

Social Change Project

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Alison Farmer

Antioch University, Seattle

Liberal Studies II 302: Diversity, Power & Privilege

Winter 2009

Patricia Russell & Phoenix Raine

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The City of Woodinville is a rural city on the east side of Seattle that is struggling to keep a small town mentality within a desperate need for growth. The city has a large family residency and is advertised as "City Living, Country Style", a family and community minded destination offering an outstanding quality of life. In 2005 the city came up with a new vision statement and mission goals. In 2008 it adopted a new "Economic Development Strategic Action Plan" that addresses need for growth and diversity in the area. The city has grown rapidly and the "Growth Management Act" requires it to increase residency in its urban areas. However, the council is confronting a battle from current residents as to the way to move forward. Woodinville lacks affordable housing but is experiencing a large resistance against it by existing residents. Immigration to the city has increased greatly, especially from Mexico, and there have been steadily increasing signs of poverty, and homelessness. Many of the problems the city faces is due to an old 'Vision' of the city that residents are trying to hold on to. For years Woodinville has been perceived as a small upscale predominantly "white" neighborhood, its reality is no longer meeting this old "oppressive" vision.

In 2000 the city had a relatively low representation of minority races and a slightly lower percentage of foreign- born residents than the County and Region. Though Woodinville's foreign born population (11% in 2000) represents over 30 countries, there is a strong concentration of people from South/Central America, particularly Mexico. This Hispanic population has exploded from nothing to substantial due to manufacturing and service industries in town ( 3 times the share of incorporated King County) recruiting from Central

America and Mexico. Many immigrants from Mexico who work in Woodinville cannot afford to live here due to its high home prices. There is a smaller percentage of multifamily housing than neighboring cities and the percentage of owner-occupied multifamily units is much higher in Woodinville leaving little rental availability. The large and growing number of immigrants to the City are almost non-visible at the moment and not part of the vision many hold for the city.

In Feb 2006 Carol Edwards (1942-2004) was recognized as the founding mother of the Woodinville. Carol promoted the city as a unique and colorful place where individuality and human dignity are appreciated. She "modeled compassion for all humans, spirited advocacy of teens, immigrants, the homeless, and the needy and put her money and time into many causes that supported all segments of Woodinville society" (RESOLUTION NO. 317, 2006). Not all people in Woodinville have such an inclusive and fair view however, and one comment given in resistance of affordable housing was "Woodinville is an Upscale area.... Affordable housing residents will not be able to shop here, probably won't even buy gas here because it is 5 to 15 cents higher. They won't infuse the local economy" (2008, p. 96). A statement that is not only blatantly from a 'Privileged' point of view, but perpetuates a system of 'Oppression'.

These same residents have also requested a desire for more visible art in the community to enrich their lives. As an artist living in Woodinville, and an immigrant from a foreign country, I would like to promote the diverse richness and culture existing in the area through art. As a social change agent I would also use the opportunity to highlight the city's large immigrant population in an attempt to transform the oppressive, narrow vision many still hang on to. Working with the newly formed "Sammamish Valley Arts Center"(SVAC) who support art in the

community, I would promote community based art projects that help create a new inclusive, "fair " vision for Woodinville. This vision would celebrate diversity and welcome immigrants, granting them equal privilege and choice. Empowered Women International, an organization based in Virginia sees art as the "glue holding people of all ethnicities together ". A common denominator for many people emigrating to America that transcends socioeconomic borders (Beattie, 2006).

Art can be used to mobilize and inspire social and political action (Richardson, 2008). Allan Johnson says in his book *Privilege, power, and Difference*, "Of all human needs, few are as powerful as the need to be seen, included, and accepted by other people" (Johnson, 2001, p. 58). This need to be seen is the main theme that runs through Elliot Liebow's book about the lives of homeless women. He notes that no women ever said the actual words "tell them who I am" but "they demand to be seen - and have a right to be seen - as they are, with warts and human frailties, but fully human nonetheless (Liebow, 1993, p. 21). Until someone highlights the minority population of Woodinville they will remain invisible. "Those who don't look like people in power will feel invisible and in fact BE invisible, for they are routinely over-looked. And this is a major way that patterns of inequality and privilege repeat themselves over and over again" (Johnson, 2001, p. 102). Immigration in general brings up issues of being included and accepted. Ronald Takaki explores many of the feelings of migrants to America in his book "A Different Mirror". He notes how the Jews came to America desperate to be American, but did not gain any sense of belonging to their new land until their labor strikes and second generation (Takaki, 1993, p. 298). How the Mexicans where "not allowed to feel at home north of the border" (Takaki, 1993, p. 337). To this day Mexicans tend to create their own

"communities" within America so that they do not "feel like aliens in a foreign land" (Takaki, 1993, p. 334).

My own experience as a 'white' immigrant from Scotland has not always been easy. After 7 years, I still do not feel at home, though apart from one person telling me to "go home", people have always made me feel welcome (though I cannot say the same for the immigration system itself). One of the most common questions that new Jewish immigrants asked of each other was "How long have you been in America? (a question I often get asked and ask myself of other foreign nationals), with "How long" being a measure of the degree of assimilation (Takaki, 1993, p. 298). As a migrant you leave your home land a little apprehensive but full of hope, how you are treated when you arrive is critical to your sense of belonging. My transition was made easier by being "white" and speaking English. Katharine Jones author of *Accent of Privilege* said;

"Britons are unusual among immigrant groups in that when an American can't make out what they're saying, the reaction is generally positive. "They might say 'cute accent' or 'say something else'. Anyone else would be told 'speak English'." Whereas UK expats in Australia tend to lose their accents quite quickly, those in the US are less likely to. "They don't have as much incentive to change because of the perceived benefits - leaving a message in a 'posh' accent about a sought-after apartment and the landlady rings you straight back" (Lane, 2007).

I also came into the country legally and am able to afford to stay in Woodinville. Even with all these privileges however, arriving in a new country was still scary and hard going. Every day for such a long time I had to face something "New", which took a lot of courage and effort. Many of the new Jewish population said they felt unhappy and frightened because they did not know anything (Takaki, 1993, p. 298). Like anyone new to a different country, you do not know

how systems function, where to buy certain goods etc. For much of the Mexican population arriving here, the opportunities and acceptance are much lower than mine within the wider community. They may be here "illegally" and not speak English which adds to their distress at not being seen and heard. My goal as a social change agent would be to make sure the Mexican population is seen and heard as part of the greater Woodinville Community.

Allan Johnson says in his book, "a trouble we can't talk about is a trouble we can't do anything about" (Johnson, 2001, p. 13). Not being able to highlight a problem because it is illegal keeps many silent, including the Mexican population which the system of immigration oppresses. For many Mexicans over the centuries "the border was only an imaginary line" (Takaki, 1993, p. 334). "Immigration is a powerful issue to rediscover through art" (Garton, 2008) and there have been many art projects done in attempt to bring back the humanness to the problem of illegal immigration, which is a civil violation, not a crime. One art show had visitors signing their "support of "A Declaration of Immigration," which stated, among other things, that the United States is a nation of immigrants and no human being is illegal" (Garton, 2008). The America we know today has been founded on immigration. Takaki notes in his book, "Much of what is familiar in America's cultural landscape actually has ethnic origins" (Takaki, 1993, p. 12). Immigration art, an important by-product of self-expression that deals with uprooting and relocating, is its self often overlooked. Tony Pfannenstiel who ran a gallery in Portland, Oregon for 6 years says, "It's tough for immigrant artists to get seen" (Beattie, 2006). For those who do see Immigrant Art, they see it as the way forward in the contemporary art world, "The future of art in New York City will be driven by immigrants" (Beattie, 2006). Part of my work to highlight the Mexican population would not only make sure

they were seen, it would also incorporate their own participation with artwork as a way of inclusion, bridging and bonding.

Coming to America as a foreigner can be enlightening, but it may be impossible to ever be considered American if you are not born here. The Jews considered not being born here as a physical defect that "no surgeon in the world is capable of removing" (Takaki, 1993, p. 302). The language is different, habits are different. As a foreigner one particularly habit stands out loud and clear, the one of endless consumption. Takaki notes in his book that "by adapting to abundance, the immigrants were adopting America" (Takaki, 1993, p. 304). It is this strange addiction to collecting large amounts of "stuff" that was particularly highlighted in my own transition, and others who I have spoken to. I still feel sick going around Costco and only come away with one or two items every time I go to do a "big shop". When I moved into a house without a garage someone actually looked shocked and asked "where was I going to put all my stuff". Immigrants usually arrive in America with very little "stuff" and much of the rapid collection of it could come down to a need to feel they belong. As a social change agent who thinks our consumption and materialism has got way out of hand, I would also seek to promote art projects which highlighted a desire for a simple wholesome community life and draw attention to the people and not their belongings. This would be easily done through the SVAC as their focus is on small scale local farming and community building within the valley.

One other area I would like to address through an art based project is the notion of "White Privilege". As a social change agent and "white" I feel compelled to alert the rest of my dominant "white" community of their responsibility and power as privileged members to end

racial oppression. Many dominant groups are not even aware of their power or privilege as their "privilege insulates them from its consequences" (Johnson, 2001, p. 75). If they are aware of their privilege, they either don't feel it personally, are afraid of losing it, want to hold on to their prejudiced views, or are afraid to accept it, so do nothing with the power that comes with the privilege of waking up each morning and being white. Woodinville as a community is part of a "social system" that at the moment is trapped in the path of least resistance that continues to oppress racial minorities through the dominant group staying unaware and silent. As a Woodinville artist who is part of the dominant group I have the power, and responsibility, to help my community take the first step toward revolutionary change. Art is a door opener that yields an inviting and appealing method of communication that transcends all racial and class divisions. It can help "remove the barriers that keep well-intentioned members of dominant groups stuck in a place where they don't see themselves as part of the solution" (Johnson, 2001, p. 82). Any art project done would invite dialogue about difference while acting across it, thereby changing the way we think about it. Privilege is a difficult and sometimes painful subject to talk about, and art is an excellent way to reduce the risk of talking about it. Art has often been combined with politics to bring awareness of social injustices. When it does it is often referred to as disturbance art and artists that create it can be called "artists". "It's a reality that we don't like to look at, that's what an artist points out" (Illegal immigrants to cross border in specialty sneaks, 2005). Art projects will hopefully spur conversations on the controversial topics of privilege and immigration in a peaceful manner. Woodinville is perceived and culturally defined as white, in spite of the diversity of the population. This is because privileged groups are assumed to represent society as a whole (Johnson, 2001, p. 103).

At the moment many of the dominant privileged white population in Woodinville do not feel connected to the growing oppressed minority racial population and it leaves the community divided. Any art project with draw attention to the fact we are all part of the same community, stressing the fact "what effects one effects the other".

### Conclusion

My goal as a social change agent would be to bring the diverse population together into a united non-oppressive community. Working with the SVAC, I would utilize the power of art to transform the old vision many people still hold of the City into its new inclusive one inspired by Woodinville's founding mother Carol Edwards. This new healthy, diverse, fair community would invite and offer a warm welcome to immigrants of every ethnicity and economic position. As a privileged white immigrant artist residing in Woodinville I would devise art projects that focus on making the minority immigrants a visible part of the community. Art would not only highlight this growing population group, but include immigrant participation. Community bonding would occur through the process of producing art "all together" that tackled political subjects such as illegal immigration, white privilege and consumerism. By opening dialogue through creative exchange, awareness and understanding would stir interest rather than obligation. This would hopefully bring forth a responsibility towards individual action by privileged members of the community to end oppression as they begin to see that what effects one community member inevitably effects them.

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