

Lisa Campus
Talking Across Difference
Flower
Problem Analysis
25 February 2003

My Something

As I read, I became angry. I was angry at the man who stood behind the words. Ronald Takaki preached that it is essential to embrace the worth and depth of all cultures. He wanted to see all of them represented and appreciated - all of them it seemed but mine. I was angry. In all of this, where was I? If everyone is so important, why am I not important? Why was it so easy for him to say that I never took the time to know him, when he did not know me? Why can he not see that my family has suffered too? We too have been displaced and lived as outsiders. He did not know my grandfather died in a Pittsburgh steel mill anymore than I knew that his was ripped from his California home during World War II. I was angry. He could stare into his mirror as long as he wished, but he would never see inside a proud Italian American young woman. I was angry, and I put him away. The battle lines had been drawn.

I have a cultural identity. I am a woman, a Catholic, an Italian, a Slovak, a college student and so much more. Cultural identity places individuals, including myself, into a specific position in a cultural discourse, like mine with Ronald Takaki and his article. My cultural identity connects me to a spreading network of like thoughts and people. We share a common trait, a common theme. It gives me a place in something larger than myself; it gives me a larger voice and a place to start. I have many voices, though. I do not belong to a single culture. I am as much a heterosexual woman as I am an engineer. Each facet of my culture links me to another larger representation of myself.

I belong to my culture. However, I do not fully represent my culture. I am a woman, but I will never know what it is to be a woman in an Afghan village or in urban Chicago. I cannot be every aspect of my cultural identity, but I do know my piece of the

larger picture better than any other. My experience in a little, declining steel town is small in comparison to the experience of every woman, or every immigrant's daughter, but it is mine, and it is real. My experience and my identity is what I offer to the cultural discourse. It is my addition to the image of difference. I bring who I am to the dialogue with Ronald Takaki.

I have my identities, both cultural and personal, but I must understand and harness them to be truly active in the dialogue. I have to prod through my questions and nameless emotions to find the source of my reaction to Takaki and others. My identity is not a cold, academic label. It is a living, breathing fusion of my family, my heart, my past and my hopes. As Gloria Anzaldua explains in *Borderlands*, understanding identity comes not only from discovering the facts of the past, but also from exploring the emotional and spiritual forces that feed personal identity and keep cultural identity alive. I must understand why my anger rises, and why I feel so deeply. I must know the past that I cling to and appreciate its movement within myself. I inventory the ties to my multiple cultures, my perceptions of myself and my ideas of respect. I begin to uncover the picture of what makes my identity undeniably unique and important. Yet, part of understanding my identity is to realize that I do not know everything about myself, those who share my culture and especially my companions in dialogue. I must understand that I do not know as much as I think about Ronald Takaki. I must accept that within the sphere of my personal identity are misconceptions, half-truths and false assumptions. By understanding that I will not be an oracle, forever blameless, I temper my soaring self-image and anchor myself to reality. I come to see the power and the limits of my identity.

As I saw in Takaki's article, my personal identity will not always be recognized and validated as I wish it to be. Identity may become a spring of conflict and tension. I became angry when I felt my personal and cultural identity was being ignored and discounted. I lost myself in guarding the tradition and experience of my family and culture. In doing so, I forfeited an open perspective, which could have allowed me to see the threads of connection instead of the lines of difference. I felt as if my identity was

not appreciated and it was my job to defend who I was and what I loved. Anzaldua suggests that identity forms the basis of cultural “counterstance.” The line of difference becomes a division, a river, separating two identities and experiences. The dialogue becomes a battle, fought to be won. One side sees themselves as oppressed, and the others as the oppressors. I wrestled to legitimize my experience by proclaiming its struggles and hardships. I fought to show that I was as downtrodden as others. I let the breach widen and the misnaming continue. I fostered my assumed perceptions and attitudes, and lashed out to validate myself. My war, however, soon became one-sided. The offensive attack of my counterstance quickly became a forceful proclamation of personal identity, with resistance to compromise and dialogue hot on its heels.

However, even as I struggle to move beyond the counterstance to a broader acceptance and understanding, another hazard lies in wait. It is easy to think that perhaps if the counterstance is never allowed to surface I can tame it and cast it out. I can bottle my identity and let Takaki pass by undisturbed. Yet, if the counterstance does not occur, the dialogue still dies. Lena Williams observed this in her Duke classroom. Perceptions of identity were left unopened and opinions remained unsaid. One identity stood silent as it was challenged for the sake of keeping the peace. The silence propagated nothing but silence and the discussion passed away. In doing this, we hide our identity and lose that piece of experience that makes our presence in the dialogue crucial. We let fear of the social retribution of sharing identity in the context of the discourse prevent us from sharing who we are and why we are important. We deactivate the parts of ourselves that demand the response. We cheat our companions from understanding our position and identity. We let more false assumptions grow in the social consciousness because the price seems too high.

I am myself. I am angry. I am important. My cultural and personal identities define who I am and I am proud of that woman. I must learn to use my identity as a tool, not a weapon. I must understand the anger inside of me and the want inside Ronald Takaki. It is in being strong in my identity that I can justly and gently prove my worth, to myself and to the world.

Note: This Personal Learning Assessment was written 3 months later

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My Journey

I began this course with few expectations. I walked in the first day expecting another CMU English class, one more trial on the engineering "humanities gauntlet," as my advisor likes to call it. I'm not exactly sure why the course title struck my eye, but it did. The idea of talking across difference appealed to me. In the back of my mind, it was something I wished I could do. I knew that I was as much the naive, small town girl as I appeared, but that I wanted to know more. So, I sat in the second row in the second seat and began my journey.

The very first day I wondered if I had made the right decision. I took home Ronald Takaki's article and fumed to anyone that would listen. I was so furious that the pieces of myself, my part of the "difference," were nowhere to be found. In a respected article and a class about talking across difference, no one wanted to talk to the little Italian girl. I stamped my feet and decided that I wasn't to be so easily defeated. I would hang in there and if nothing else be the voice that I didn't hear. Much later, as I tried for a second time to put that experience into coherent, useful terms for my problem analysis, an idea finally crystallized in my mind. I had always seen myself as a special section of the majority. For the first time, I was thrust into the minority. The part of the world that was mine was the background. I had to stand aside for someone else. I saw things from a perspective I had only heard about. More than anything, I felt the drive and the undeniable want to make the world see what they were ignoring. I wanted to be loud enough to force them to see me. It was strange to hear myself screaming the same impassioned oaths I had put down as whining in others. I reached a new understanding and a new appreciation for a plea I too had ignored. I finally saw the purpose of diversity beyond that of having a smiling,

multicolored PC snapshot. The need was completely different when I was the one in the different shoes, when it was my "something" on the line.

The same battle resurfaced as I struggled through *Borderlands*. I was in an unfamiliar place. The language, the imagery and the exceptionally strong feelings were not my own. At times, they were not only different, but flew in the face of what I believed. Again, my emotions rose and I felt called to confrontation. The claims about women, Catholicism and society clashed deafeningly with how I saw the world. However, as the reading went on, the same words that at first enflamed me, now served to temper my resolve. Listening to my own voice, in discussion with my peers, put my thoughts into tangible terms. I heard myself speaking of the beauty in being tied to tradition and culture, of living happily with multiple labels, and of being proud to be passionate. I sounded like the book. I realized that I too was mestiza. The attitude that had struck out at Ronald Takaki was multifaceted. As much as I was an engineer, I was a woman and a Slovak granddaughter. I found a comfort in realizing the balance was allowed to exist. Through all the strange serpents and eagles, I had found a little pearl of wisdom and a new sense of self.

As the journey continued, I again found myself re-evaluating. The inquiry portion of the course opened my eyes to new, subtle layers in the atmosphere around me. As I read *Women's Ways of Knowing* and *Habits of the Heart*, I was drawn back to impressions of my family, my friends, my classmates and myself. I took a look behind the simple, surface actions and wondered just what the story was behind the story. In many ways, I took a second look at actions and people I had known for years and saw strange, new depth. It made me curious to know how I myself have come to this point in my life. I wondered just what forces of mestiza consciousness, connected knowing and stubborn, small town individualism held my hand as I came to be a junior in the second row. The inquiry process also tuned my perception to the CMU environment. As I walk across campus now, I watch the students and staff around me. I ask myself how they perceive each other, and perhaps how they perceive me. I wonder how they have come to be where they are, and if they took the same steps as me. A million rivals exist to every guess, but

at times that is the most rewarding realization. As tangled as I feel at times in the jungle of myself, a small part of what I feel is swimming in the minds of hundreds of others around me. The infinite paths are all being taken. Each step, of each student, is testing a rival hypothesis. They are negotiating and stumbling and revising as much as I am. The incidents of their lives are reflected in mine.

Above all else, this semester has expanded my vision of difference. My set of cultural cookie cutters has been set aside. I have felt the fire that fuels the fight of difference. I have discovered a means to funnel that zeal into a better understanding of the differences within myself. I have assumed a set of tools that I can use to disassemble the confusing and troublesome feeling of who I and they and we are. I have learned to let my version of reality and truth be unique, but not overruling. It has been quite a journey.