

## THE BOUNDARIES OF MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Luise McCarty's "critique of images" exposes deep and damaging assumptions in conventional notions of culture. Inner city, barrio, ghetto, township: all attest to the injury that enclosure wreaks. Significantly, McCarty recognizes that while "culture as finite object" connotes barriers and isolation, spatial imagery per se need not limit nor occlude. Indeed, culture conceived of as "region" calls up the "intrinsic, nondisposable orientation to place" which is essential to human existence. Without this "definite but abstract tie to particular place," we wouldn't know how to "get around." Put simply, we'd be lost.

Culture thus conveys the proposition that although we have been spatially "fixed," we are not thereby "fixated." McCarty offers two metaphors which express this idea. Following Heidegger, she construes culture as "path," noting that this imagery conceives of spatial location as "a tracing-out, historically, of potential commonalities." Similarly, Hegel's "home" suggests that cultures, while bounded, are not self-contained. On the contrary, "the very idea of a single, self-conscious culture requires, for its identity, comparison against alternatives."

Upon close reading, it becomes apparent that images of home and path connote more than empirical phenomena. Commenting on Heidegger's path, McCarty declares: "if 'my' words and their concepts are a crosscultural heritage, then so are 'my' thoughts. I cannot think without thinking through other times, other cultures." With respect to Hegel's "home," she writes: "one only comes to recognize and to appreciate a culture — even a home culture — by reflection in and upon others. I must 'recognize my own in the alien.'" McCarty's metaphors, in short, not only illumine salient features of culture: they also disclose dimensions of understanding. Persons who understand "culturally" are grounded but not rigid. They are both positioned and potentiated by others. Cultural understanding is a kind of "situated openness." As the term implies, situated openness is a way of understanding that is also a way of being.

On McCarty's model, the task of multicultural education is not to transmit "disposable" information. Rather, it is to cultivate a certain orientation to life. This orientation, McCarty observes, is both an aesthetic discernment and a moral virtue. It is a "style of judging" which builds a sense of place even as it is "open to what is other." Gadamer's *Takt*, McCarty concludes, provides a strategy for education on this genuinely cultural model.

I find McCarty's critique rich and compelling. My aim is not to dispute but to further her lucid discussion by highlighting a key assumption which undergirds her argument. This assumption, I believe, drives not only McCarty's work but hermeneutic understanding in general. It has important implications for how we view cultural boundaries.

Culture construed hermeneutically as home or place not only orients: it also refers. Specifically, it points us towards the common or universal. Paths intersect, McCarty notes. In so doing, they both lead to future and recall a multitude of commonalities. Home tends in the same direction. Speaking about *Bildung* — the conceptual basis of Hegel's "home" — Gadamer explains: "It is the universal nature of human *Bildung* to constitute itself as a universal intellectual being."<sup>1</sup> *Takt* preserves the

universality implicit in Hegel's *Bildung. Takt*, we are told, essentially consists in "keeping oneself open to what is other — to other, more universal points of view."

McCarty's culture, we thus can say, inclines towards harmony and wholeness. While attentive to plurality, it accents what we share. Cultural understanding is at once expansive and inclusive.<sup>2</sup> The better interpretation is the one that is more comprehensive.

Of course, the "whole" to which culture refers is just that: a point of reference. The immediate condition of human existence consists in particularity. A myriad of differences and divisions characterizes social life.

The challenge is to reconcile the universal and the particular. According to Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, history constitutes the arena in which the dialectic gets played out. To be sure, the three conceive of reconciliation very differently. For Hegel, reconciliation is an achievement, history's culmination. For Heidegger and Gadamer, the task is not to restore or reconstruct wholeness but rather to disclose it within a given horizon. For all three, making sense of life is a function of wholes and parts. Meaning on this hermeneutic view is a drive for increasing coherence.

What is significant about this account is the way that it regards "breaking." Hegel considers the break from wholeness as unnatural, even alien. In Gadamer's words, man for Hegel "is characterised by the break with the immediate and the natural that the intellectual, rational side of his nature demands of him. 'In this sphere he is not, by nature, what he should be' — and hence he needs *Bildung*."<sup>3</sup> For Gadamer, the condition of having been broken is not an obstacle to be overcome. Separation and distance in Gadamer's view are enabling and productive. Nevertheless, Gadamer, too, regards breaking as emblematic of primordial loss. Loss, in turn, is disorienting, tragic. It calls for repair and fusion.

McCarty also recognizes the phenomenon of breaking. According to her, breaking not only occasions sadness: it also elicits fear. "In those very words of 'breaking out,'" she writes, "we hear echoes of 'breaking in' and 'breaking down' and, more simply, 'breaking.' The image of geographic region naturally prompts the frightened questions..." In McCarty's view, we steel ourselves against being broken by erecting boundaries. In so doing, we make ourselves vulnerable to even more loss.

Like McCarty, I am frightened by the trauma of breaking. Loss, however, confronts us as a stark reality. The historian, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, puts the point eloquently. Reflecting on the irony of being a Jew who writes Jewish history, Yerushalmi observes:

To address...all the many modern Jews who have experienced the other radical "breaks" that modern Jewish existence has entailed, some reorientation is required. The task can no longer be limited to finding continuities in Jewish history, not even "dialectical" ones. Perhaps the time has come to look more closely at ruptures, breaches, breaks, to identify them more precisely, to see how Jews endured them, to understand that not everything of value that existed before a break was either salvaged or metamorphosed, but was lost....<sup>4</sup>

Significantly, Yerushalmi goes on to talk about retrieval. His words, however, place us squarely in the moment of loss. In that moment, we are called upon not to fear nor yet repair, but simply to be present.

What does it mean to understand in the presence of loss? What implications might this have for multicultural education? Ralph Ellison's "invisible man" offers us a clue. Ellison's protagonist, a man seduced into thinking he can act outside of history, closes the account of his life with the following remarks:

Now I know men are different and that all life is divided and that only in division is there true health.... America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's "winner take nothing" that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is

won by continuing to play in the face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many — This is not prophecy, but description.<sup>5</sup>

Ellison does not revel in radical discontinuity. His view of diversity clearly is framed with an eye towards social harmony. At the same time, Ellison maintains that boundaries are indispensable. To ignore division on his view is to ignore and ultimately perpetuate loss. It is only when differences are respected that visibility becomes possible.

In the face of loss, we can erect barriers and enclosures. Or we can be open to breaks and divisions in life. Either way we confront boundaries and limits. Will the presence of boundaries impede understanding? Must differences between us disrupt and diminish relations? Or can boundaries and differences enrich our interactions, promoting opportunities for new insight and growth? To imagine how boundaries might be *generative* of understanding to me constitutes the challenge of multicultural education.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1986), 13.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Maxine Greene, “The Passions of Pluralism: Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community,” *Educational Researcher* 22, no.1 (1993): 13-18.

<sup>3</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 101.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), 499.