

CRITICAL THINKING, RACISM AND EDUCATION IN THE US "THIRD WORLD"

SHARON SPENCER

(*Note: Within the context of this essay "Critical thinking" will be understood to mean "common sense: sound practical judgment that is independent of specialized knowledge, training, or the like: normal native intelligence." The Random House College Dictionary, 1968*)

Unless they live in California, Texas or in the urban Northeast, North Americans are unlikely to be aware that the population is gradually shifting to an anticipated majority of "people of color." The causes of this shift are immigration (both legal and illegal) and the high birth rate, primarily of people of South and Central American origins. For example, according to a 1988 Census Bureau report, since 1980 the Latino population of the United States has increased five times faster than that of any other group, reaching an estimated 19.4 million. California counts the highest per state Latino population—6.6 million" (*Los Angeles Times Magazine*, February 19, 1989). The November/December issue of *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* reports that "According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1.75 million East, Southeast, and South Asian immigrants were admitted legally to the U.S., with Asians now constituting the largest group of legal immigrants annually." To cite a home-grown example of population change, I taught a Freshman Composition course in the summer of 1989; of twenty-five students, three were first-generation European immigrants; two were Latinos (a relatively small number for M.S.C.); two were African-Americans; and six were Asian (three from Vietnam, three from India).

Fully aware of the enormous cultural differences among, for example, Asians or Latinos, we must give deep thought to the ways in which U.S. life might be affected in the future by this gradual shift. At best, the new immigrants will be welcomed by the descendents of the former immigrants from Europe, who have inherited a consciousness of their ancestors' struggle in the "new"

world. The new immigrants will benefit from equal opportunities to find safe work at fair pay and comfortable housing as well as educational programs that will meet their diverse needs. This in itself is an immense problem; the new immigrants have widely varied skills and needs; indeed, this is the major focus of the *Change* issue subtitled "Asian and Pacific Americans: Behind the Myths." East Indians and West Indians generally have remarkably good English language skills, often higher than those of their U.S.-born peers, while people from China, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, and various Central and South American countries often need intensive language training before they can participate in society even marginally.

I would like to believe, even to hope, that the newcomers will be welcomed and invited to participate fully in our society. But this belief is very difficult to sustain, especially considering shrinking U.S. economic achievements and prospects and the new wave of racist-inflamed violence that is so ugly a feature of contemporary life.

Although I grew up in a small mid-Western community and went to high school in Denver, I have been a resident of Manhattan and northern New Jersey since I was sixteen and came to New York to attend college. My experience in the Northeast suggests a much grimmer, even a tragic future, a racially and, of course, economically bifurcated society that may have many of the features of present-day South Africa. In this grim social possibility, the numerical majority of "people of color," not only the new immigrants but also many African-Americans and Puerto Ricans, will work at unskilled jobs to

support an increasingly small number of multinational corporations whose managers will be persons of European origins.

A particularly brutal aspect of this dreaded possibility is that there will be fierce competitive in-fighting among "people of color" (encouraged by those in power to ensure the continuance of their own privileges); the new groups will resist solidarity with the Native-Americans, the African-Americans and the Puerto Ricans, who, in turn, will resent advances made by the newly arrived, mostly Latinos and Asians. As we have already seen in Miami, there may be continued strife between under-employed African-Americans and more affluent and politically powerful Cuban-Americans. This strife will, of course, serve the interests of the governing class, who will isolate their homes in communities far away from the urban ghettos where crime may rage at an even more accelerated rate than at present, stimulated by the deadly combination of poverty and the availability of never-ending supplies of murderous drugs.

What does all this have to do with critical thinking? A great deal. To illustrate I need to resort to a self-congratulatory reminiscence. When I was seven or eight years old and still living in a predominantly rural community, a friend of the same age quoted her father as having said that "All Jews are...." Even though I had no awareness of what a Jew was, I knew that what she had said could not be true. I argued with her. I was convinced that her father's assertion could not be true because *all* of any group of people could not accurately be described as anything at all (except human). I rejected the generalization as impossible. When I got home I told

(continued on page 28)

THIRD WORLD (from page 27)

my parents what had happened, and they provided me with the knowledge to support my opposition to my friend's parroted defamation of Jews.

Let's look at the relation between critical thinking and racism pragmatically. Even if it were not the *right* thing to do to treat other people as we wish to be treated — an axiom of European existentialism, though couched in much more sophisticated language — there is a very sound *practical* reason to do so. People who are unjustly treated eventually become very angry; the longer they are unfairly treated, the angrier they become. Although for a long time they may express their rage against members of their own group, eventually they begin to direct it at the perpetrators of the injustice they have experienced. If it is organized, this rage can lead to revolution; if it is not organized, it can lead to anarchy, and if it is exacerbated by extensive drug trafficking, it can lead to random violence. At present the society we live in is vainly trying to deal with this cycle of injustice and consequent rage by building more jails in which to lock the angry people. The Afrikaner rulers of the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa let their captive population work for them, and then carefully contain them in an attempt to repress the anticipated violence.

To push my argument a little bit further, I'd like to suggest that there is a crucial, but often overlooked link between being the victims of a crime and the process of critical thinking. How many victims of street crimes — rapes and muggings, for example — see a connection between the injustice *they* have been subjected to and the injustice experienced by the perpetrator(s) of the crime? There are victims, and there are victims of victims. Although I myself have been the victim of numerous petty crimes (the most frightening was being mugged at knife-point), I did not examine the connection between being violated and society's larger

racism until I entered into a detailed discussion with a friend, who was the victim of an especially brutal cross-racial crime.

She was living in Boston in a supposedly "good" (i.e., "safe") neighborhood. On the day after Thanksgiving in the afternoon she opened her door to an expected friend and found it forced open by the butt of a gun. Three men then forced their way into her apartment. At first—it seemed—they had intended only to rob her, but after a discussion they decided to assault her sexually as well. My friend endured five hours of verbal and sexual abuse.

During this time she begged her attackers to kill her. After the assailants left, she wriggled out of the ropes they had tied her in and called the police. Eventually, the men were apprehended, tried and given three consecutive life sentences.

What is remarkable about the victim of this horrendous crime is her understanding that she was as much a victim of racism as the men who robbed and tortured her mercilessly. Once she recovered from the trauma of having been so severely violated, my friend changed her professional goals. She entered law school with the intent of becoming a Public Defender.

Racism manifests a tragic lack of critical thinking. Racism is irrational; it is based on mass projections of despised and supposedly shameful attributes by one group of people onto another. Racism can be automatically reversed; it is grounded in nothing more quantifiable than clustered projections. Racism causes enmity and produces enemies. Besides displaying a lack of critical thinking, racism displays a lack of human empathy. A lack of humanism. A lack of humanity.

As teachers — and learners — we are in a unique position to combat the projections that underlie racism. Especially if we work in a humanities discipline, we enjoy a platform and a space of time that gives us the opportunity to challenge students to

search their educational books and other materials as well as their life experiences for the common elements of humanity, for the ties that bind and blend, without losing awareness of the culturally-specific differences that give groups of people the original identities that enhance their shared human identity.

A good place to begin is by encouraging students to think of the "world" globally. As recently as 1983 when I was searching publishers' catalogs for a possible anthology to be used as a text in our two new World Literature courses, I found that no such collection was available. I located several anthologies with "world" in the title, but in every case "world" meant the Western world (typically beginning either with the Bible as literature or with the "Golden Age" of Greece, the fifth century "B.C." Thinking of the world globally means recognizing that for most of the world's people the designation "B.C." to denote historical time is offensive, or perhaps merely irrelevant, the inherited historical designation of conquerors. Thinking of the world globally means developing the parallel awareness that "America" denotes an area vastly larger than the United States. A marvelous example of how the word "America" changes, depending on who is using it lies in the following accolade on a poster portraying the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Patron Saint of Mexico. she is called the "Queen of Mexico, the Empress of America." Thinking of the world globally means challenging ourselves to develop an awareness of how we are perceived by others.

This is why the two World Literature courses that are a sophomore-level General Education Requirement at M.S.C. are based on thematically related literary works drawn from a wide variety of the world's literatures. One is subtitled "The Coming of Age Theme" (indicating any transition in the life cycle) and the other "Voices of

(continued on page 29)

THIRD WORLD *(from page 28)*

Tradition and Challenge." Instructors are free to choose any works they wish, providing there are a substantial number of non-Western texts. (Yes, it is true. The term "non-Western" is objectionable; it describes something by what it is *not*—by "otherness." Simone de Beauvoir long ago demonstrated how men have used "otherness" (wo-man) to denigrate women, and more recently Edward Said has used the same argument to show Western projections incongruously clustered and thrust upon Easterners (*Orientalism*).

As the person who coordinated the development of the two World Literature courses, I wish to share the two most basic problems connected to their successful presentation and implementation. The first is the difficulty of identifying faculty members who can transcend their feelings of insecurity about teaching isolated literary works from a national literature when they have had no extensive training in the history of that literature. ("How can I teach a Japanese novel? I don't know anything at all about Japanese literature!") Without critical thinking, Western-oriented instructors may use terms like "Renaissance" or "Enlightenment" to describe the literatures of, for example, Malaysia or Turkey. Recently, a visiting lecturer who was hired to evaluate a faculty development program in non-Western literature inadvertently aroused the participants' laughter: after hearing a detailed presentation of a twentieth-century Japanese novel (*The Waiting Years* by Fumiko Enchi), he commented with absolute assurance: "Obviously, it's a pastoral elegy!"

Such blunders are caused by unexamined habits and by failing to review and revise language. They are caused by a lack of critical thinking. Even when multicultural courses and programs are supported by faculty development projects, there will be some faculty members who

will remain convinced that—as the late Doors lead singer Jim Morrison wryly put it—"The West is the best."

A more profound problem with the implementation of the two World Literature courses is the way that students may resist emotionally processing the new materials. I stress the word "emotionally," because even the most resistant students can intellectually master the works; they can do well on exams and papers, but this does not mean that they have gained an understanding of the relativity of their assumptions about other people and their cultures, nor that they have attained an enhanced awareness of what it means to be human in a world of superficial differences. To state the issue bluntly: how readily will students of European origins enter into an emotional identification with a fictional character who is African, Asian, or Native American? Unless this emotional identification takes place, the student will not truly experience a given literary work in a profound and complete way.

Certain responses of students in a recent World Literature course ("Voices of Tradition and Challenge") will illustrate this problem. Because of events occurring in the Americas and in Mexico, I felt the urgency of students understanding something about these areas. My reading list was slanted to include a number of Caribbean works; one was V. S. Naipaul's *Miguel Street*, a collection of stories and sketches describing his early life in a poor section of Port of Spain, Trinidad. I began the course with a xeroxed excerpt, *The Autobiography of Miguel Duran, an Urban Marginal* (from Cali, Columbia). I also showed the film *El Norte* which depicts the urgent journey of a Guatemalan brother and sister to California by way of Mexico. Other works included the films *The World of Apu* and *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, collections of stories from Africa and Japan, and Khushwant Singh's novel about the partitioning of India, *Train to Pakistan*.

On the first day of class I reviewed the list of films and books with the class and explained — I thought — that the purpose of the course was to introduce students to literary materials depicting cultures other than their own so that they could make essential comparisons with the intent of attaining a deeper understanding both of themselves and others. Of twenty-five students five were assertively challenging at the start. Typical questions were: "What is the point of this course?" "What is this course about?" "Why do we have to read all these books about Caribbean people?"

In spite of what I thought were clear explanations, these questions persisted. One totally unwilling student withdrew. Three others had to be quieted, one rather sharply. Finally, I asked, "Is there still a need for me to explain the purpose of this course?"

I was delighted. I was rescued by an intelligent student, who called out: "Not again!" There was laughter, and we could move on to the assigned reading.

Nevertheless, one student remained possessed of incorrigible prejudices. One night she complained about the large number of "foreigners" teaching in the business department. "After all, we *have* all those foreigners in the business department!"

She said this in spite of the fact that the class constituency included a Jamaican, a Trinidadian, three identifiable and one "passing" Latino, and three African-Americans. Not one of the students challenged her. My response was tart; I commented that at least we knew what *her* opinion was, and moved the discussion back to the text.

At the end of the semester perhaps as many as five students remained as thoroughly saturated with a sense of their own racial and cultural superiority as when the class started. Others, who were silent, were probably also unaffected. However,

(continued on page 30)

THIRD WORLD *(from page 29)*

one woman who had an "Anglo" name took me aside to tell me that her native language was Spanish, though she no longer spoke it. After seeing *El Norte*, five or six students told me that their attitudes toward undocumented immigrants had become much more favorable because they had gained an understanding of the conditions that might drive people to cross national boundaries furtively, risking their lives to do so. Most students attained a basic understanding of Hinduism from the student panel that responded to *The World of Apu*, as well as an historical framework for the conflicts among Hindus, Moslems and Sikhs that are so frequently described by media.

In 1983 when M.S.C. initiated the World Literature courses we were unique in making such a course a G.E.R. requirement. I am sure that by now many more colleges have introduced similar courses. And it is my intense hope that we will continue to develop courses and programs in multicultural studies that will meet the needs of a student body that will increasingly reflect the population of the world.

The possibility of a society based on *de facto* apartheid is a potential tragedy that we must avoid not only by welcoming the

newcomers but also by cultivating the generosity to share our declining riches with them in a just manner. Who would willingly make an enemy when it is so much more intelligent to acquire a friend?

To think critically is to examine one's prejudices, to explore one's unconscious assumptions, to look directly at the connections between racism and crime, and to relinquish the arrogance of racial and cultural superiority that has reduced the concept of the world to a small number of embattled whites. A world of difference is—fundamentally—a world of sameness, and it is filled with a diversity of riches.

Sharon Spencer is a faculty member in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at MSC, where she also serves as Special Assistant to the Vice President for Student Affairs.

Dr. Spencer writes both literary criticism and fiction. She has a longstanding commitment to excellence in teaching as well as to curriculum development.

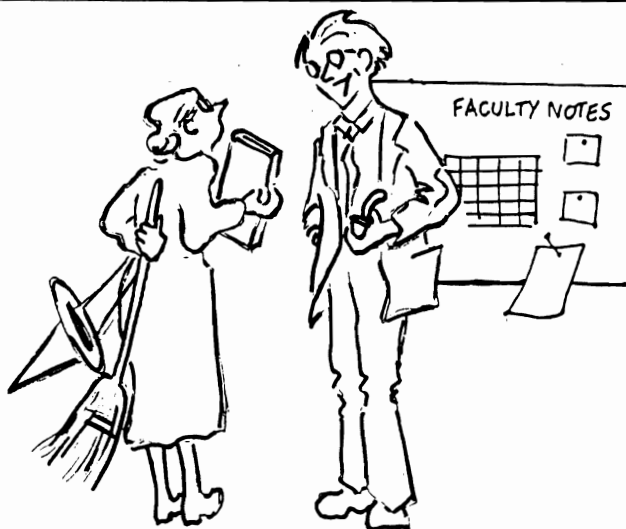
Last summer she introduced a graduate seminar called Narrative Art in the International Short Story in English. She has traveled widely in Europe, the Balkans, North Africa, and Mexico. She spends as much time as possible with her five Mayan godsons who live in a Yucatan village.

Seminar Offered

Meditation, or mindfulness, is considered the cornerstone practice of the Buddhist philosophical discipline, which also includes many critical thinking skills in its focus on phenomenological analysis. Subtlety and clarity of mind, mental equipoise and flexibility are all results of successful meditation practice and all serve to enhance not only clear perception, but also rigorous thinking.

Dr. Joan Cheu of the Department of Psychology at MSC will offer a seminar entitled "Buddhism, Meditation and Life," which will address these and other aspects of Buddhist practice. She will be assisted by Ms. Avy Kennedy, long-time student of Chan Master Sheng-Yen of the Chan Meditation Center in Elmhurst, Queens, who will demonstrate introductory techniques.

The talk and practicum is scheduled for Wednesday evening, March 28 at 6:00 p.m. in the Student Center, room 417. An ongoing meditation and inquiry group, devoted both to Buddhist and non-Buddhist perspectives, is one possibility to be discussed in the course of the evening. For further information contact Robert Esformes at the Institute for Critical Thinking.



Critical Thinking? You've got to be...



...kidding!