

**Additional Comments relating to the proposed CA Curriculum for Ethnic Studies.
9/2/2019 Ginny Atherton**

“If only everyone could travel throughout the United States, visiting communities large and small, rural and urban, getting even a *little* familiar with the people living and working everyday lives, there would be more appreciation of our vast diversity.” Paraphrased from a heartfelt proclamation after a Labor Day supper by former California Boys Choir “tourister” (choir boy on multiple cross-country tours for CAMI in the 80s) having just returned from a vacation road trip with spouse who was surprised and enchanted by the geographic and geopolitical diversity they encountered along the trip. Esteban Felix, Sept 1, 2019

“If I could put you all in a bus and take you throughout the nation as we learned the history and geography of our country...I would.” Remembered from 8th grade history class at Chittenango, NY, teacher Alvin Gehrke, imagining the best way to teach and learn Social Studies. Fall, 1955

“I’d love to return to each of the towns we visited and see them with their Christmas lights” declared eleven-year old chorister, David Atherton, after his first 10-week CBC tour, November 1982, as he finished displaying his tschokes on the hearth.

“Pick a country about which you know the least and find out as much as you can.” Economic Geography assignment for 9th graders at Chittenango HS (Alvin Gehrke, teacher). Energized to discovery, a student found Bolivia intriguing for its colorful and exotic postage stamps and full of potential for “primary source” research via correspondence with distant, unmet, relatives who were serving as missionaries in the headwaters of the Amazon in Bolivia. 1956.

Less than a decade later, when prompted to select 1st, 2nd and 3rd choices for assignment with the still new Peace Corps, Bolivia floated to the top of the list...with the expressed hope for the assignment to be related to symphony orchestra work. The stars aligned; the Bolivians requested assistance with developing the Orquesta Sinfonica Nacional and those dreams of a social studies teacher were fulfilled for at least one student.

One of the three goals of Peace Corps service is for the volunteer to return to the US with insights that will inform her community interactions henceforth...to bring the world home.

Now, as Otherness dominates public policy and incites public violence, educators rightly and sometimes, righteously, toil to create curricula to stem nastiness bred of ignorance.

In California, groups, communities, most vulnerable to being Othered by folks grasping power, advocate Ethnic Studies from an equally self-centered perspective.

Self-awareness, cultivation and exposure of *each* community's journey is, of course, essential to displaying the quilt that we are. Some of the patches in the quilt are of vintage fabric: former newcomers, who might be understood as both models and caveats to whoever arrives next.

That no community is a monolith might be understood as an "Enduring Understanding." Stereotypes work both ways, to aid in identifying contributions as well as conflicts, and to entrench old misunderstandings.

Communities are increasingly complex, with overlapping identities and subgroups. Depending upon isolation or inclusion by design or by circumstance, individuals may form impressions and opinions limited by those parameters. Ignorance and lack of curiosity prevent expanded or generous social patterns.

In some curricular proposals, inquiry of the stranger is considered rude or even a microaggression.

Fear of offending, fear of being offended guide our conversations to the point of shutting down conversation...of sanitizing interaction.

Similarly, diverse political views, diverse religious traditions, unfamiliar food and music, partition our communities, holding the Other at arm's or block's length.

“He’s from the Other Side of the Tracks.” That almost jokingly delivered description of an Other’s abode while I was growing up in 1940s Haddonfield, NJ, a town with blue laws and restrictions on which religions could build a house of worship within town boundaries, to a child meant only a physical fact of tracks which needed care to be crossed, the train being the only danger and the nuance that somehow, the “other side” was less desirable, and thus also were those who lived there. This child thought it meant merely less money. The adults knew it was the law, excluding certain folks from a particular residential area. On reflection, odd, as the town was founded by Quakers, a generous humanitarian sect critical to the success of the Underground Railway. Prohibiting Roman Catholic churches from owning property and building within the town limits and thus creating parishes certainly made it unattractive for newcomers from Catholic countries to settle in the town.

The history of exclusion, Otherness, inclusion, resistance and activists within all communities, might be a tent within which to examine the tensions and successes of previous generations as well as to address the realities of the current generation of newcomers.

Some newcomer communities are almost invisible to the majority populations. Vietnamese immigrants have stories painful, irrevocable and mostly unknown by other communities. Many Jewish families didn’t learn their own grandparents’ heartbreak and struggles, as it was too painful for the survivors to share.

To gain insights and stimulate discussion, a few noteworthy books are **Maus** and **Meta Maus** by Art Spiegelman (2011), **They Called Us Enemy** by George Takei (2019)

Our Kind of People by Lawrence Otis Graham (1999)
Nigger by Randall Kennedy (2002)

White Trash by Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz (1997)
Prisoners of Hate by Aaron T. Beck, M.D. (1999)

Consider the homeless, particularly, but not only, the river dwellers, in the **Ballad of Huck and Miguel** by Time DeRoche (2018)

Interviews are an effective conversation starter. Students at various ages might be encouraged to ask, in their own age-appropriate ways, “Grandma, tell me a story about....” Or “Uncle, what was your first job like?” Or, “Did you have a friend who...?” The possibilities are endless.

As a teacher in a re-configured middle school in Pasadena, in order to teach two periods of band and orchestra, I was assigned another 3 periods of English, social studies and health...with no text books, no curricular support and a credential to teach Music K-14! The students were mostly from ethnic communities of well-established African-American families, newly arrived Vietnamese boat refugees who had eaten cockroaches and other bugs *en route* to safety and Armenian refugees who had endured cellar living in Lebanon while surviving on PB&J (a staple in USDA food gifts to the hungry).

Three varieties of English, with determined English learners and (often) non-standard local dialect native speakers mixed, no way or reason to standardize grammar or reading, so what to do? Interviews in their own families and neighborhoods produced beautifully insightful and generous sharing of their “stories.” Each student received a final copy of the collection (typed by a friend to make all of them readable) and we placed one copy in the school library.

Thus, honoring the struggles and realities of *all* students in each classroom *combined with a very broad view of the history of **The Other in America***, can illuminate understanding and ignite compassionate curiosity throughout the next generation.

There will always (I hope) be newcomers. How very exciting and enriching for them and for us.

Students need to look outward as well as inward within the ambitions of an Ethnic Studies Curriculum. We do, *each of us*, have ethnic markers, blended identities and a compelling mission to build community.

In harmony,
Rarely static, usually a “progression,”

Ginny Atherton