Arcilla on Art and Multiculturalism

Hanan A. Alexander
University of Haifa and University of California, Berkeley

In this beautifully argued paper, René V. Arcilla addresses the extent to which identity is given or constructed in multicultural education according to a critical, as opposed to a liberal, democratic theory. He challenges the historicist assumption of multiculturalism that each culture represents its own Platonic ideals in formative texts. Students can be encouraged to reflect upon, and even embrace, their own cultural identities, in this view, by learning to interpret these documents. "According to the multiculturalist paradigm," Arcilla writes, "the project of liberating citizens from unnecessary and harmful constraints and treating them more fairly requires that we recognize and respect their cultural identities." The problem with this approach, Arcilla contends, is that it "demotes artistic, imaginative works to second-class status in humanities teaching," and reduces artistic abstraction in particular "to a more or less dazzling, but rather superfluous, form of decoration and rhetorical emphasis."

Instead of Platonic abstraction, which subtracts the material accidents of things perceived by the senses in order to reveal their essential forms, Arcilla posits an account that he derives from the writings of Louis Althusser. It begins with already constituted essences embedded in familiar ideologies and, by means of a thoroughgoing skepticism of anything contingent, interested, or artificial, "subtracts from the form its idealization." This alternative kind of abstraction, which is typical of abstract art, attempts neither to represent states of affairs as they are nor to discover a metaphysical ideal behind the material mess; it focuses instead on transforming that which is given into a different mess, one in which more of us take a creative role. Abstract art suggests that we do not in fact possess the essential cultural identities that are posited by historicism. These identities are the products of Platonic abstraction. Rather, the person who each of us could become is revealed when we acknowledge our alienation from the cultural forms we inherit and seek to transform them into something new. A democratic education that engages this view of art will be concerned with constructing new worlds in which we find fulfillment in what we create together, not in essential selves or communal origins, which are illusory or misleading. Liberation from the violence of cultural misrecognition can be achieved through collective action inspired by the sense of solidarity found in this social project.

Arcilla's problem with historicism lays more in its tendency to limit interpretation in the arts to an idealized view of representation than in its tendency toward marginalization of interpretation in the arts. He shares with liberals the belief that people ought to choose their own identities, even if he may doubt whether Immanuel Kant's rational autonomy or John Rawls's principles of justice limit these choices any less than Plato's forms. Freedom from *rational* abstraction — liberal or critical — can be achieved by an inverse process in which we acknowledge our inherent

alienation from given ideas, liberating us to create new worlds together. Although he is surely onto something in emphasizing the role of the arts in this emancipatory project, I want to ask with Elizabeth Ellsworth why this does not feel very liberating, though my answer is more optimistic than hers regarding the possibilities of freedom.[1]

Ellsworth maintains that critical pedagogies such as multicultural education have developed along highly abstract, utopian lines that are based on rationalist myths that perpetuate, rather than overcome, power relations. Rather than reversing this process through yet another form of abstraction, Ellsworth returns to classroom practice, pressing us to retheorize such notions as "empowerment" and "liberation" as windows into poststructuralist discourse that acknowledges the "interested" character of any "standpoint" from which we view "reality." Though she would embrace Arcilla's critique of historicism, Ellsworth would apply the same critical skepticism to his optimistic conclusion that this new form of abstraction can liberate us from false ideologies, including the violence perpetrated by the arts themselves. Although it can sensitize us to the sundry ways in which we dominate one another, even aesthetic education cannot alleviate the grip that inherited power relations have on us.

Ellsworth's critique of abstraction and elevation of practice are most welcome. She has gotten right what Michael Oakeshott called the fallacy of rationalism in politics, or the false idea that human affairs can be adequately captured by means of abstract and rigid concepts, rules, or techniques, such as those taught in empirical science, critical theory, or the fine arts. All of these are but convenient ways of summarizing more complex languages and literatures, and the customs, symbols, and stories by means of which people live with others. Ellsworth has also gotten right that the dynamics of real life, as opposed to abstraction, are experienced, expressed, understood, and preserved in local "traditions of practice," which are embedded in a plurality of deeply different, and sometimes even incommensurate, cultures.[2] Arcilla's account of art fails to liberate, then, to the extent that it reifies abstraction in ways that distance, rather than abridge, lived experience. Like the historicism he delimits, Arcilla's account privileges one contingent form of cultural expression over others by positing a particular medium — abstract art — as a universal ideal.[3] This dilutes, rather than celebrates, difference, since it promotes solidarity among those substantially alienated from their cultural roots, while marginalizing those who are not.[4]

However, Ellsworth shares with Arcilla a rigid conception of lived tradition that is more like the abstraction that she rejects and he celebrates than the actual legacies that are passed from one generation to the next. They both misconstrue the ways in which we construct distinctive identities in dialogue with local cultures. Traditions of practice are normally not inflexible ways of doing things. They are neither fixed nor finished, and they have no changeless center — no model to be copied or idea to be realized. Some parts of these traditions may change more slowly than others, but none is immune from change. Nevertheless, they are not totally fluid, since all of their parts do not change at the same time. What accounts for the coherence of a

tradition is the diffusion of authority between past, present, and future in which nothing is ever completely lost. Change within a tradition emerges gradually, not abruptly, by means of undirected evolution, not preplanned revolution; and the engine of this change is found in the ways in which individuals engage culture in order to create themselves.[5]

Selves are historical achievements, not rational or artistic abstractions. Each human being is self-made, not out of nothing, but from a self-understanding acquired by learning to recognize oneself in the mirror of a cultural inheritance that "reaches us, as it reached generations before ours, neither as long-ago terminated specimens of human adventure, nor as an accumulation of human achievements we are called upon to accept, but as a manifold of invitations to look, to listen, and to reflect."[6] It is in joining conversations that connect past and present to future, deciphering artifacts that have been handed down and creating new ones to pass along, and speaking the languages and appreciating the literatures of a culture that a particular biological body, or locus of psychological or sociological traits, becomes a recognizably human life.[7] Alienation from a tradition stems from ignorance of, not initiation into, one's cultural heritage, even if that initiation results in the rejection of received worlds for new ones.[8]

One important role of art in many cultures, however, especially of the abstract variety, is to push back the limits of received tradition in order to adapt to new circumstances, reveal hidden injustices, and create new realities.[9] That this entails initiation into particular cultures, rather than alienation from culture in general, only highlights the importance of Arcilla's otherwise excellent analysis. When viewed from a less deterministic and more pluralistic perspective than the critical orientation in which it was formulated, Arcilla's analysis encourages a genuine optimism about the possibilities of freedom that Ellsworth's poststructuralism simply does not allow. Although we ought to question Arcilla's attempt to disengage identity from culture, we have reason to be much more sanguine about his desire to link creativity to liberty.

---

1. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering: Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989): 297–324.

2. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics* (London: Methuen, 1962), 9–33.

3. John Gray, *Two Faces of Liberalism* (New York: New Press, 2000), 2.

4. As I have argued elsewhere, some traditions are more liberating and less alienating than others. See Hanan A. Alexander, "Education in Ideology," *Journal of Moral Education* 34, no. 1 (2005): 1–18.

5. Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, 128–135.

6. Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1989), 29.

7. Ibid., 64.

8. Hanan A. Alexander, "Engaging Tradition: Michael Oakeshott on Liberal Learning," in *Learning to Live with the Future*, eds. Andrew Stables and Stephen Gough (New York: Routledge, 2008).

9. Hanan A. Alexander, "Aesthetic Inquiry in Education: Community, Transcendence, and the Meaning of Pedagogy," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 1–18.