because it disables judgment, the second because it removes it from history, our philosophers, historians, and social scientists turn toward the sort of we-are-we and they-are-they *imperméabilité*.”

Richard Rorty is one of these philosophers. He has been as influential as Geertz in fields other than his own, but he is less worried about cultural narcissism. In his response to Geertz he asserts that liberal ideals of procedural justice and human inequality are “parochial, recent, eccentric, cultural developments.” Still, he adds, “ideals may be local and culturebound and nevertheless be the best hope for the species.” Hence “all we should do is point out the practical advantages of liberal institutions in allowing individuals and cultures to get along without intruding on each other’s privacy, without meddling with each other’s conceptions of the good.”⁴ Rorty is now well known as a proponent of the “conversation of mankind,” an intellectual environment in which no academic discipline or form of judgment seeks authority over any other.

Geertz and Rorty disagree less than their conservative opponents, those favoring the authority of a durable core curriculum for example, would wish. But they disagree enough to discipline our enthusiasm for any program of multi-culturalism that neglects their arguments. One way to state what divides them is that Geertz would have us each be accountable to the ideals of diversity where Rorty would have us merely amenable to them. Geertz is interested in what is socially and even morally necessary. Rorty, convinced that ideas and ideals are contingent, is interested in what is feasible. The meliorative consequences of pluralism (never far from Geertz’s mind), Rorty appears to think, will emerge from the “conversation” but

cannot and should not be, as the saying goes for the curriculum, “required.” Both want more pluralism on the campus (and indeed in the culture) than Bloom, but they differ on how to get it. Geertz would have all disciplines active in the “locales” of diversity, especially third world cultures here and abroad. Rorty would let the fields of instruction and scholarship wander as they see fit, welcoming “diversity” where it appears—in the text or the classroom or the Public Television program—but prompting it only as a choice in human invention and inquiry. Writing from outside this disagreement between liberals, Bloom would accept what pluralism there is in intellectual and cultural tradition, mainly the selection of instances of (non-Western) difference to fortify Western idea and ideals. That is not enough of course for Simonson and Walker, but neither may be Rorty’s pragmatic ideals. And Geertz’s program awaits institutional forms which will be difficult to install in academic culture.

MORRISON ON MORRISON

The give and take of the learned and literary journals can hardly be conclusive on a matter as volatile and, to be sure, as diverse in its meanings and uses, as “diversity.” The classroom, as Bloom’s book suggests, is a format where the public at least appears to think that ideas can be managed with social goals in mind. But Rorty is no doubt justified in his skepticism about the view, as he himself puts it, that “college faculties are instrumentalities that can be ordered to a purpose.” Students will “create” and “recreate” themselves, he said recently in the Deweyan terms he favors, only in response to the “provocations” of the independent instructor.⁵ I can report myself, that in the area of multi-culturalism, such provocations have their surprises, especially where the texts of pluralism are themselves pluralistic in unexpected ways.

A class I teach has had as one of its readings Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). I include this short but dense book because of the opportunity it provides for multi-cultural consideration of the course themes: literature and developmental psychology. My students are invariably white and middle class, and because we live in the Upper Midwest, we are rather isolated from black and other non-white cultures. Worse yet, my own background is as limited as theirs, if my reading experience is somewhat larger. And *The Bluest Eye* falls in the syllabus just after E. L. Doctorow’s

novel *World's Fair*, which is about Jewish life in New York, a subject on which I can speak with more authority than I can on black life in Lorain, Ohio, where Toni Morrison was raised and where much of her fiction is set.

Claudia, the narrator of *The Bluest Eye*, is a middle-aged black woman, and the story she tells is of growing up in the 1930s with her sister and their beleaguered friend. Pecola Breedlove is the main subject of the novel, a teenager whose difficult family life and poverty prompts fantasies of whiteness, especially blue eyes, and hence social acceptance. Claudia at first resists the Shirley Temple doll and all others she is offered because she is not interested in surrogate motherhood nor in other fantasies of doll play.

In fact, Claudia rejects objects entirely, asking instead for “experiences” as her holiday gifts. She wants, for example, to sit on a stool in her mother’s kitchen with a lap full of lilacs listening to her father play the violin for her alone. Here is how she states the results: “The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama’s kitchen, the smell of lilacs, the sound of the music, and since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward.” She remembers being envious of the gentle treatment that white playmates got from black women and she does have fantasies of violence against such children. “When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame foundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement.”⁶

From one point of view it is hard to tell Claudia from other security-seeking children. But of course from another point of view she is unlike most other children—white children. Her effort to understand and to mobilize the difference, her own awareness of cultural pluralism, yields her disappointment that it can only be so as “adjustment without improvement.” This pair of terms turns out to be, I think, a version of the choices posed by Geertz and Rorty in the sense that we can recognize racial and cultural differences along a scale of opportunities for “recreating” ourselves and perhaps even our societies. Claudia’s rueful recognition of what is disclosed to her, and foreclosed too, is an historical and personal experience of

seemingly great pedagogic value. Simply bringing *The Bluest Eye* into the syllabus enlarged the classroom conversation, as Rorty would have it, and forced us to adjust our interest in child development to include the experience of blacks. How much we improved as readers, as neighbors, as citizens—the moral ideals Geertz seems to have in mind—is more difficult to specify.

I suspect that my students and I were inclined to move from our individual considerations of *The Bluest Eye* toward its meanings for the kind of society we desire. Yet those whose thinking moves this way have now been warned by Toni Morrison herself about mistaking novels for editorials, for sacrificing the unique features of imaginative literature to the institutional or public roles of those teaching it. She has said that she values readers “who talk about how as well as what; who identify the workings as well as the work; for whom the study of Afro-American literature is neither a crash course in neighborliness and tolerance, nor an infant to be carried, instructed or chastised or even whipped like a child, but the serious study of art forms that have much work to do [and] are already legitimized by their own cultural sources and predecessors. . . .”⁷

Toni Morrison welcomes multi-cultural art and inquiry of course, but she is worried about us being too interested in certain kinds of results if such work is detached from the artistic and scholarly practices from which it emerges. The very precise attention she gives in her essay to the crafting of the opening sentence of each of her novels is a compelling sign of how she thinks about their origins in language as well as in ideas. And her determination to find a tradition of “Afro-American” writing, of black thought as far back as the ancient world, tells us how difficult it will be to install multi-culturalism with writing less comprehensive in its intentions and less powerful in its effects than hers. For her work and identity as a writer are always in danger of being compromised by their assignment to the forces of “diversity” in the current debate about the literary canon and the general curricular and cultural disputes that it represents. I admire her approach to the Allan Bloom problem, but I recognize as well that hers is a contingent response reflecting the conditions of her creative life as its appeal to me reflects my professional one.

THE VANISHING POINT

For most contributors to *Multi-Cultural Literacy* the intellectual terrain occupied by Bloom, Geertz, Rorty, and even Morrison, may be a matter of indifference. But for readers of Simonson's and Walker's collection the contexts for pluralism may mean as much as the commitment to it. Several contributors to *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, still early in their writing careers, share Morrison's anger. In their view, non-white writers face the double burden of finding a workable artistic "identity" (no term appears more often in the collection) as well as an audience. We have here multiple versions of what Michelle Wallace calls in her essay "Invisibility Blues." Yet in a moment of historical counterpoint, the accomplished Mexican novelist, Carlos Fuentes, recalls observing, many years ago, a group of miners in southern Chile gathered around a bonfire singing a poem by Pablo Neruda. He tells them of the pleasure that the poem's author would no doubt derive from knowing that it had been set to music. "What author?" Fuentes was asked, prompting him to recognize that the recitation he had heard represented an archaic social practice. The transformed poem had become a "document" representing the "original identity" of the culturally isolated people now singing it. Fuentes' essay, by way of contrast, is about the making of his own cosmopolitan literary identity via a mobile youth in a diplomatic family. But writing now as an internationally recognized novelist, Fuentes recognizes some limits of his work by contemplating the Homeric kind of reputation granted Neruda.

Gloria Anzaldúa also proposes that it is the identity of the work that matters most, classifying her stories as performances or even ritual offerings ("my Aztec blood sacrifices") aimed at achieving a powerful "presence" outside the Western European aesthetic ideals of virtuosity. Perhaps she would find my attribution of aims and achievements also to be self-styled artifacts of Western culture, since it is in her view only unrest that can produce the art that matters: "It is like a cactus needle embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper. . . . I write in red. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of the paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the inside of trees. Daily I battle the silence and the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from constant struggle."

Fuentes is less inclined to dramatize his creative habits and he grants to

even a canonical figure like Thomas Mann (though he is no favorite of Bloom's) a role in the making of his own voice: "I was able to approach the fire and ask it for a few sparks." But he is an able spokesman for the central claims of *Multi-Cultural Literacy*: "My upbringing taught me that cultures are not isolated, and perish when deprived of contact with what is different and challenging. Reading, writing, teaching, learning, are all activities aimed at introducing civilizations to each other. No culture, I believed unconsciously ever since then, and quite consciously today, retains its identity in isolation; identity is attained in contact, in contrast, in breakthrough."

But as Geertz's essay suggests, this idea is not self-evident, even within our civilizing institutions of learning. And as Rorty notes in his most recent book, speaking of what people do to "keep going" in difficult circumstances: "We do so by talking to other people—trying to get reconfirmation of our own identities by articulating these in the presence of others. We hope that these others will say something to help us keep our web of beliefs and desires coherent."⁸ By "other" Rorty means those in our camp as well as those outside. His remark suggests to me that, whatever their contributors' indifference to Bloom, Simonson and Walker miscalculated in making him the chief object of the essays in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*. More needs to be said within the conventional wisdom about multi-culturalism.

The cases of Fuentes' cosmopolitan allegiance to Western literary tradition is one example. Uruguayan novelist Eduardo Galeano, in contrast to Fuentes, and to Rorty's benevolent version of the relations between writers and readers, has a more precise and militant view: "One writes against one's solitude and against the solitude of others. . . . But 'others' is too vague; and in times of crisis, times of definition, ambiguities may too closely resemble lies. One writes, in reality, for the people whose luck or misfortune one identifies with—the hungry, the sleepless, the rebels, and the wretched of the earth—and the majority of them are illiterate." Galeano believes, as do several other essayists in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, that the writer's identity is in political action and social struggle. Japanese-American poet David Mura proposes that white guilt is a durable fact of political and cultural life because of "the way that power was acquired and the way its sources have been kept hidden from the consciousness of both whites and colored minorities." And that is an essential reason, in his view, that minority writing has what amounts to an educative claim on white audiences, letting us know "what others think of us."

These motives and more show through Michelle Cliff's pair of essays. In the first, "A Journey into Speech," she explains the burden of "forced fluency" in standard English that prompted both her advanced study in London of the Italian Renaissance and then her discovery of herself and her Jamaican background as a subject. "No reggae spoken here" was not just the putative rule of the prestigious Warburg Institute but of the class-conscious culture of Jamaica itself. In a painful irony she notes that the past was "bleached" from her mind by colonizers and natives alike. The fragmented form of the second essay, "If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire," represents her abandonment of the "coldbloodedness" of scholarly and colonial languages and her choice of more authentic "speech." It provides the presence otherwise denied even to an author. For she tells of showing a bookstore clerk in London a copy of her own book: "She stares at me for a minute, then says: 'You're a Jamaican.' 'Yes.' 'You're not at all like our Jamaicans.'" The distinction is worse than invidious: "Encountering the void is nothing more nor less than understanding invisibility. Of being fogbound."

But Cliff's cultural gyroscope still works, partly to contain her rage, partly, like Morrison, to redirect it toward the complex problems in identity and creative endeavor she feels responsible about. And she offers, I think, a useful image of multi-cultural consciousness, one that depends on her formal training in art: "*Looking back*: To try and see when the background changed places with the foreground. To try and locate the vanishing point: where the lines of perspective converge and disappear. Lines of color and class. Lines of history and social context. Lines of denial and rejection." By describing her own circumstances this way, as "My Jamaica Problem—and Ours" if you will, Cliff achieves something of Podhoretz's worried detachment on a problem of great moral urgency. And her Warburg years survive within a more mobile and admittedly ambivalent identity than is available to writers more singular in thinking about and presenting their backgrounds and purposes. Aware quite personally of the ethnocentrism Geertz fears, she is also a "conversationalist" on Rorty's terms: "I and Jamaica is who I am. . . . And Jamaica is a place in which we/they/I connect and disconnect. . . ."

CONCLUSION: AN ENLISTMENT

In his buoyant contribution to *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, Ishmael Reed offers examples of the way that cultural styles are irreversibly overlapping in the United States and declares to those still musing about the possibility of multi-culturalism, "The world is here." Besides, he says, Western Civilization is too complex a phenomenon, with roots in other cultures, to depend on it for a complete grasp of human experience. Perhaps, Reed suggests, we know too much about the Puritans, or the wrong things, to be able to change our "beasts and pagans" view of others.

Accordingly, beyond the discursive resources of *Multi-Cultural Literacy* there is the list, offered somewhat reluctantly by Simonson and Walker, but certainly suggestive of how diverse is diversity, how conflicting interests define real difference. How else might we account for the unreconciled appearance on the list of Anna Freud and Dr. J., Prague Spring and Smokey the Bear, Yiddish and the United Fruit Company. I am myself pleased to be able to say a few things about each of these, but to be able to do so is not the same as knowing why it is important to know about them and not something else.

That is the putative task of the essays in *Multi-Cultural Literacy*, but most meet it only diffidently, I think, focussed as they are on the experience of the writer as the primary object of knowledge. They confirm part of Bloom's argument, that preoccupation with the self (or "identity") has displaced interest in what is outside it, especially the past. And we are left with the list, as counterpoint to the prose, to reaffirm multi-culturalism as a site where particular forms of knowing, both for their subjects and objects, might be revealed as the intellectually demanding enterprise it is. My Allan Bloom problem — and here I am cautious about an "our" — cannot be resolved. For I am not inclined to resist what *Multi-Cultural Literacy* suggests I need to know. But so too do I see how coming to such knowledge actually deepens my problem rather than resolves it through forms of intellectual solidarity or even a Podhoretz-like confession.

Notes

1. Norman Podhoretz, *Doings and Undoings: The Fifties and After in American Writing* (New York: Noonday, 1964), pp. 354–371.
2. Peter Shaw, *The War Against the Intellect: Episodes in the Decline of Discourse* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989), pp. 173–81.
3. Clifford Geertz, “The Uses of Diversity,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* XXV (Winter 1986), pp. 105–123. The quotations which follow are from pages 119 and 108 respectively.
4. Richard Rorty, “On Ethnocentrism: A Reply to Clifford Geertz,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* XXV (Summer 1986), pp. 532, 533.
5. Richard Rorty, “Education and Dogma: Truth, Freedom and Our Universities,” *Dissent* (Spring 1989), p. 204.
6. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972; originally published in 1970), pp. 21–22.
7. Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* XXVIII (Winter 1989), p. 33.
8. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 185.