Valuing Cultural Diversity is Cultural Validation

Joseph Marshall, III

One of the tenets of "Manifest Destiny"—relative to North American history—was that **different** was defined as **less than** or **not quite as good as** whatever was considered to be the standard or the norm. That philosophy resulted in one of the saddest chapters in the history of human interaction, because the basis for that interaction was rooted in enmity. One can only wonder how different the course of North American history might have been had the practitioners of "Manifest Destiny' been less fearful of those that were different in race, form, or philosophy. But, since history is not based on "what if," we must face it as we know it.

History belongs to all of us, no matter our race, religion, language, culture, or place of origin. Our ancestors made history simply by being what they were. We are doing the same even at this particular moment. It follows, then, that if history is part of everything that we are individually, ethnically, and socially, we should all be entitled to the telling of that history. Sadly, that has not been the case.

North American history has been told predominantly from the point of view of those who perceive themselves to be the "winners" or "conquerors." That point of view—to make an understatement—is biased. It is biased in favor of those doing the telling, and it is biased against those who are perceived to be the "losers" or the "conquered." Furthermore, denying a voice, in the telling of history, to those perceived to be the "losers" or "conquered" is part of the process of invalidating a culture; or, in this case, hundreds of cultures.

Fortunately, change is in the wind. As a Native American, I was fearful of the possible consequences of the national and worldwide focus on the Columbus Quincentenary. Such a focus, I thought, would give rise to renewed white American ethnocentrism to the detriment of Native Americans, Native American issues, and Native American history. While I do believe that white American ethnocentrism exists to some extent, my assessment of the Columbus Quincentenary is that it was a bust.

It is significant to note that many activities relative to Columbus Day or the Columbus Quincentenary in general were labeled as an **observance** or **observation,** instead of a **celebration.** While there were a number of Columbus Day "celebrations," there appeared to be an overall sensitivity to the use of the word **celebration;** though I suspect in some cases the sensitivity was predicated mainly on the desire to avoid bad publicity or possible confrontation with Native American radicals, and not necessarily on a brotherly concern for Native American feelings. But, all in all, the Columbus Quincentenary fizzled because there is—obviously to an effective extent—a sincere concern in the American society's psyche about how we have and should look at the consequences of Columbus' arrival in North America. And that is realizing there is more than one view point regarding history. Consequently, that realization is, further, a necessary recognition of cultural diversity.

We are led to believe that the history of this continent now called North America began with the arrival of the Europeans. Perhaps because of the frequent use of words such as **prehistory,** it is easy to be led to that assumption. Even today, some Americans and Canadians are ignorant of human history in North America prior to 1492. But in 1492 on this continent there were hundreds, if not thousands, of diverse cultures, societies, and languages in existence. And they had developed, evolved, and existed for thousands of years.

Archeologists seem generally reluctant to say that the pre-European inhabitants of this continent have been here for longer than 12,000 to 15,000 years. But discoveries of artifacts carbon dated at 19,000 and 27,000 years suggest, for some, migration across Beringia between 40,000 to 60,000 years ago. Of course, theories and discussions in the scientific community, concerning earliest habitation of this continent, are necessarily based on hard evidence. Among many native North American

*(**Marshall**—continued on page 40)*

Joseph Marshall's article reflects a divergent, or different view of what is important about history and about our past. We must always keep in mind that the values we associate with tradition and history may be seen by others from different perspectives. Those of us oriented to a European tradition often see the past as represented in those physical elements remaining from these eras. To others, the past is experienced through a living culture with its many forms of dance, painting and oral tradition. In this experience, the past is not something with sharp divisions that begin here and end there, but is something that flows into the present and becomes part of a now.

In Native American culture the past often is experienced as a spiritual quality. This is not to say it is diminished by this form of experience, but that this type of experience can be as valid to a society as the more tactile experience is to European culture. After the presentation of his paper, Joe Marshall questioned the validity of referring to the Native American experience of the past as being "less tangible." For the Native American, transportation corridors, as entities for representing the past, may have less validity than the other qualities associated with the migration and transport of peoples and things. Cultural diversity includes the appreciation of all aspects of culture. This may pose certain difficulties for a system that is oriented to the physical elements remaining from the past. However, we must remember still that history is written by all people; the sensitive interpretation of this history will come in many forms.

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(***Marshall**—continued from page 39)*

peoples, however, origin and creation stories say that we have been here forever. But before we allow this particular discussion to become a continuing argument on the exact time of arrival, we should pause to remember that the unavoidable fact will always be that the various native peoples of this continent were indeed here long before the Europeans. And in that time before the Europeans, cultures, societies, and languages were born, evolved, and, in some cases, died. For contemporary non-native society to be cognizant of that fact is to validate, for themselves, the rich, non-European cultural diversity of North America. To us Native Americans, our cultures, societies, and languages have always been valid and tangible and Euro-American or Euro-Canadian acceptance is not a requirement to have that sense about ourselves. However, all peoples need to recognize that different peoples—and therefore different cultures—do exist. The recognition of cultural diversity then becomes a basis for dialogue and a way to strengthen the human community. Anything less can be, and has been, the basis for conflict.

Valuing cultural diversity is knowing that being different does not mean being "less than" or "better than." Valuing cultural diversity is to recognize that being different is simply being different. Valuing cultural diversity is to say, in a sense, **that I know your way may be better than my way or it may not be as good as my way, but I do understand that it is your way, and I will not deny it to you.** Valuing cultural diversity is to say further that **if given the opportunity I will sincerely try to learn about your way, not to take it for my own necessarily, but, so that I can learn all I can about you.**

Valuing cultural diversity is to enhance and strengthen the global community through the avenue of awareness. Gaining that awareness does not mean a forced agreement with a differing philosophy. It does mean acceptance of the fact that a differing philosophy has a right to existence. That is how valuing cultural diversity becomes cultural validation.

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(***Fricker**—continued from page 25)*

grappling with the wide variety of historic resources associated with the development of transportation and transportation corridors. We can attest that in Louisiana it has produced concrete results.

For Further Reading

Note: Much of the information contained in this paper was drawn from the National Register files in the Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation and would not be available to the general public. However, the following sources can be consulted for further reading.

Newton, Milton B. *Louisiana: A Geographical Portrait,* published by Geoforensics, Baton Rouge, LA, 1987 (Press defunct).

Kniffen, Fred B. *Louisiana: Its Land and People,* published by Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA, 1968.

Davis, Edwin Adams. *Louisiana: A Narrative History,* published by Claitor's Publishing Division, Baton Rouge, LA, 1961.

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