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Humanizing the Other in “Us and Them”

TESSA HICKS

At an arbitrary point in the widening circle, I took a seat and gazed upon the group of twenty-five stellar human beings gathered around me. I felt honored to be coordinating this important gathering about how to dismantle the building blocks of interpersonal and institutional bias and oppression. I began by voicing some of my hopes for what would come from our three hours together. Through interactive discussions and experiential activities, we would explore how bias functions in society and the roles we each play in witnessing, receiving, and perpetuating discrimination. We would also investigate the roadmap to institutional oppression and genocide that results when interpersonal bias is left unchecked.

This agenda presented no easy task, but this was no ordinary think tank assembled before me. These twenty-five individuals represented an eclectic brew of undergraduate and graduate-school professors and students, activists and organizers, and theatre writers, directors, and actors who hailed from as far as Serbia, Rwanda, and Argentina and as close as San Francisco, Valencia, and Santa Monica. Amazingly, this intellectual and artistic powerhouse represented only a third of the larger group that was taking part in a dynamic conference sponsored by the Theatre Arts Department of Cal Arts, The International Coexistence Center of Brandeis University and the grassroots organization, Theatre without Borders. Through four days of performances, workshops, panels, and lectures, the “Arts in the One World: A Look at Rwandan Genocide” Conference called forth this international community with the objective of exploring the role of art, witnessing, and reconciliation in times of violent oppression and genocide.

Throughout the many days of this gathering, words describing oppression and genocide were thrown around on stage and at the podium that seemed to be the basic, agreed-on terms of our discussion. Yet, I was sure that language was understood and used differently per the personal, cultural, and intellectual lens of the user. Even allegedly “agreed-on” terminology was rarely collectively understood in the same ways.

To address this phenomena and the misunderstanding it can create, I opened the workshop by asking the participants to unravel the meanings

of the terms: “stereotype,” “prejudice,” “discrimination,” “genocide,” “victim,” “ally,” “bystander,” and “perpetrator.” Small groups were given just two words each to tackle, and after almost an hour of animated debate and dialogue, the group could really only agree on one thing: just how multifaceted our definitions, perspectives, and feelings about these words are. Personal bias, experience, judgment, and assumptions flooded our allegedly “objective” definitions. Dualities were created to sustain boundaries between such words as ally and bystander, and bridges were built to shed light on the interdependence between such words as stereotype and prejudice. I never presented them with any “correct” dictionary definitions of the terms that we would use for the purposes of the workshop, but instead encouraged us to exist together in the interstitial space of conflicting meanings and multiple understandings of the words that were actively in use.

Next, we began to explore the fluidity that exists between the stages in the development of bias. This development can be likened to moving up a ladder that links our perceptions, beliefs, and actions. Beginning with what may be a natural process of categorizing information (a strategy for sorting and understanding new knowledge), we often quickly move to the unnatural process of acting on judgments that convert our original categorizing to over-generalized assumptions about diverse pieces of information and groups of people, like in the case of a bias ladder.

The ladder’s first steps begin with the understanding that a stereotype is a thought we formulate, based sometimes on a kernel of truth from past experiences or on messages learned from family, media, school, or religion. This thought or stereotype generalizes information about a person or group, and categorizes them into a simplified and often inaccurate portrayal. There is not usually a leap into discrimination at this point but rather the next step on the ladder, where we habitually use our thought pattern and stereotyping until it becomes an ingrained belief system. That is, it develops into an overarching prejudice about a group of people that have been identified stereotypically. We then begin to formulate our actions based on this belief system (prejudice). We perpetuate prejudice through our actions, which we call “discrimination.” By recognizing the fluidity we use to climb this ladder, we can point out the need to halt the escalation of bias at each step.

Categorizing information is a benign process that turns malignant when we add false assumptions and hierarchical judgments to it. Luckily, we can reconstruct how we navigate our personal and collective responsibilities in the growth of this cancerous behavior. The workshop participants did just that as they began to dissect the roles they play while climbing the bias ladder. Returning to some of the words they had tried to define (victim, ally, bystander, and perpetrator), they began to explore the different perspectives,

actions, inactions, and reactions of individuals and groups involved in bias-motivated situations.

In a quiet visualization, we dimmed the lights and stood together to remember the times, feelings, and consequences we have experienced in our own lives when we have played one or all of these roles. We engaged in somatic experiencing to feel where in our bodies we held pain, shame, hurt, anger, or empowerment from having played each of these roles at some point in our lives. Taking responsibility for our part in the escalation of bias was both painful and empowering. Yet, by recognizing the “stuck” spot to which we can become glued, as a result of the painful feelings associated with our experiences in these roles, we can chart a dynamic route toward active individual and collective healing in the face of this cancer’s contagious effect.

Although it is certainly easier to blame others for the paradigms of oppression in our society and more painful to recognize our parts in acting in less than inclusive and respectful manners, there is also a sense of hope in knowing that we have the power to do something in response to such overwhelming issues as ethnic hatred and bias. By exploring the ways we can make even the smallest recognition about the biases we may harbor about certain groups (be it religious, ethnic, racial, cultural, national, sexual orientation, or gender groups), we could see how the *Pyramid of Hate* can be disrupted. The *Pyramid of Hate* (see Figure 1) illustrates the different

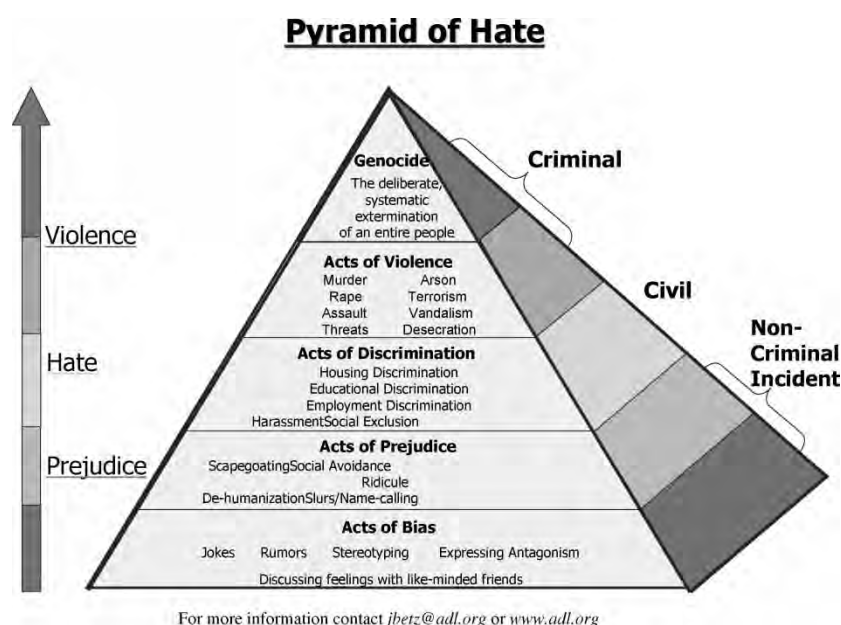


Figure 1. Pyramid of Hate.

levels on which bias plays out in society, and shows that hate does not occur in a vacuum. Something as huge as genocide does not erupt surprisingly, and if we intercept prejudice and hate at lower levels, we can interrupt the growth of this pyramid. Thus, we become responsible for our vulnerabilities and responsibilities associated with the roles of both victim and perpetrator, and recognize our ability to halt the escalation of bias as we idly standby or actively interrupt. Although everyone joined this discussion from distinct cultural backgrounds, we were able to recognize our respective positions in relation to the pyramid of hate, and illuminate our collective responsibilities.

Despite the accomplishments of this conference, critical questions remain for those of us who are working to dismantle systems of oppression and hate. Audre Lorde reminds us that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.” So, in our very use of terms like “victim,” “perpetrator,” “oppressed,” and “oppressor,” are we not simply perpetuating the paradigms of oppression that we wish to dismantle? Do the methods and terminology used to recognize the fragmenting effects on communities that result from prejudicial thinking and discriminatory actions simultaneously forward the very hierarchical dualism that divides “us” from “them,” “good” from “bad,” “victim” from “enemy,” and “oppressed” from “oppressors?” If we want a more empathetic, interconnected community, mustn’t we heed Gandhi’s wise words and “become the change we wish to see in the world?” How can we break free of our roles as victims (and as perpetrators) of bias and violence if we keep referring to ourselves and others in these terms?

Throughout the conference, we used language that enables cultural polarization and social binaries to exist, yet we did so because we did not know how else to describe the realities of violent oppression. Besides investigating the ways bias can develop and the roles we take in the various stages of the Pyramid of Hate, we must also somehow explore ways to heal from and dissolve hierarchical paradigms of dualism without perpetuating them in our very discussions of oppression.

Of course, this demands that we re-think the very nature of individualism and dualism that have been the building blocks of Western culture from its inception. Even in the typical process of self-identification, we have used binaries to separate us from the other, to accent our individuality. This creates tensions in the very ways we chose to define and understand ourselves, leading to the use of socially imposed categorizations that can box us in. We see this in the common desire to defy how the category of “race” attempts to generalize our multifaceted personalities, talents, values, behavior, and spirit on the arbitrary measurement of skin color, yet we simultaneously cling to the very cultural identity that has been born in relation to that racial categorization.

We seem trapped in a prison of our own construction. Likewise, we are bound by the roles, identities, and terms associated with the paradigms of bias-motivated violence and oppression. We want to rob the “oppressors” of their ability to make us “oppressed,” but we contribute to the power of the very construct, paradigm, and action of oppression by continually giving them the role and name of “oppressors” and ourselves as “oppressed.” The discussions of racial identity and oppression/genocide become linked: we want to dismantle this house altogether, yet we keep using the very tools that keep it entrenched as an active part of our society.

As a result, we end up polarizing parts of ourselves and our community. Each of us can take power in some way and yet be robbed of our own power in other ways. We have the capacity to act out both roles, but recognizing this generates cognitive dissonance: it clashes with our desire to be seen as wholly “good,” unprejudiced people. We do not embrace the fluidity between the dual tendencies toward compassion and oppression that exists within our own selves, much less within our respected communities. We exchange a fluid, holistic understanding of the capacity to carry out all roles in situations of oppression for a hierarchical understanding of duality that only polarizes good from bad and enables us to objectify the Other.

Gloria Anzaldua warned us of the perils of such objectification, “otherizing” and compartmentalizing, when she said: “What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better.” In the act of drawing lines in the sand and enclosing ourselves into disparate cultural groups, we perpetuate a divisive cycle of fragmenting our whole selves into many parts and our whole community into many sub-groups, not necessarily mending the divides we cry over. I believe deeply in the work of strategizing about how to dismantle the building blocks of interpersonal and institutional bias and oppression, yet I worry that if we don’t critically interrogate our means to do so, we may only perpetuate the paradigms of hierarchical dualism. What is then left dismantled are the promising practices of collective responsibility, interconnectedness, and the social equilibrium found in a harmonious, fluid sense of duality.

My desire to navigate the labyrinth of tensions between static dualism and fluid interconnectivity has been inspired by time I spent engaging in inter-cultural practices and cultural affirmations with indigenous communities throughout the Andes and Amazon of Peru. The Andean philosophy, as I understand it, does not dissect one’s identity into various sub-sections (black, white, or brown; victim, perpetrator or ally—typical of an abstract, individualist model), but rather looks concretely at the whole individual,

as part of a greater whole in the family and community. As my Peruvian mentor, Jorge Ishizawa, said to me one day:

You Americans have this drama with identity. What am I? What are you? You don't see that simply in the act of saying 'I am...' you suddenly become that one thing and exclude yourself from all the other things that you are. You end up creating a dualism within yourself and creating a subject-object relationship within your own identity so that you are excluding some parts of yourself from other parts of yourself. No wonder you build empathy with others—you are building empathy over excluding yourself from yourself and from each other!

This Andean perspective is further explained by Ladislaus Semali and Joe Kincheloe in *What is Indigenous Knowledge*:

The notion of individuality or the possibility of a person being considered separate from his or her group and natural context is inconsistent with the Andean worldview. The abstraction and decontextualization so characteristic of modernist science is out of place in a system of knowledge production that is grounded on the cohesiveness of the human, natural, and spiritual world. The individual is connected to the group, the group to nature, and nature to the domain of the spiritual. . . . Human consciousness and the social life of the community are viewed as inseparable in most indigenous societies. In contrast modernist science often reduces consciousness to physiological neuroprocesses, not understanding that the separation and isolation of the parts of a whole undermine our ability to make sense of social, physical and human phenomena.

The indigenous Peruvian model does not ask individuals to negotiate the “What am I?” question in regard to racial groupings nor in regard to roles in oppression. It does not ask the participant to reflect on oneself alone and to try to break down the self into distinct categories or traits. In fact, the “self” is rarely addressed under a microscope or in a vacuum, and instead, is traded in for a cultural reflection of the community because the self is not larger or even specifically defined as separate from the community. The collective experience is the centerpiece in each situation and a breaking apart of self or the entire community into different roles, categories, and identities is seen as a useless practice in hierarchical dualism.

This does not mean the oppression and marginalization faced by the indigenous peoples of the Andes is not recognized. There is merely a marked difference in their approach to that circumstance. The group of activists, educators, and farmers I met in Peru take the radical approach wherein *campesinos* (peasants) actively engage in processes of “*descolonización*” and “*interculturalismo*.” Eduardo Grillo Fernandez says in “Development or Cultural Affirmation in the Andes?” that:

Decolonization simply consists in the decision and corresponding action of recovering here in the Andes, fully and right now, the culture that is our own and which guarantees us healthy, creative, diligent and joyful life. [...] to decolonize is to affirm our Andean culture and to reject the imperialist pretention of homogenizing peoples, overwhelming one's own culture.

By consciously renegotiating the marginalizing consequences of colonization, emphasis is put on empowerment and an appreciation for one's indigenous culture is strengthened. Through practices of "*Afirmacion Cultural*" (Cultural Affirmation), traditional practices of art, music, ritual, earth-tending, and community-building are re-valued and re-integrated as staple components of the community's cosmology and epistemology. In time, this results in the ability to actively integrate the fruits of both cultures into daily life.

"Inter-culturalism" involves a concentration on balancing and mutually respecting and nurturing both Western and indigenous cultures, cosmologies, and epistemologies in the teaching of various subject matters in schools, agricultural methods in business and approaches in political, civic, market, and social relations. There is no hierarchy-embedded dualism created here, but rather an appreciation of the intrinsic value that exists in different ways of knowing and encouraging the existence of harmonious equilibrium with various philosophies, perspectives, and practices. While this might sound idealistic, it is a practice that takes time, patience, and respect. It is alive and well today throughout areas of the Andes and one, I think, that has a lot to offer in conversations about oppression and marginalization.

My mentor in Peru tells me that even before the indigenous villages in the Andes found out through the slow-traveling media about the incidents of 9/11, they already knew essentially what happened. They sensed the disarray in practices of global mutual respect. When they discovered the details of the traumatic attacks on the World Trade Center, they were not surprised. "We are responsible," they said. "We have not been treating each other well." Their sense of an interconnected community does not remain in a dualistic perspective that is divided by international borders; rather, their interconnected community extends all the way between and among the Andes, the Middle East, New York City, and beyond. They felt that because they had not been treating themselves with adequate mutual nurturing, the reciprocity had been recognized in the outbreak of bigotry and violence with their interdependent brethren of the North and East.

Imagine taking the concepts of "interconnected community" to this extent? Then the dissolution of the roles of "oppressor" and "oppressed" becomes clear, as we are all responsible and contribute to the ways in

which our societies create and maintain systems of oppression. This does not negate the terrible pain suffered by those targeted and killed in bias-motivated violence; it merely makes it a terrible pain with which we all must reckon rather than engaging in blaming others while knowing we are implicated in cycles of bias and hate.

Whether in interpersonal dialogues, international conferences, corporate boardrooms, academic classrooms, or activist rallies, we will benefit from giving more attention to the Andean-cosmology-inspired question of if and how lived practices of mutual respect, non-dualism, collective responsibility, and interconnectedness can be integrated into communities plagued by oppression and violence. Perhaps we chose to maintain our conversations within the institutionalized dichotomy of “us and them” because to negotiate the terrain of shared responsibility within interconnected communities presents too many challenges, unknowns, and contradictions that seem awkward within Western paradigms of problem solving (a paradigm that has historically been attached to rational-based, clear-cut and immediate solutions). There is no clear roadmap for what an active shift toward interconnectedness will look like for healing people caught in the starkly polarizing picture our society holds of oppression.

Recognizing the nonexistence of “objective” or “right” answers and approaches, we must nevertheless actively recognize and make space for diverse epistemological perspectives for analyzing and healing the contradictions and pain embedded in bearing witness, making art, and promoting reconciliation in communities torn by bias-motivated violence and hate. Might we continue to gather, again and again, as artists, activists, and concerned community members to discuss these important topics. We should do so with expanded viewpoints and diverse ontologies, to help us break free altogether of this master’s house we have co-constructed.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1999. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
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