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EDLE 800: Dr. Shaklee

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Reflection #4

In my second Journal Reflection, I reflected on how Kuhn had shifted my perspective on Descartes. Initially I hadn’t recognized that a significant contribution of Descartes’ thinking was his reasoning process; while his framework remained steadfast to a theological epistemology, his critical thinking introduced a synthesis of thought based on a reasoning process that was just taking shape during his time period. Along with Bacon, Descartes is considered the founder of modern empiricism and rationalism with a heavy interest in physical science (Encyclopedia Britannica). Imagining the context in which Descartes wrote is fascinating; he lived in the late 1600s after the reformation period had erupted and just as the enlightenment was dawning.

Fast forward three hundred years and Edward Said wrote a book called Orientalism. His work reminds me of several authors who wrote of India in the late 1800s and the first half of the 20th century when India (and usuallu the region) were brushed together in a single watercolor of “exotic.” Said’s article discusses a commonly held Western worldview of Orientals being contrasted with the Occident, that is, the East from the West. He refers to the sweeping landscape of arts, geopolitics, cultures and traditions across the Orient as a unified construct used by the West to, in part, hold the subordinate position of the Orientals below that of the Occident. Further, he argues Europe generated an identity by upholding this “other,” that there is a mutual creation of identity between East and West.

Another ten years later, bell hooks wrote Black Looks: Race and Representation. This book offers a different juxtaposition, namely between the supposed complex culture of the white race and the more seemingly simple, mono-existence of the black. She notes the lack of representation of the black face and experience in media and other forms of the American cultural narrative. She calls us to not just critique the status quo but to transform our questions and worldviews. Ultimately, she says, this transformation must call out a change in paradigm and our ways of seeing.

These three very distinct thinkers each held up a mirror and showed their contemporary readers something uncomfortable. None of them were accepting a status quo, and in their writings, they asked their communities to take a second look and challenge their perceptions. Moreover, they pushed the question of identity. Who are we and how are we interacting with the world around us? From their work, I examine my own life: where am I maintaining a status quo? In what ways am I defining myself against the other? How is my identity dependent on my definition of the other? And when is that method of definition destructive or constructive?

There is a strong sense of facelessness in the work of these writers. Descartes focuses on empirical evidence, a method of objectifying information as reason and logic are applied rather than intuition and metaphysical spirituality. Said’s work describes groups as generalities rather than individuals in unique cities, regions, or countries. And bell hooks recognizes the facelessness of blacks, who are regularly not present in public displays.

When I consider my research interests and international focus, I am pausing – where am I generalizing, not seeing, or holding status quo’s that tear down rather than build up?

The other day I heard someone discuss the “Muslim terrorists.” Quickly his terminology turned to saying “Muslims” and the group seemed not to notice. He effectively was continuing a transformation in our country’s discourse by some who want to perpetuate a status quo of derision for an entire religion. The conversation later turned to a particular country with whom some in the United States see as our new Cold War enemy. How do these actions to establish a new status quo shape our worldviews? I recall hooks and her call to critique, to ask different questions, to consider other worldviews. Our future research, teaching, and engagement as a scholar demands and deserves this attention and types of careful inquiry.

I asked my colleagues to stick with the term “terrorist” rather than use “Muslim.”

And so, transformation starts with each of us.

Encyclopedia Brittanica (2020). Retrieved on July 14, 2020 at

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Western-philosophy/The-rationalism-of-Descartes>

Dr. Shaklee Comment:

I appreciated your example and how casually we change terms that change and/or reinforce meanings - I'm also glad you asked for a change.  The nuances of our language are increasingly important.﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿﻿