

**INTERCULTURAL EXCHANGE THROUGH LANGUAGE AND THE CREATIVE ARTS:  
A BRIDGE TO CULTURAL EMPATHY AND HARMONIOUS RELATIONS  
BETWEEN AMERICANS AND LATINOS**

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This paper will study the potential effect of intercultural exchange, particularly in the creative areas of language and the arts, on easing the current difficulties between the U.S. and Latin America. Relations between the two regions have been strained for the last century, and resolution of that strain is of paramount importance at this time. I do not believe that the problem can be solved by politics alone, but must start with individuals on a personal level. I have two interests which contribute to this paper. One is creative expression in all forms and its contribution to human evolution, and the other is a fascination with, and support of, indigenous cultures, particularly in melding different cultures into new and vibrant forms of expression while keeping old traditions alive. Sharing our languages and our creative arts is one means of enhancing communication and sharing our cultures respectfully, rather than trying to impose one on the other disrespectfully. This could be a first step toward harmonious relations between the U.S. and Latin America—or with any dissonant cultures.

**Getting to Know You, Getting to Know All About You**

I believe that atrocities are committed not just because of the desire of power-hungry and greedy politicians, but because of the indifference or complacency of the politicians' constituents, i.e., the citizens of their country, and that this indifference is due in large part to a lack of empathy for the victims of the atrocities. They are "the other." In order for "the other" to become "us," we must get to know them, their traditions and cultures, and they must know us.

It is possible that, while the U.S. government is responsible for the terrible wrongs committed against Latin America over the past century, if our citizens kept themselves informed, were outraged and rose up in protest, the politicians would bend to public opinion at least to some extent, and future actions against Latin America would be different and less barbaric. One solution to mending the current rift between the U.S. and Latin America is to bring the two cultures together in a personal, rather than political,

manner in order to share cultures and learn about each other's way of living and what matters to us. Xenophobia has been responsible for many of the heinous acts in history; e.g., the massacre of entire Indian tribes in the U.S. was due in part to fear of those who seemed so different and unknown. While power, money and arrogance were likely the primary reasons, I do not believe that the massacres would have been tolerated by the general Caucasian population if they had known some Native Americans personally and come to understand their culture and traditions, thereby ceasing to view them as "the other." Getting to know people and their ways might seem like a simplistic solution to a complex problem at first glance, but sometimes simple solutions are the most effective.

## **Background**

Since the first settlers in the U.S. began to spread over the land, the U.S. has been involved with Latin America, and never with a totally benign intention. With doctrines such as Manifest Destiny (*Manifest Destiny: The Philosophy That Created a Nation*) and the Monroe Doctrine (*The Monroe Doctrine (1823)*) leading the way, the U.S. has been involved politically and economically in Latin America for the past century, often supporting or fomenting military actions—such as toppling democratically-elected governments and engaging in torture and murder of Latin Americans in executing its political agenda (*Let the Bloody Truth Be Told: A Chronology of U.S. Imperialism and SOA Watch*)—that American citizens would find appalling and completely intolerable if they were to occur in the U.S., and has gone to great lengths to hide these activities from Americans (*U.S. Interventions in Latin America*).

Not surprisingly, America is now viewed by Latin Americans with distrust and often hatred. At a time when anti-American sentiment is at an all-time high, it would seem prudent to review policy regarding interference in the affairs of other governments, and also to examine where our personal responsibility in this dissonant relationship might be. Is there something we can do to overcome the current discordant relationship between the two cultures?

## **Cultural Challenges**

Understanding and communicating with someone from another culture always has its challenges. Communication can fail in a myriad number of ways. Different cultures often have differing concepts of time, different styles of communication, different manners in relating to people, and different behavior and customs (DuPraw). It is common for humans to believe that the manner in which they are accustomed to communicating or behaving is the correct one, and that differing cultural customs are incorrect or inferior (*Multicultural Learning*). If we can open to the possibility that there are multiple styles of communicating and behaving and expose ourselves to another culture's customs in order to learn them, there is a greater possibility of harmonious relations between the cultures and more effective communication.

For example, something as seemingly simple as the experience of time is relative to one's culture. Americans assume, for example, that 7:00 p.m. means 7:00 p.m., and if you arrive for a 7:00 p.m. appointment at 7:15, then you are late. However, time in many Latino cultures is more flexible. I remember when I first moved with my family to Puerto Rico, and we were invited to a party at 8:00 p.m. We arrived shortly after 8:00, and were greeted by very surprised hosts who were not even dressed yet. We had committed the faux pas of being "on time." We quickly learned that one should add at least an hour to the time of social invitations in Puerto Rico. I was recently scheduling a rehearsal time with a Dominican musician with whom I was working for the first time, and he asked me how I was about time. Puzzled, I asked what he meant. He said that he was wondering that if I said 2:00, if would be there at 2:00. Momentarily wondering if I should be offended that he apparently questioned my integrity, I quickly realized that he was conscious of the difference in the conception of time between our two cultures and was astute enough to determine if we were communicating in the same way. Was my 2:00 the same as his 2:00? This is a very good way of thinking which can prevent misunderstandings.

In general, Americans tend to be very much focused on individual success in isolation, while other cultures are often much more community-oriented. For example, a

Peace Corps worker in the Dominican Republic related a story of his morning jogging practice while in the Dominican Republic (*Jogging Alone*). The worker valued the peaceful feeling that he experienced jogging alone in the early morning, and had vowed to continue jogging while in the Dominican Republic. However, whenever he jogged, the villagers all came out to offer him coffee and invite him to stop to chat as he passed their homes. Sometimes they sent their children to run with him because they were afraid he would be lonely. The villagers could not understand his need to be alone, and were concerned for him; their culture valued community.

Our judgments of other cultures are sometimes based on the assumption that others' circumstances and customs are the same as our own, and that we know everything we need to know about them. As Rigoberta Menchú, a Quiché Indian in Guatemala, tells us in her autobiography (*I Rigoberta Menchú*, 1983, p. 9), her community keeps their traditions and customs a secret from outsiders in order to prevent their being misunderstood or judged, and also to keep them sacred. It would be a mistake to think that we understand this culture solely from what we see of it on the surface. Westerners and Guatemalan landowners judged Rigoberta's people negatively, often times out of misunderstanding. For example, they judged the Indians for being dirty, when in fact the Indians had no money for clothes and nowhere to bathe. Apparently, it never occurred to them that there were things they didn't know or understand about Rigoberta's people, instead seeing what appeared to be their shortcomings as evidence of their inferiority.

### **Creativity as a Bridge**

Speaking to each other, or with each other, through the creative arts allows us to communicate in a common language in which we are much less likely to encounter miscommunication, and to learn of our commonalities as human beings and to appreciate the differences.

I believe that creativity offers a major contribution to the evolution of society and a means of conveying our history in a much more relevant manner to future societies

than a history book could possibly communicate. In addition, the arts offer the experience of communicating in a language that has no boundaries or limits, so that expression through creative arts can be shared by different cultures as common language which contains no cultural barriers. Robert Sternberg (Sternberg) states that creativity is a “radical force within a culture that serves to help individuals in shaping and redefining ... environments.” People from two cultures engaging in creative process together can redefine the relationship of those cultures.

*Language.* Language is how we communicate with each other. It is also how we miscommunicate with each other. Often the meaning intended by the speaker in conversation is misinterpreted or misunderstood by the listener due to a difference in socialization or in how their perceptions are organized conceptually (*A Framework for Understanding Cross-Cultural Misunderstandings*). In learning Spanish, I have discovered that just memorizing vocabulary or verb tenses and translating English verbatim into Spanish is not learning the Spanish language, but that I must organize my thoughts differently in order to speak the language. Learning the language has showed me how a Spanish-speaking person thinks, something I would not have been aware of if I had not made an attempt to learn the language. In studying the language, I have experienced a different way of seeing the world which allows me to understand Latin culture better. The study of a foreign language is a good way to begin to open to another culture. As we learn how a language is structured, we can appreciate how native speakers think, and this alone can shed new light on a culture.

Bernardo Palombo, the founder and director of *El Taller Latino Americano* in New York City, an intercultural center which teaches Spanish, often tells beginning Spanish students, “In English, everyone is quiet while someone else is speaking; only one person speaks at a time. In Spanish, everyone talks at once.” He encourages students to practice this in class. This seems very odd to those of us who were brought up to believe that talking when someone else is talking is bad manners. Attempting to practice this gave me a new perspective on communication in Latin cultures.

A survey in Canada demonstrated that those whose primary language was English who had studied French had low levels of prejudice against those whose primary language was French, while those who had not studied French had the highest levels of prejudice (*Diversity, Intercultural Exchange and Mobility Round Table*). Apparently, simply knowing something about another's language lowers the prejudice we might feel towards them.

*Art.* Art is a direct link between higher sensory creation and perception and the concrete expression of those images as a communication. By viewing the art of another person, we can experience his or her inner world for a time and the deeper communications that are of importance to them without the usual filter of culture and prejudice.

*Music.* Music is both vibration itself and the recreation of emotional expression through sound. It bypasses the need for intellectual processing. When we listen to music, we experience a direct communication of the musician's emotions and beliefs. When we perform music together, we are speaking with one voice, one which contains no concepts or beliefs. It is the perfect medium for bringing cultures together.

### **Center of Intercultural Exchange as a Medium for Change**

Imagine a place where all of these arts are practiced in multicultural groups. *El Taller Latino Americano*, an organization in New York City which promotes intercultural creation of new forms of communication and expression, is a brilliant example of this. While there are many organizations which support and promote Latinos and their arts, their purpose is to show the world what and who Latinos are and the distinctions that make their culture their own. El Taller does indeed provide a nurturing environment for Latino musicians and artists; but what is different about El Taller is that it welcomes Americans (and other nationalities) and invites them to participate. In the organization's own words on its website ([www.tallerlatino.org](http://www.tallerlatino.org)), it is "an arts and education organization in New York City, founded in 1979 by Latin and North Americans to afford opportunities for artistic expression and the exchange of

ideas and experiences between people of different cultures.” It offers “arts programming and Spanish language classes that seek not only to entertain and educate, but to gather together culturally and linguistically mixed audiences on the common ground of creativity.”

*Language.* It accomplishes this goal first by teaching the Spanish language through the Acoustic Method, a unique method of Spanish language instruction based on sound and originated by Bernardo Palombo which integrates cultural facts, idioms and customs, as well as current events, into its curriculum (*Spanish Language Classes*). The focus of these classes is on speaking, living and thinking in Spanish, rather than on memorizing grammar, and spoken dialogue is a part of every class. It is “pre-grammar” Palombo says (Martínez 2001), and the emphasis is on the sound and rhythm of the spoken word. The method has supporters in linguist Noan Chomsky and novelist Grace Paley (Martínez 2001), and Palombo has received the Independent Educator’s Award from Teachers College at Columbia University for his unique contribution to education (*La Familia del Taller*).

*Art.* The first thing you see when you enter the El Taller loftspace is art. In fact, the staircase leading up to the loft is also covered with art—bright, colorful art—so that by the time you reach the space, you already feel the ambiance of a place that exudes creative energy. El Taller’s Grady Alexis Gallery has shown many emerging artists, Latino and otherwise. Although its primary mission is to support Latino artists, being Latino is not a requirement for showing at El Taller; only creativity is.

*Music.* The primary platform for cultural exchange and creativity at El Taller is the music. Performers from all over the Latin world, both famous and unknown, clamor to perform at El Taller. Neighborhood musicians and composers, both American and Latino, give concerts there. Traditional South American peñas are offered monthly, informal concerts where musicians of any sort who have a commitment to the tenets of the Taller can play, and one never knows what kind of music or musician one might hear, whether Latino or American. El Taller is an introduction for Latino musicians to the American world and vice versa. It provides a space for American and Latino



musicians to make music together, melding their art into new forms of creative expression that combine both worlds and merge them into something unique.

*A Creative Space.* The space itself seems to generate creativity. The loft at 2710 Broadway and West 104 Street formerly belonged to Thomas Edison—creator of the light bulb and the phonograph (*Thomas Edison*)—and was used as a work space by him (Cristian p. 198). You can make yourself at home any time the building is open in the comfortable loftspace, where there is always someone engaged in a creative activity, whether strumming a guitar, learning the tango or practicing a song in Spanish. Everyone is welcome—and feels welcome—regardless of heritage. This a place where both cultures can feel at home.

## **Conclusion**

El Taller seems to have found a way to bridge the cultural gap while generating some of the most creative music and art to be found in New York City. It truly lets Americans and Latinos learn about and from each other so that we can let go of fear and appreciate each other. I found only one other organization which has a similar function, *La Peña* in Berkeley ([www.lapena.org](http://www.lapena.org)), which focuses on Latin American music. It does not, however, offer Spanish classes, and the combination of language, music and art in a creative setting are what seems to make El Taller work, and what makes it unique.

It seems that the focus of El Taller that provides cohesiveness is the recognition by the regular participants that merging of the cultures is something to strive for and that the real goal at El Taller is creativity in its highest form. As indicated previously in this paper, expression through the creative arts can be shared by different cultures as a common language which contains no cultural barriers, and when that type of creativity occurs, I believe that society evolves.

While I am not certain that El Taller could be duplicated, it could be used as a model for similar organizations in other major cities. Each such organization would take on its own character reflecting the culture in which it exists. Even a few El Taller's in the

country would go a long way in healing the rift between cultures and bring forth a brand new culture.

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