Working Within: Diversity and the Environment

By Jennifer Vazquez

Writing about traveling is one of the hardest things to do well. It really is. As we attempt to open ourselves up to the experience of a place—and if we're lucky—what catches our imagination will be the unexpected, what we didn't think we'd find. As we scramble to relate, to process the new information, so many things about our daily lives can be revealed: our assumptions; our passions; intricacies of the places we come from; and maybe even a greater understanding of our national culture, national identity. And then there's culture shock—an amazing thing to experience in one's own country. The old adage "strangers in a strange land" comes to mind, as we navigate and assimilate to our new and diverse surroundings. This can often feel like what we imagine it would be like to travel at light speed, though we have no scientific proof of this.

Traveling the country by bus this summer was a great way to experience this, and focusing on youth, the environment, and issues pertinent to tribal communities provided a great focus, something to ground our experiences in. I'm fascinated with the overarching culture of the environmental movement, and as awareness of environmental issues and work to improve or "greenwash" becomes more main-stream, I believe environmentalism is moving towards a more precise and uniform standard and practice. I'm very interested in the role of social equity and the preservation of culture within this movement, as I have observed an applied standard of "what it means to be green" throughout college and on this trip. I think a large focus of the environmental movement is in investment in new technologies and other material items, all of which is determined by access. In this sense, access is affected by things such as cultural guidelines (think do's and don'ts)**,** local and regional availability, and cost, all of which are primarily affected by race and class. If affordability is such a big thing in environmentalism, I think it's important to remember that not everyone is going to be focused on monitoring and limiting their use of goods and services if they don't have equal access to these things–healthy homes, food, clean energy, reliable transportation, etc.–in the first place. I think we take it for granted that ideas and methodologies come from somewhere, are nested in cultural practice. It's easy for us environmentalists to forget that our ideas are associated with the cultures and socioeconomic backgrounds we come from, and that most of us are middle class and/or white, and this point definitely matters. My family is middle class, happily so, and my experiences with race and culture growing up have influenced and nurtured me in many ways.

I come from a Cuban-American family; my father moved to Miami with his family after their house was confiscated by revolutionary forces in the early sixties. My family has worked hard and we've had a good life. My parents could provide for all of our needs, and when it was time to go to college, they made sure that I went and they've been as supportive as parents can be. I was a tribal events coordinator on this tour, largely due to the experiences I've had working in native communities in Wisconsin, where I attended college. While in school, I was welcomed into the Native American Student Association because I am of Cuban heritage. I don't even know what it means to say that I'm half Cuban. I say it a lot, but I still just don't know what it means. It's funny how easy it is to simplify the most complex things, whether we do it out of frustration, apathy, fear, we do it, I do it all the time–not to mention that it's also pressed upon us to act in this

way. I often leave a conversation wondering if I should have explained myself better, however I always feel limited by time and whether or not that person would even care to hear it all; am I on a soapbox by talking about my ethnicity, my history? Easy-street answers are a barrier to taking the next step in our understandings of race and culture, and I realize this, but is this something I want to "take-on" when the grocery store clerk asks me about my last name? In America, you don't necessarily need a cultural identity to survive, but then again, this may only apply to the white majority who can pick and choose ethnicity as we go.

I think a major way in which I identify with Native students is that I find myself most everyday trying to figure out how to walk in two worlds (though most likely not to the extent that many Native students experience this). How will my definition of self be changed depending on who I'm talking with? What values come first? This age celebrates diversity, but it doesn't necessarily reward it. I've been more than happy to help promote the Foundation for this reason, and I think this is a major reason why I wanted to help co-ordinate the tribal events. Going to college as a minority isn't easy, and I definitely think that I have it easiest out of most minorities. I look white, I am white. But in this age of affirmative action and economic downturns, being a minority leaves you open to judgment in a way that is decidedly other. People usually tell me that because I don't speak Spanish well, or because I have freckles and red hair, because of these things, I can't possibly be who I say I am. I remember my 7th grade teacher announcing to the class that my mother must have been sleeping with the milkman because I didn't have dark hair and brown skin exactly like my father. Aside from insulting her, this teacher's statement completely discounted my mom's heritage, and subsequently mine, choosing instead to focus on the "exotic", the other. When someone called my last name across a party in college to get my attention, my friend sitting next to me yelled, "What are we all getting Mexican nicknames now?" He was pretty embarrassed and literally put his foot in his mouth, but the reaction is always the same: that's not you, your name, your life. Funny enough, he's currently applying for his Irish citizenship.

I think it's very important to try and understand the inner workings of race and culture in our daily lives, and I think that it's something that the "environmental movement" as a whole really needs to work on. There are countless examples of this, as we saw from the tour alone. We have to pull it together and quit telling people what to do, who they are, and why their lifestyles are right or wrong. I understand the ethical concepts of utilitarianism, that we should seek methods that provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people, and I think many young, college-educated environmentalists work with this kind-hearted philosophical concept in mind. While this may sound ideal, culture, class, money, and all sorts of structural impediments keep utilitarian ideals from actually providing a basis for a just and equal society, a truly sustainable society. The "greatest number of people" inherently implies that some of us will be sloughed off in the name of that greater good. Powerful stuff, to be working for the greater good. We all know that it won't be the wealthy, we privileged people, who will be forgotten about, lost

to structural adjustment as we try and save the planet from our waste and affluence.

In all honesty though, I really don't know if many youth truly operate under this paradigm of "greatest good", but it seems that way to me, it seems to come across in conversation. One such conversation that sticks out in my mind is a discussion that we had about the rebuilding of New Orleans, which I know sparked a lot of talk among the group. The issue being discussed was whether or not New Orleans could ever be sustainable, and further, should New Orleans be rebuilt? The land that makes up New Orleans and Baton Rouge is sited by many geographers as being capable of supporting small subsistence and fishing villages. It's been a long time since those villages, however, and to many this seems like a mute point. Dare we ask the same question of Chicago or New York, or other urban/cultural meccas of the US? Dare we ask members from the Houma Nation, who were the original inhabitants of the greater New Orleans area, for their opinions in this regard? None of us are from Louisiana, many, myself included, were visiting Louisiana for the first time, yet somehow we felt qualified to answer this question.

Admittedly, discussing the idea of whether or not an area can be "sustainable" or even rebuilt may provide a great avenue for eliciting the role and power that the environmental movement, among other things, has in dictating change on a global scale. However, we were holding this conversation while touring the bayou communities of Houma, LA, tribal lands where people are struggling to rebuild and live a good life in a safe environment. So we're there applauding the improvements and the strong community which has been self-sufficient in rebuilding, while simultaneously, without including our hosts, discussing their fate in terms of an outside, institutionally-bred ideal. I kept thinking about the day before, when one of our hosts shyly admitted to us environmental and social gurus that Wal-Mart had donated two truckloads of relief supplies, and we all know what's wrong with Wal-Mart. Needless to say, our conversation on the bus that day was a little hairy and a little awkward.

Race, culture, class, religion, these are the everyday topics which are still awkward to deal with and discuss in a casual, light-hearted, morning cup of coffee sort of way, yet we are confronted with these issues daily. It was interesting to me the difficulty that many people on the trip had in asking me if I was Native because I was working on the tribal stops. People dodged the question. Then when I said no, that I wasn't Native, the equally awkward question arose, and with some hesitation I would be asked, "So are you Latina?" It was as if people were asking me how I was comfortable around people of other backgrounds. All of this was good-natured, we just wanted to know where everyone stood, but I'm a firm believer that this awkwardness, this reaction, is another form of racism, an important, powerful form.

While all of this is very personal in many ways, I really do think that there is truth behind what I'm trying to get at. I'm not disappointed with the environmental movement, but it's time that we truly take the next step. We need to realize that there is no separation between environmental issues and social issues. If we can't respect each other, truly respect and attempt to understand each other, then I do not see how we can expect to do the same with the Earth. We are as dependent on each other as we are on the natural resources we are depleting and until we can

all sit down at the same table as equals I do not see how our ecological situation will improve.