

WORDS IN BLACK AND WHITE: REFLECTIONS FROM A WHITE STUDENT ATTENDING A HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGE

by Kimberly Smith

"I do not know which makes a man more conservative - to know nothing but the present, or nothing but the past." J.M. Keynes (1926)

Some people live each moment as if it were their last, drinking in each experience as if it were the very manna that their soul needed for subsistence and survival. Still others live in a world shrouded by the dark clouds of the past, the unresolved issues floating in their lives like angry, cumbersome, cumulus clouds - storms waiting for the opportunity to strike. There are those, of course, that live as if the now had no purpose, no meaning, as if the future is all that is relevant. These insatiable planners overlook the importance of the present, all the while planning for that which is yet to come. Progress means a delicate balancing act between the past, the present and the future. This is a foolhardy task not easily accomplished.

Education is not an easy task in itself, regardless of which college the focus is upon. Graduating from college requires the delicate balancing act of seeing the present requirements for what they are now and what they will mean in the future, all the while drawing upon the past as a reference source.

Drawing upon the experience I've gained from other colleges I've attended has led me to realize that definite distinctions can be made from one university to the next, particularly when the other universities are more culturally diverse. Is this due to race? Yes it is due to race; it is due to the fact that FSU is a historically black college. Other colleges I've attended were more integrated and provided a more culturally diverse experience. However, the other universities were larger, somehow colder, more alienating. The topics of debate, however, focused on a much broader scale of social, political, economic and class consciousness. This is logical in that the cultural mix added diversity to conversation.

At Fayetteville State I am dealing with a majority of black students and a minority of white students, and very few people of other races. Analytically speaking, it makes sense that topics would involve black issues and white issues. There is no problem in this. Blacks experienced a cultural debasing as a direct result of slavery, and are still experiencing the effects 128 years after the signing of the "Emancipation Proclamation." This act

supposedly abolished slavery.

Yet this proclamation did not free all slaves as some history teachers would have you believe. It excluded the slaves in the border states and in Southern areas under Union control, such as parts of Tennessee, Louisiana, and Virginia. This was left out of any history I was ever privy to. Is this due to race? Yes, you can bet it is. The fact that the proclamation strengthened the North's war effort was also overlooked in all of those somewhat biased history courses. By the end of the war more than 500,000 slaves fled behind Union lines and many of them joined the Union Army or worked as laborers for the Union Army. The Armed Forces and Navy enlisted almost 200,000 former slaves. These slaves helped the North win the war. All of these efforts eventually led to the 13th Amendment which freed slaves in all parts of the United States.

How many of you who are white were ever taught any of this in your history classes? If you were taught this, consider yourself the recipient of a historically accurate education. If you were simply told the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves, then it is time you did some self educating. Use Max Weber's process of *Verstehen* - interpretive understanding. You might try to put your white feet in the black man's shoes and possibly come away from the experience understanding some of the anger that is common to some blacks when discussing hot topics of debate.

Blacks are still trying to overcome the cultural debasing that occurred during slavery. Blacks are trying to regain self esteem and a lost culture. That is a fact. And, thus, the topic of slavery comes up often. There is no problem with this at all. The problem lies in the fact that blacks were not the only ones treated improperly in this country. (Stay with me now, you made it this far!)

Why isn't the plight of the Native American brought up? Could you imagine living somewhere for hundreds of years and read in history books today that a blue-blooded Englishman "discovered" your country? How about the other immigrants that came into this country, with little more than the shirt on their back and a family to feed? Why is this never brought up in class? Signs in businesses used to read "No Indians", "No Irish", "No Chinese" and on and on. Why is this never mentioned? It seems to always be a black-white issue. Why is this? Is it due to race? Yes it is. To fully benefit from the education process, it must be more culturally diverse. The plights of all people of color, or country must be given equal time. If not, history is being slanted again, only this time it is not being slanted by the system set up by the ever powerful white male.

One of the things the black man/woman is fighting for is truth. Do not in turn make the same mistakes by biasing the truths as they have been

biased before you. Yes, it is important that black history be taught to whites, white history to blacks, and the history of others to both. Everything does not have to be a black-white issue. There are a rainbow of issues out there. They all need to be touched upon.

Even the media is biased. Blacks are portrayed in the media as being the root of the drug problem and, of course, the major arteries of the welfare system. This is not true. Wake up. Why can't we talk about this in class also? I have had the pleasure of some open minded debate in a certain sociology class in which the professor does allow all sides to be presented. It may be a struggle for many blacks out there, but it is a struggle for whites as well. There are more whites on welfare and food stamps than blacks. Look at the statistics. Whites need to quit portraying blacks as vampires of the system and blacks need to realize they are not the only group with economic or social problems. Drugs are equal opportunity destroyers. They do not discriminate due to race, religion or creed. Poverty cares not what the color of your skin may be. She has no qualms about inflicting her burden wherever she will.

Open your heart, open your mind; see the forest and the trees at the same time. Those of you who are professors, and in a position of authority, open up your curriculum. Make it a point to cover more than just black and white issues. Those of you who are students, demand that you get perspective from more than just a black and white snapshot in time. Mention issues, be vocal, get a culturally rounded education. If they disagree, the worst that can happen is they will take your student ID. And if your picture looks anything like mine, you would be glad to let them have it back.

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from people, Van Sertima queries, "So many people have mastered the bible. Why can't we master history?"

Brought up in the jungles of Guyana, "similar to the ones(jungles) in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," Van Sertima remembers the first movie he saw. Watching Indians run from "John Wayne" and "Ronald Reagan," the young Van Sertima began to realize that Indians and blacks were second class citizens in their own country. Van Sertima struggled with this 'second-class citizenship.' He entered college in London at age 28. After much study he found that the medicine, astronomy, and science of Africans had happened 300 years before Christ. Many African achievements have been wiped out. Yet, Van Sertima has gone to great lengths to restructure our past.

Van Sertima's slide presentations present compelling evidence to disprove the Columbus myth. Photographs of statues found in Mexico and other Latin American countries depict heads with broad noses,

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thick lips, and 'kinky' hair. Also found were designs similar to Egyptian culture in which he head is considered the seed of consciousness. This corroborates the prevalence of statues and busts modeled after great African warriors, kings, and queens.

Stoneheads found in Mexico attest to the similarities between Mexican and African culture. The stoneheads depict dual crowns indicative of African influence. The Egyptian use of birds and serpents on crowns is also demonstrated in Mexican culture.

The African attempt to influence Mexican culture is evident in the existence of pyramids in Mexico. Pyramids, originally built in Egypt, were geologically impossible to build in Mexico. Thus, many turned out in irregular shapes due to soil erosion.

"Only through history you can remake the world and learn that you're not second-class citizens." History can be used as a guide to help the future, and Van Sertima's research has enabled us to piece together the lost history of man. Van Sertima believes "the race of man is only just beginning."

Dr. Ivan Van Sertima was educated at the School of Oriental and African Studies at London University and Rutgers Graduate School. He holds degrees in African Studies, Linguistics, and Anthropology and has made a name for himself in all three fields. He's Associate Professor of African Studies at Rutgers University and also Visiting Professor at Princeton University. He is Editor of the Journal of African Civilizations which he founded in 1979. Professor Van Sertima has lectured at various settings all over the world. On July 7, 1987, he appeared before Congress to challenge the Columbus myth.

Dr. Ivan Van Sertima spoke at FSU on Nov.12 in the Shaw Auditorium.