

Comments

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I.

It is generally assumed that a commentator's role at a panel like this is to summarize and make comments on each presentation. Today, we have three commentators, each with a different academic background, who are requested to remark upon the papers just read. I think it would be of more benefit to every panelist and everyone participating in the conference if a commentator, instead of giving a general summary of the papers—as is customarily done at academic conferences—were to express his/ her own understanding of the papers based on his/ her particular interest in each one, as well as to pose questions and to try to clarify the arguments the presenters are making and emphasizing.

II.

Under the main theme of “Americanism and Social Justice,” I read with great pleasure and interest three papers: *Americanism Behind Barbed Wire*, by Professor Eric. L. Muller; *Multilingualism in America*, by Professor Werner Sollors; and *City on a Hill, City Behind a Wall: Criminal Justice, Social Justice, and American Exceptionalism*, by Professor Marie Gottschalk.

Professor Muller begins his paper by referring to the recent American presidential election and the decision by the country's citizens to elect Barack Obama as their leader. The year 2008 will surely be remembered not only by Americans but by people everywhere as an epoch-making one, a year that spawned great expectations for the creation of a better world in which all human beings can live together in peace and harmony.

I think most of us here believe, as Professor Muller noted that the United States “was turning a corner in its racial history.” He cites the January/ February issue of *Atlantic* magazine, the cover of which features the new president along with the provocative headline, “The End of White America?” Professor Muller admits that it is still too early to make the assertion that the country “has entered an era in which race no longer plays any role” in defining who is a true American; nevertheless, he assures us that the “role of race” in America is undoubtedly “waning.”

My understanding of what Professor Muller meant by the “waning” of the “role of race” in U.S. politics is that historically, racial elements have worked as a powerful negative force militating against the electorate choosing an African American president, and that it is indeed a positive and welcome change that voters have now been able to elect an African American, Barack Obama, to lead the country. They have chosen him because in the election of 2008, the race issue was not as important a consideration as it has been in the past.

At this point I would like to pose a question; or, rather, to express a different point of view—to assess in somewhat different terms, the election of President Obama as a major turning point in American history.

The title of the *Atlantic* feature story, “The End of White America?” with that attention-grabbing question mark, must not be interpreted as merely describing or predicting a future U.S. led and controlled by a white or by a black administration. The dichotomic phrasing itself indicates that Americans are still thinking in racial terms, and implies that the disparity between White America and Black America still exists. I, as a non-American citizen of the globe, would prefer that Barack Obama be seen as emblematic of a promising shift in racial matters. I would like to assert that the election of Barack Obama as president does not mean that the role of race is waning, but that it is positively waxing. As leader of the world’s preeminent superpower, the new president has ipso facto become—politically, socially, and culturally—a major global figure and symbol of hope.

President Obama’s biological and biographical backgrounds immediately tell us that he is different from “average” African Americans, both of whose parents are native-born Americans, who have lived on American soil most of their lives, especially during their formative years, and who possess a collective memory of America’s slavery past. Obama is, in a way, a brand new breed of an American. Ethnically and culturally he is a totally new type of American president, a man of mixed heritage who was opportunely born into a multicultural world of global interdependence.

Obama’s ethnicity, then, and not his nationality, is of vital importance. Thanks to his multiracial and multicultural background, the image he projects to the world is particularly significant. Barack Obama represents neither “The end of White America” nor “the Beginning of Black America.” What he does represent is the possibility of real change in global racial attitudes. I believe that the time is long overdue for denying—for consigning to history—the age-old hierarchy of racial components and for considering such components as mere variations of individual beings around the globe.

This does not mean, of course, that racial, ethnic, and cultural differences must be downplayed in the name of building a harmonious global society. A race-free global society is not an option. We must gaze at our differences, maintain, nurture, respect, and cherish them. As global citizens we are not a people of neutral impersonality, no-face, or *Nopperabo*. To me, the timely ascendancy of Barack Obama to the throne of the American presidency is

transformative in that it has led us to scrutinize global issues of race, ethnicity, culture, and society not in a dichotomic way but with compound eyes. He has given us the hope and promise that some much-needed changes are about to be realized, not only in America but everywhere on Earth.

Quoting Horace Kallen's 1915 essay entitled "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," Professor Muller points out that even in the early years of the twentieth century, the debate over Americanism included a voice "preaching the preservation rather than the eradication of cultural difference." But Kallen, with his eyes directed solely at immigrants to America from the countries of Europe, was oblivious of Americans of African or Asian descent. The strong voice of Kallen and other cosmopolitans of his time called for the preservation of different cultures as a way to enhance American civilization, seeing "virtue in immigrant groups' retention of their discrete cultural identities." But Kallen and his brethren failed to convince the world. Kallen's phrase, "multiplicity in a unity, an orchestration of mankind," echoes some of Barack Obama's words, with a slight difference in emphasis. Obama's voice underscores the unity of the United States, while Kallen, praising the "orchestration of mankind," stressed its multiplicity.

III.

I believe that Horace Kallen's idea resonates with the concept of "the American Text" elucidated in Professor Sollors' paper, which also introduces the project of the Longfellow Institute of Harvard University. Although American literature was once considered a branch of English literature, Professor Sollors reminds us that even the traditional *Cambridge History of American Literature* of 1919ff already included "Non-English writings" of "German, French, Yiddish, and 'Aboriginal texts,'" as well as texts by some non-English-speaking authors. Thus, he insightfully draws our attention to the historic evidence of a multilingual presence and to the "orchestration of mankind" in the United States.

The concept of "the American Text" induces us to reconsider the issue of literary categorization. Until the recent past, we were tightly bound and haunted by the concept of "nation-state literature." The idea of "one nation, one language, etc." was an intrinsic assumption of the nation-state way of classifying texts. But to think that literatures could be categorized by nation-state is an idea that long ago had its day. While we still distinguish and divide literatures by language today, "the American Text" concept of Professor Sollors and his colleague, Professor Marc Shell, reflects yet another method of categorizing literature.

I agree with Professor Sollors' conviction that "the American Text," or American literature, is composed of multilingual writings and, as a result, that it has been greatly enriched. My contention is that the use of hyphens in the categorization of American literature—for example, African-American literature, Native-American literature, and the like—does nothing but degrade and

impoverish American literature.

Some confusion might emerge, however, in how to interpret “the American Text” and how to define “American” literature. Is “the American Text” based on the topos and the historical and regional experience of the works’ authors? A Nobel Prize winner in literature, Isaac Bashevis Singer, who wrote his novels and stories in Yiddish and then collaborated with his translators in rendering them into English, may be an exemplary author whose contribution to “the American Text” is beyond doubt very great. Does “the American Text” include those authors with American citizenship residing outside of the U.S. who write in languages other than English? In a word, what is the crucial qualification for being included in “the American Text”? Milan Kundera comes to mind. If he were living and writing in New York City, U.S.A., instead of in Paris, France, would he too be considered a contributor to “the American Text”? Is “the American Text” exceptional, a product and a concept uniquely American?

Here, I would like to pose another question. The publication in 2000 of *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations* was truly revolutionary in widening the concept of American literature. Here is my question: What, exactly, were the criteria adopted in the choice of texts or the non-English languages that were included in this volume? Was the selection made based on the content of the writing per se, or was it decided by calculating the proportion of the inhabitants in the United States who speak those particular languages? And how were the texts that were not printed discovered?

I find the inclusion in the anthology of the text of a bilingual prayer in English and Algonquin, and of an Arabic slave narrative, exceptionally intriguing. And the presence of the first African American short story—written in French—in the table of contents is also cause for celebration. I always humbly wonder, by the way, when and how the epithet “first” is put in front of a specific literary product. How can anyone be so positive about its “first-ness”?

IV.

The idea of “the American Text” has led me to think of yet another interesting issue related to literary categorization. Onoto Watanna (1875–1954), a pseudonym of Winnifred Eaton and the younger sister of Sui Sin Far (1865–1914), wrote “Japanese” novels in English and published them in the United States, disguising herself as Japanese. The nom de plume might have sounded Japanese to her and her readers, but to Japanese the name is totally nonsensical. The reasons why Watanna chose to write “Japanese” novels, hiding her true self in the name of “being Japanese,” are yet to be analyzed. Although it could be, to some extent, attributed to the influence of her older sister, an already successful writer who was able to “pass” as an Englishwoman and yet identified herself as Chinese and wrote about Chinese people living in North America,

Winnifred Eaton's decision to be "Japanese" may have had just as much to do with the question of "the American identity."

Another related topic can be found on the Japanese literary scene. Isaiah Ben-Dasan, a Hebrew-sounding name, was actually the pen name of a Japanese writer, editor, and publisher, Yamamoto Shichihei (1921–1991), a well-known social critic and philosopher. His non-fiction book, *The Japanese and the Jews* (1970), was published under his Jewish pseudonym and became a national bestseller. At the time, it was rumored that the "voice" of Isaiah Ben-Dasan was that of a Jew born in Kobe, or, perhaps, that the book was the collaborative effort of two or three writers. It took more than a few years for the world to learn that Isaiah Ben-Dasan was in reality the pseudonym of Yamamoto Shichihei.

Another example of a Japanese writer disguising himself as a foreigner is that of Yan (Jan) Denman. Supposedly an overseas correspondent from Holland, Denman was in fact Saito Juuichi, the editor of a Japanese magazine, who wrote about topical issues in Japanese from a "foreigner's point of view." Such unusual cases may complicate the categorization of literature even further. Perhaps writers like these might better be classified under the rubric, "The Global Text."

V.

Professor Sollors' thought-provoking discussion of language rights guides our attention toward phenomena commonly experienced in Japan in the first half of the twentieth century. It naturally leads us to the situation in colonized countries like Korea and Taiwan, where pupils were forced to use Japanese in schools and, if they chatted in their own language, were punished. And within Japan itself, local "country" dialects were greatly despised and their use banned in public schools, again, with pupils who used them subject to punishment. The strict prohibition of local dialects in those days engendered an inferiority complex in Japanese from outside of Tokyo, where "standard" Japanese is supposedly spoken.

As Professor Sollors avows, language rights are a vital component in providing a sense of identity and security in young people and in helping to nurture in them respect for their ancestral culture. He cites a couple of cases of the inconvenience caused by "English Only Laws." I agree with him that on a personal, daily-life, family-life level, it is far more desirable to foster and maintain the generous acceptance of different languages within a community and nation. During World War II, Japanese Americans interned in "relocation" camps were not allowed to speak Japanese at meetings. Yet the so-called Issei generation, the immigrant generation, only understood Japanese. The ban of the Japanese language must have generated great anxiety among them at a time when their illegal internment was already causing them untold anguish and angst.

Language rights as a part of human rights is a new proposal similar in significance to Malcolm X's fight for human rights—rather than civil

rights—more than half a century ago. That bilingualism and multilingualism widen one's perspective cannot and should not be denied. But this gives rise to a serious problem: in the United States today it is an undeniable fact that English is a passport to a better education, a better job, a better life. How can immigrant children, while being urged to keep their mother tongue and preserve and protect the culture of their ancestors, be expected at the same time to learn and perfect the common language of English? We all know how difficult it is for most people to acquire two languages.

It may be helpful to have a class substitute or assistant, as is done in some first-grade lessons today, who can speak and explain things in the pupil's own language. Such a substitute may lighten the burden of learning and help to assuage the pupils' anxiety. Eventually, however, pupils must gain a thorough command of English or risk being at a serious disadvantage economically and socially compared to those who have mastered the language.

When we ask for language rights, we need to approach the topic on several different levels. Beginners in education who need language support must be provided with suitable assistance. Only in this way can they develop their communication skills as well as expand their general knowledge and become fully participating members of society. Thus, looked at from this standpoint, I believe that "English Only Laws" must be abolished.

VI.

Today in Japan, one of the biggest and most controversial issues is the so-called deterioration of language ability, or *kokugo-ryoku*, especially among the younger generation. Colleges which sponsor projects to develop new courses in enhancing Japanese writing skills are eligible to receive special government funding. I assume that a similar situation exists in the United States. Professor Sollors emphasizes that bilingualism and multilingualism open up new dimensions of understanding, thus making it possible for students to achieve a wider view of the world. This is an idea to which I wholeheartedly concur.

One thing I am curious about, though, is why, in 1968, the faculty at Harvard University decided to reduce foreign-language requirements and then, nearly thirty years later, resuscitated foreign-language courses in the name of a "language citation program" for fortifying students' command of other languages. Professor Sollors writes that "In recent years the tide has been turning in higher education." As a good example, the MLA now offers a downloadable brochure entitled "Knowing Other Languages Brings Opportunities," which asserts that foreign-language education will allow learners to reap "greater job opportunities in the global economy." It must be pointed out, however, that while foreign-language study at the college level is undeniably beneficial, the emphasis on "the study of heritage languages" at the elementary-school level is not always so.

With English being used around the globe as an implement for cross-cultural

communication, especially over the Internet, corruption of the language can be clearly observed today. To what extent we should allow the “creolization” of English is another issue. If fewer and fewer Americans use what is called standard English, and a higher and higher percentage of the population contributes to the composition of a “corrupt” American language, would the American language itself then become a “mishmash” language? This is a question that deserves some serious thought. Concerning the teaching of English as a required subject for three years in Japanese junior high schools, right now there is a heated ideological argument going on over whether it is “politically correct” to teach so-called standard English. On one side of the debate are those who insist that non-standard “Englishes” like the Philippine and Indian varieties must be taught in junior high classes as well. To me, this is an absurd position: How can students be expected to learn a variation or offshoot of English even before they have achieved a workable command of the original? This is just one example that illustrates how complicated and divisive the argument over foreign-language learning can be.

VII.

Professor Muller’s paper draws a disturbing picture of the racist treatment of Japanese Americans in the twentieth century, especially during World War II when they were incarcerated in “relocation camps.” It is a well-known historical fact that Mike Masaoka, a leader of JACL, suppressed the “Nisei protest of the government’s program of racial removal and incarceration” based on his hope that Japanese Americans would be looked upon as “good Americans.” Today, we may condemn JACL’s decision as unwise, yet at the time, their docile submission to Executive Order 9066 seemed to be the best way of coping with the situation. This reminds me of the African American leader Booker T. Washington and his policy of compromising with middle-class white Americans, asking them for jobs, but never asking for social equality. Washington was later castigated by W.E.B. DuBois, who demanded equal rights and citizenship for African Americans. Washington’s policy was to avoid any confrontation which might cause more pain and suffering for African Americans. This was no doubt Masaoka’s stance as well: To avoid exacerbating Japanese Americans’ already dire plight and to accept everything from the “above-authority” because the situation was “shikataganai (It cannot be helped).”

The idea of Americanism for both Japanese Americans and African Americans, then, was equivalent to a kind of passive inclusion in the American polity—a way of being accepted by the dominant white majority. Some Japanese Americans and African Americans were even willing to become “fully American,” denying their ancestral background, venerating American values and its way of life, and dreaming of finding their own version of the American Dream. This, no doubt, resulted from the assimilative education of the era, which was

conducted under the influence of essentialism and Eurocentric ideas.

Statistical evidence shows that out of 120,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated in camps during World War II, 78 percent were Nisei with full American citizenship. To lock these Americans up behind barbed wire was wholly and criminally unconstitutional, and yet, in a time of war against Japan, the measure no doubt seemed one of pressing necessity. But Professor Muller's illuminating list of loyalty ratings based on "registration questionnaire" interviews conducted at the relocation camps by military and civilian personnel clearly indicates a critical disparity among Americans themselves in regard to the government's internment policy. As Professor Muller points out, the interviewers were not at all consistent in deciding who was "loyal" and who was not, in defining what constituted an American citizen. The episode involving the now well-known Japanese American photographer, Toyo Miyatake, amply illustrates this. Thanks to the "intentional ignorance" of Ralph Merritt, Director of the Manzanar Relocation Center, Miyatake was able to smuggle in a lens for his camera and take pictures that movingly chronicled daily life in the camp.

Professor Muller emphasizes the enormous change that has taken place over the last 60-odd years in Japanese Americans' attitudes, once the "possibility of loyal protest and dissent became available." He refers to the two Japanese American military officials who stood up and openly criticized Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's plan for the "invasion and military occupation of Iraq."

Of course, we must remember that when World War II broke out, the history of Japanese immigration in America was still very short, covering only half a century or so. Many Issei people still dreamed of returning to their homeland as successful farmers or businesspersons. They could still not legally become Americans. Some of the younger Niseis were sent back to Japan to be educated in Japanese schools in order to develop their Japanese-language ability and to bolster their knowledge of Japanese history, culture, and so on. When they returned to the United States, they were referred to and grouped together as "Kibei" (returnees) whose English was not as good as the Niseis who had stayed in America. Because their identity was ambiguous, Kibeis were often feared not only by Americans but by their fellow Japanese Americans as well. Americans by birthright, they themselves could not help but wonder if they were not actually Japanese.

Those two Japanese Americans of younger generation mentioned above who had the courage to challenge their country's defense strategy were born only a few years before the Second World War or even after the Vietnam War. At the time of their protest, more than half a century had passed since the end of the war with Japan. In the meantime, America had gone through the Civil Rights Era and passed the historic Civil Rights Act and Voting Act. Time, then, played a vital role in allowing these intensely loyal American citizens to criticize their government's policy. Obviously, the ethos of today is vastly different from what it was just 50 years ago.

VIII.

Now, a few words about the paper read by Professor Gottschalk. When, a few years ago, I watched a TV news program on the 2000 presidential election, I was shocked to see how disorganized, how chaotic, and how wholly undemocratic the method for counting votes was. Professor Gottschalk notes that “ex-offenders who have completed their sentences” were routinely disenfranchised. I would like to know more about how such an unfair and eminently corruptible system ever came about. It was appalling for me to learn from Professor Gottschalk’s paper that “five million Americans” are barred from voting because of complicated laws inhibiting people with criminal records from exercising their right to go to the polls. With the percentage of imprisoned African Americans so high, it is only natural that America’s political parties do everything they can to turn this state of affairs to their own advantage.

Professor Gottschalk also briefly discusses the “No Child Left Behind Act” advocated and pushed through by former President George W. Bush, who propounded the notion that “educational failure and crime [are] parallel problems.” According to Professor Gottschalk, the distressing result of this idea is that “educational policy has been criminalized and that schools have been prisonized.” I have only a limited understanding of the “No Child Left Behind” program and would like to know more about its intended educational benefits and its after-effects on educators.

In Professor Gottschalk’s paper we once again meet with the term “human rights.” She informs us that “Penal reformers are enlisting not only civil rights but also international human rights laws and norms to challenge the U.S. penal system.”

IX.

The historic election of Barack Obama to the American presidency could stand as symbolic evidence of what may be termed “the global ethnicity.” Thus, rather than narrowly defining him ethnically as an African American, it may be time to see him as something much broader and more significant than that, and to regard our problems not as narrow, national ones, but as global and human rights issues.

Through my reading of these three papers, I have been able to get a glimpse of a new racial attitude and movement toward change in the United States. I feel that the world is now more liberated than it ever has been and hope that the changes taking place in America will radiate outward and work for a better world, a better global future.