

## Examining Biases and Prejudices: Implications for Art Education

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In this paper, I combine an overview of Elisabeth Young-Buehl's (1996) socio-psychological examination of group prejudices with a critical examination of artwork by Juan Sánchez to illustrate how issues-based studies of works of art help teachers and students examine and resist biases and prejudices that contribute to oppressive or hegemonic actions.

The invitation posed by critical pedagogy is to bend reality to the requirements of a just world, to decenter, deform, disorient, and ultimately transform modes of authority that domesticate the Other, that lay siege to the power of the margins. . . . We need to develop a praxis that gives encouragement to those who, instead of being content with visiting history as curators or custodians of memory, choose to live in the furnace of history where memory is molten

and can be bent into the contours of a dream and perhaps even acquire the immanent force of a vision. (Giroux, & McLaren, 1994, p. 218)

Hegemony is defined as a preponderant influence, especially that of one nation over another (Webster, 9th). Antonio Gramsci's (1972) concept of hegemony was that it is a constantly changing condition wherein force and consent are related in various combinations. Hegemony appears to succeed when socio-psychological conditions permit that interplay between force and consent. Ultimately people must consent in order to be socially conditioned to believe in the dominant ideology. Oftentimes hegemony is achieved through homogenization, which may be viewed as trying to achieve uniformity as a means of civil control. In Elisabeth Young-Bruehl's (1996) study of group prejudices, we find how groups, even nation groups, abide a homogeneity that has its roots in bias and prejudice. Coercion and manipulation through intellectual and moral influences are keys to the success of hegemony (Gramsci, 1972; Stanley, 1992, p. 98). This paper addresses the interplay of homogenization in the service of hegemony, the conscious and unconscious needs and desires involved in group prejudices, and the implications of these for art education.

The field of art education has an opportunity and an obligation to students and society to confront bias and prejudice. All art teachers are obliged, by virtue of their commitment to the profession, to learn to read the multiple layers of meaning of works of art in order to appreciate fully their significance. From such a stance, works of art become catalysts for dialogue, confrontation, and reflection. In this paper, I discuss artworks that encourage critical inquiry, empowerment, and an empathic/activist possibility through directly confronting biases and prejudices. The study of artworks such as those by the Puerto-Rican/American artist Juan Sánchez may bring a historical awareness to acculturated biases and group prejudices such as those manifested in US government attempts at homogeneity.

### **De-parting Puerto-Rico**

Juan Sánchez (b. 1954) was born of Puerto Rican parents who

came to the US in the 1950s and settled in a Spanish speaking Puerto-Rican / African-American community in Brooklyn, New York. Personal experiences gave Sánchez the impetus to merge art and politics. *NeoRican Convictions*, c.1989, is one of his works that addresses the results of homogenization practices by the US in Puerto-Rico, and the oppression of immigrants and people outside the dominant culture in US society. In this work, Sánchez used symbols such as hearts, stars, nails, hands, crosses, flags, roses, and barbed wire. The format of the American flag boasts six green and black stripes with 15 black stars on an orange background. Sánchez also uses formal elements to introduce opposition. For example, green is a complementary color or opposite of red, orange is the complement of blue. The notion of opposites leads us directly to believe that veracity of the flag is in jeopardy because of its change in color. The foundational red, white, and blue, holds a different look than anticipated. We question the veracity of a country with the simple change in color. To magnify the clues to the story, an enormous heart showing nails dripping with blood occupies the major part of the upper space of the canvas. The nails appear to have been forced deep into the heart—the heart of a people. On the surface of the entire mixed media work, text by Sánchez’s brother Samuel, an independence movement activist, reveals the “bleeding heart” martyrdom of the systematic violence against Puerto Ricans in the US (Fusco, 1990, p. 187n). Sánchez’s story stems from acts of racism, hatred, youth gangs, and violent crimes that occur in the US yet are largely overlooked by the government and its citizens. By revealing the desperation, herding of émigrés, inequality, and injustice, Sánchez directly confronts our national biases and prejudices in visual accusations of neglect and oppression. Tackling tough issues, Sánchez empathized with the plight of oppressed and suffering people which led him to make art with heated passion and political conviction. Among those tough issues that his work brings to our attention are the colonization policies of the US government built on homogeneous practices wrought through public schooling.

## **Colonization, Homogenization, and Public Schooling**

The traditions and conventions that formed the basis of colonization practices by the US government have depended upon various means of homogenization. In attempts to achieve uniformity, to level cultural distinctions as a means of control, the US often has attempted to

homogenize or create uniformity among the ideologies and traditions of its immigrants and conquered peoples such as Native American, Irish, Polish, Latino, African, and Puerto Rican. Homogenization attempted to provide conditions for eventual acceptance of the conqueror's culture (Spring, 1997).

Historically, public schooling, or the lack thereof, is one of the venues that the US government has used to insure the success of homogenization practices. These practices were accomplished through boarding schools such as those in Carlisle, Pennsylvania (Wilson, 1992; Achbar & Wintonick, 1992) where Native American children were removed from their families for purposes of deculturalization through "American" education; the destructive "melting pot" ideology imposed on Puerto-Rican school children that insisted they "be like US"; and the lack of schooling for the first African and African-American slaves, wherein fear of revolution outlawed learning to read. Such inequalities and undesirable conditions remain gaping scars on the face of public and private education (Kozol, 1991).

The stripping of a culture from its people occurs through disempowerment, indoctrination, removal, eradication, segregation, policing, unnecessary violence, imprisonment, and other treatment involving discriminatory government policies in public education. In such practices, mutual respect, empathy, and equality lie far from the central motives. Sanchez's concerns in *NeoRican Convictions* particularly reveal the effects of deculturalization on the native people of Puerto Rico and its émigrés to the US. Looking at history provides a context for Sanchez's message

## **Puerto Rican History in Context**

In 1897, Puerto Ricans successfully won autonomy from the Spanish and initiated a republican form of government. At the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Puerto Rico immediately fell under US military authority determined to protect economic interests, particularly American owned sugar and tobacco plantations. Puerto Rico became a colony of the US in 1898 and endured assimilationist and deculturalization tactics sometimes referred to as Americanization (Spring, 1997, p. 41). In great measure through public schooling, Americanization practices

attempted to replace native cultures with the dominant culture in the United States (Spring, 1997) highlighting the contexts of Eurocentric, capitalist, technocratic, puritanical, and republican systems. School policies in Puerto Rico imposed the celebration of United States holidays and patriotic exercises honoring United States history. Textbooks and curricula reflected United States culture. Students were expelled for anti-United States sentiment. Dissenting native teachers were replaced by teachers from the US. Since a commission to recommend educational policies from the US War Department under President McKinley showed that only 10 percent of the population of Puerto Rico was literate (Spring, 1997), United States leaders rationalized imposing an English only policy in schools. Euro-organizations such as the Boy Scouts, already a status quo allegiance keeper, also contributed to the deculturalization. One man, Brumbaugh, appointed commissioner of education for only one year, initiated these Americanization policies that lasted through six commissioners (Spring, 1997). One important point to remember is that without group support, Brumbaugh's ideas would have quickly dissipated.

The prevailing attitude of US moral and cultural superiority negated the ways of life of Puerto Ricans, and, as a result, the imposition of that type of instruction had a disastrous effect on students (Spring, 1997). Many Puerto Ricans resisted Americanization programs and protested United States' policy, particularly the substitution of the English language in Spanish-speaking schools in the 1930s. Because of the long history of discontent, Franklin D. Roosevelt urged a bilingual policy. By 1951, Puerto Rico became a commonwealth and the Spanish language returned as the major language in the schools (Spring, 1997). Spring has speculated that resistance of numerous Puerto-Rican people impeded the homogenization process.

Human beings often fail to cross the seemingly cavernous distance between an appreciation of difference and the oppressiveness of homogeneity. Group prejudices hinder that crossing. Socio-psychologist Young-Bruehl (1996) in the *Anatomy of Prejudices* determined three character types who hold prejudice—the narcissistic, the hysterical, and the obsessional. Narcissistic prejudices deal with sexism and include homophobia, while hysterical prejudices deal with racism. Obsessional prejudices deal with those like anti-Semitism (pp. 26-38). In Young-Bruehl's character typing of group prejudices, sexists will hate marks of the feminine whether in men or women; racists will hate black, red,

yellow, brown, or white signification wherever it may be found; and anti-Semitism will obsess and destroy both in fear and desire of the evil other (p. 28). Inability to bridge the distance may be due to shared prejudices that influence and mold the character of entire societies including our own.

The normalization of prejudice, or making all prejudice appear categorically the same, erroneously allows one to think that proper education can eliminate all prejudice and that tolerance can be taught (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 13). The idea in American education of "Just fix it!" has been legitimated through a kind of generalized research in the social and cognitive sciences since the 1950s (p. 13). According to Young-Bruehl, prejudices fulfill unconscious needs and desires, come in many types, and may overlap. For instance, individual character types who are racist also can be sexist. The same holds true for nations or subgroups. If we begin to analyze our own prejudices, perhaps we can begin to bridge the distance.

In discerning human beings tendencies toward homogeneity, whether that of nations or small groups, Young-Bruehl (1996) provided socio-psychological insights based on the work of Anna Freud. I paraphrase some of Young-Bruehl's ideas in the following sections and refer the reader to detailed explanations in her text. Though I focus on obsessional prejudices in terms of illustrating Juan Sanchez's artwork, I offer a brief explanation of narcissistic and hysterical prejudice to show how the three prejudices are different, yet how they can overlap.

### **Narcissistic Prejudice Begets Sexism**

Narcissistic prejudices deal with sexism. History shows how "different societal subgroups and minorities have different prevailing sexism types" (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 432). In the earliest family structures, a more patriarchal, polygamous, one-sex sexism, an expression of bodily, phallic narcissism pervaded (p. 424). Some early Renaissance artworks idealize this notion. As polygamy evolved into monogamy, two sex mental-narcissistic sexism, of Judeo-Christian tradition and patrilineal origins, continued to hold the male as phallic authority over the female (Young-Bruehl, pp. 424-434). The move toward monogamy was an acknowledgment of the female's role in reproduction and her reproductive difference. The definition of woman was mother. Other

definitions brought contempt for ideological renegades or women who did not abide the “rule” of mother (Young-Buehl, p. 427). For instance, artist Carolee Schneemann graphically confronted both male and female sexist biases through her various art forms. In *Eye Body*, c. 1963, Schneemann addressed the politics of identity through emphasizing female sexuality, goddess imagery, and the body. She wrote,

The erotic female archetype, creative imagination, and performance art itself are all subversive in the eyes of patriarchal culture because they themselves represent forms and forces which cannot be turned into functional commodities or entertainment (to be exchanged as property and value), remaining unpossessable while radicalizing social consciousness. (Schneemann, 1996, p. 683)

Schneemann usurped the ideological boundaries of woman as mother in order to challenge perceptions and identification of women in society. Her hope was that, “By the year 2000 no young woman artist will meet the determined resistance and constant undermining which I endured as a student” (Schneemann, 1996, p. 717). The struggle to eradicate those biases continues even in our personal lives.

Today, movements seeking to hold to traditionalist ways of life in the face of change refuse the amorphousness of boundaries in contemporary family structures. Growing domestic violence toward women and children results with such breaks from tradition (Young-Buehl, 1996, pp. 432-433). Cindy Sherman’s photographic renditions of mass media illustrate this violence. For instance, we are left to wonder what violence motivated her self portraits as grotesque dolls who have prosthetic body-parts that appear to be dislocated or decomposing. Furthermore, the angst that homosexuality raises continues to mount fears in phallic-narcissists. Artists such as David Wojnarovich and Keith Haring actively campaigned against that homophobia. Others such as Gran Fury transferred activist artistic sites from the museum to posters on the sides of city buses. In contemporary society, changes extending across boundaries of race, ethnicity and class are due particularly to forms of advertising and telecommunications (Young-Buehl, p. 432). Group biases begin to change as visions of difference become acceptable. Artworks such as those by Miriam Shapiro, Clarissa Sligh, and Adrian Piper enable visions of difference, so that clashes of male and female narcissistic desires ideally may become a complementarity in the best

of psychosocial possibilities as Young-Bruehl (1996) noted (p. 435). Piper wrote (as cited in Stiles & Selz, 1996) of people's blindness to the needs of others, "coupled with the arrogant and dangerous conviction that you understand those needs better than they do" (p. 791). Piper uses confrontation to dismantle the avoidance, denial, dismissal and withdrawal that cloaks our subconscious mechanisms (p. 791). Artists busily educate when the viewer listens.

According to Young-Bruehl (1996), education hardly exists except on a behavioral level in narcissist prejudice because "sexism flows through every facet of a sexist's existence, leaving, as it were, no place to stand to see it" (p. 546). It is a prejudice that "constitutes the ego ideal of the sexist" (Young-Bruehl, p. 546). Educational responses differ as groups differ, however, groups that allow great diversity among the victims are able to achieve greater group solidarity that can thwart sexism (Young-Bruehl, p. 547). Open forums in art education for discussing works of art may contribute to that appreciation of diversity. As Young-Bruehl (1996) noted, while sexists do not necessarily desire political or state support, hystericals, on the other hand, want to set up a political action agenda to perpetuate a two-tier, superior/inferior dichotomy.

### **Hysterical Prejudice Begets Racism**

In brief, Young-Bruehl's hysterical prejudices are of the type where racism resides. Hysterical prejudices reflect a need for the dominator to have the dominated Other in order to exist with a sense of identity that is all-powerful in the face of fear of the Other's potential. Hypocrisy and repression are the most obvious mental characteristics (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 371). Hystericals look for others who condone their behavior. They need to feel superior and at the same time keep the "lesser others" in their place. Hystericals surge, pulse, behave orgiastically, build to climaxes, and want bodies. . . . Hysterics need the macrocosm of the crowd to feel powerful and secure (Young-Bruehl, p. 372). The greatest social fear of the hysterically prejudiced is potential rioters; therefore, they look to keep others in their place. In contrast to America and South Africa, Young-Bruehl's comparison of racism in Brazil "showed the key sociopolitical moment in racism," when the state became the master and the emancipated slaves became patriotic followers in a nationalistic household (p. 374). Even at the national level, slaves remained slaves though emancipated—not unlike the repeal of some civil rights legislation in the US, nor the lack of support necessary to initiate further civil rights



legislation (see Kozol, 1991).

Education and therapy for a hysterical dynamic needs a political action focus. That focus would prevent government being an instrument for perpetuating state racism such as initiating Jim Crow laws, anti-civil rights legislation, even the criticism of affirmative action or welfare reform, actions that would insure race-specific poverty (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 546). Numerous works of art by artists such as Emma Amos, Faith Ringgold, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Luis Cruz Azaceta, and Pat Ward Williams address the injustices of racist prejudice (see Lippard, 1990). With Young-Bruehl's characterology, racism is understood in terms of the needs and desires of we who suffer from hysterical prejudices. Continuing with a more in-depth look at obsessional prejudice, I provide further insights into Sanchez's artwork.

### **Obsessional Prejudices Beget Those Related to Anti-Semitism**

According to Young-Bruehl (1996), the obsessively prejudiced divide the world and groups of people into completely distinct categories with impermeable boundaries such as good versus evil. Yet, dichotomies of desire such as envy/hate relationships exist in obsessionalities. Fears of corruption and destruction are tempered with allure. Obsessional prejudices are the most ambivalent (as in paranoia); "the group that is feared as corrupting and destructive is also the group that is, without acknowledgment, unconsciously, the most alluring" (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 348). Intelligence is both feared and respected; wealth and power are both threatening and desired.

Within a fundamentalist adoration of truth, obsessional types reject any kind of plurality or Enlightenment idea of common humanity (Young-Bruehl, 1996). As a young woman, I remember being forbidden to take communion in our local church because I was not yet among the membership. Fundamentalisms regulate and segregate and spill over into the rest of our lives.

In extremist, separatist obsessionalism, eugenic race purity (like Hitler's) remains the ultimate good accomplished by totalitarian isolationism of blood or other products that might contaminate that purity (Young-Bruehl, 1996). Like many young southerners, I observed

the segregation of African-Americans accomplished through such means as the threat of contamination with toilets and drinking fountains, even though the type of contamination could never be satisfactorily explained. In fear, obsessionals use censorship and form attacks on common humanity rights (Young-Bruehl, 1996), such as prohibiting black males free speech to address public groups, speak to white women, or even make eye contact for fear of reprisals.

Obsessionals are isolationist and separatist but want to extend their domination to greater circles. They believe that the only protection to their fears of conspiracy initiated by the evil other is eradication, extermination, even to the point of destroying any evidence of the destruction, such as the cremation of Jewish people during the Holocaust. "Anything less (than destruction) means that the conspiracy can regenerate, regroup" (Young-Bruehl, 1996, p. 348). Recent atrocities in Kosovo, Rawanda, Bosnia, Israel, even gang atrocities in the US attest to human acts of genocide. Much of the art of Jean-Michel Basquiat reveals the depth of fragmentation and pain in response to such tendencies toward elimination or X-ing out in his graphic gestures that highlight racist stereotypes. When obsessionals cannot act on genocidal impulses, they advocate containment measures such as ghettoization, deportation, herding by fortress groups, or use of the enemy's methods of communication, coding, and infiltration (Young-Bruehl, 1996). Artworks by Arlan Huang and Jaune Quick-To-See-Smith portray the herding tendencies of hegemonic obsessionals. For instance, some of Quick-To-See-Smith's paintings contain animals in herds forming a narrative that lead's the viewer to make connections to Native American's retrenchment to reservations. The dominant white culture, are forced to question their complicity in such actions.

Young-Bruehl determined that obsessional dispositions often respond frantically to defend self against fears. Obsessives seek to eliminate their frustration by revenge, retaliation, and power displays through a group that is deemed able to counter the perceived threating conspiracy "out there" (Young-Bruehl, p. 351). The obsessional's duty is to keep the horror from happening to others of their group. Young-Bruehl found the obsessional crowd attracted to the "charisma of a leader who provides the meaning of life, the logic, the value system, the images of purity and cleansing, the mystical channeling and ordering that eliminate uncertainty and doubt" (p. 372). Obsessionals in a crowd lose individuality and the guilt that individuality entails. In this condition,

biases and prejudices control human actions. Young-Bruehl suggests that social and economic conditions such as depression and disillusion tend to prevent anti-Semitic-like obsessional prejudice.

Groups hold biases and prejudices that spread to other groups with whom they come into contact, then to entire nations as demonstrated in the histories of the Spain, England, United States, Germany, South Africa, and the former Yugoslavia, among numerous others. As nation conquers nation, its citizens are implicated in those decisions of control, and, therefore, become complicit in the actions of the nation group. Of course, dissent is always present, and those dissenting groups, as Young-Bruehl indicated, occupy a different type of bias or prejudice. The degree and intensity of bias and prejudice can place ideological blinders on a nation and its citizens.

### **Creating a "Good" Citizen**

The concept of citizenship within a culture is formed by particular attitudes, beliefs, and values toward ways of life. Forming good citizens insures the society a necessary means of control. A "good" citizen is molded or reproduced by common culture through its laws, traditions, religion, sentiments of nationalisms and patriotisms, and largely indoctrinated through mass media and public and private education (see Chomsky & Herman, 1988). Ironically, the molding of a good citizen reproduces group bias and prejudice toward particular ways of life. Understanding why we think the way we do provides an opportunity to question ourselves as enablers of bias and prejudice.

Citizens can be molded to suit the needs and desires of a power structure as Young-Bruehl's research indicated. Using homogeneous socio-psychological means of control or indoctrination such as public education, mass media, and various technologies are keys to the success of such manipulation. Ironically forms of resistance exist within these means of control (see Giroux, 1983). For instance, culture and values are embedded in language. Spring (1997) speculated that the attempts to change the Spanish language to English in Puerto Rico may have caused the limited effectiveness of United States deculturalization programs. He maintained the difficulty if not impossibility of deculturalization through indigenous educational institutions, indicating the empowerment and activist possibilities for oppressed peoples within this establishment (see

Freire, 1970/1992, 1973/1993). Ironically, that which would indoctrinate and dominate can also be the instrument that empowers and liberates. If pockets of resistance can enable empowerment and change, then it stands to reason that the way we teachers teach, as well as the content (or the lack thereof) we teach, has everything to do with reproducing bias and prejudice and thus enabling or resisting homogeneity in the service of hegemony. Teaching in the visual arts is no exception.

## Implications for an Issues-based Art Education

In art education, changes in philosophical and epistemological attitudes toward teaching open possibilities for examining societal and global issues as well as encouraging critical inquiry, empowerment, and empathic/activist possibility (Shor, 1987, 1992). Art lessons can address socio-political as well as aesthetic issues, reveal historical/cultural contexts and meaning in works of art, connect the histories of the artworld, and enable meaningful, richly expressive, ideational studio art. I describe one of those lessons and its implications below.

Preservice teachers in my field experience practicum class are challenged to devise issues-based art lessons for incarcerated youth in detention centers. One lesson by Christine Vodicka (1998) focused on the distress that marginalization causes human beings. Juan Sanchez's *NeoRican Convictions*, c. 1989, described earlier, reveals issues surrounding US government control and colonization of Puerto Rican people. According to Coco Fusco (1990), Sánchez is addressing the "mythology of martyrdom" by using text that his brother Samuel Sánchez wrote in response to a grand jury subpoena in which he recounts the "systematic violence, a type of enforced martyrdom, against Puerto Ricans in the US" (p. 187n). Aesthetically, Sanchez's work holds art historical significance as fine art, yet crosses boundaries into propaganda with an instrumentalist theory base. Moving between different cultural spaces, Sánchez sought to create awareness, educate, and vocalize the need for change in attitudes and policies toward Puerto Rico and immigrants in the US. For instance, in another work *Cultural, Racial, Genocidal Policy*, c. 1983, Sánchez challenged US policy of sterilizing women of Puerto Rico in order to combat overpopulation and unemployment, as he accused "the highest rate of genocidal sterilization in the world" (Fusco, 1990, p. 161n). Students discussed Sanchez's deconstruction of American symbols, such as the seemingly masked statue of liberty and

the green striped flag dripping with blood from the crucified bleeding heart. Reading the signs in this work directly challenged the students to empathize with the marginalization of Puerto Rican people—the pain, sense of loss, anger, and degradation that comes when cultural identity is stripped away. Students learned that important works of art may not be comforting and may be discussed from a variety of aesthetic stances as expressivist, formalist, and instrumentalist. Studying the context of the work can help students understand how attempts to homogenize and colonize can be promulgated and continued by national and small group biases and prejudices. In turn, students are able to create personal works that address issues of stripping away identity, and merge ideas relating to Puerto Rican people with the marginalization and homogenization in their own and others lived experience (Sánchez, 1996).

Many students in detention centers are resistant to power structures without understanding the complexity of the issues. Oftentimes, incarcerated youth have difficulty finding appropriate outlets to voice their opinions and to think through or reflect on consequences of certain actions. The study and interpretation of works of art can provide those appropriate outlets. Very often these teens appear comforted by the confirmation that cultural critique is permitted within a dynamic, in contrast to static, curriculum.

Unfortunately, bland or static curricula sanction homogeneity and erase any hope of a critical art education that works toward appreciation of difference. For instance, the bland study of composition and design leaves little room for passionate engagement with metaphor. Likewise, learning how to create expressivity in works of art without the realization or insistence that expression holds meaning becomes little more than an exercise in technique. A superficial approach to historical/cultural context leaves out the reciprocal effects that history and culture play on art and art on history and culture. A bland look at the artworld context overlooks some of the most capable philosophers, intellectuals, and thinkers of this world who are/were visual artists. From the in-depth study of important works of art such as Juan Sanchez's *NeoRican Convictions*, students may learn to resist reproducing harmful effects of bias and prejudice and begin a healing process.

One of our charges as teachers and artists is as bearers of dangerous memories. As Giroux & McLaren (1994) premised in the opening paragraph of this paper, critical pedagogues have a responsibility

to keep memory alive, all the while questioning the reformation of knowledge in relation to those memories. Neimirotff (1992) stated that we must keep alive

the memory of human suffering by recounting the history of the marginal, the vanquished, and the oppressed, and by actively opposing the hegemonic practice of 'not naming' those things which challenge the status quo [here in terms of reproducing bias and prejudice] and suggest the elimination of the sources of human suffering by the realization of alternative possibilities for society. (p. 70)

With an issues-based art curriculum that digs into the furnace of history to intelligently and conscientiously confront our plethora of overlapping biases and prejudices, one day our society, with the help of art teachers, may be better able to step outside ourselves to see the world more clearly and in doing so achieve higher levels of responsibility and civility.

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