

Of Fields and Fissures: Facing Diversity and Leveling the Playing Field

by Don Gregorio Antón

Please, for a moment, imagine a field . . .

A place where you have been before. Where feelings and thoughts have drifted over long distances. Where you held a hand, faced a fear or found yourself when absence was required. For some, the field is not of grass but of sand or concrete . . . of empty lots or busy streets where one would bloody a knee, brake a promise, or loose a bet. For others, the field belonged to those those they would never meet. It was used for school events, for competitions of strength and beauty.

Here, on ground passed over by others, we found identities defined by those who would define us. Here we gained our perspective of worth to the teams, to the cliques, to those who would exclude and include by that thin layer that characterizes us all. Upon some fields we were easy targets of definition, maimed by weight or disability, by the color of hair or its length, by words hung with accent or clarity. Here, great fissures would open, stresses created above and below ground, where one could fight, surrender, or dismiss their presence from others.

To me, the field would always define the belief I had in it. It would be affected by teachers who were taught by teachers, who were taught by teachers. By institutions that would create variations of its content, and likewise exclude and include those who might participate within its structures. My education came from this. As for many, it was defined by what we believed others were qualified to decide for us, and its structure would shadow much of our lives. Inevitably, these institutions would demonstrate the limitations of choice, exclusivity, and the foundations of safe repetition. Here, others would feel less represented and find voices and features unlike their own.

I write of these things, believing that the “playing field” on which diversity will be conducted will never be leveled or fair for most. Its terrain is far from flat or even, its size is vast and unfamiliar to those who enter. This will never change. The field only reflects the activity played upon it and the games are complex and ever changing. Rather, I believe in the players. Those who enter honestly bringing their own uniqueness - whose diversity adds to what exists and changes it slightly.

If we look at how institutionalized the “playing field” has become, we can easily see a lineage of prescribed use . . . of conditions and limitations. One would only have to look at how one is initiated into the process to participate within its structure. Here, a question emerges. How do we exist in a place that was not created by us or for us?

This is a very real issue when it comes to diversity, and it’s something we tend to overlook in an educational system or professional environments that was not created with diversity in mind. These institutions have been built on historic information, but what happens when history has not recorded a diverse representation of others? How will it define, educate, or accurately translate the contributions of those missing on the walls and from the classrooms of our institutions? It will do what it has done. It will reluctantly celebrate the days and months given over for such

things as Day of the Dead, Black History Month, and Asian Heritage Week, missing out on the lesser-known ceremonies of life that affect the disabled, the elderly, or the queer. We will know little of those without proper identification. Lost will be those good examples others would have sought to build upon, inspirations sacrificed by those left uninspired. Yet, what will we learn from a culture that misinterprets others? That has learned indifference from indifferent institutions? That assumes the cracks that many of us fell through are no longer present? We learn nothing but the vast distances that apathy creates between those who need each other most.

Let us address a statement made by the co-chairs of the 2010 Society for Photographic Education's national conference, **Facing Diversity: Leveling the Playing Field in the Photographic Arts**. Hannah Frieser and Miriam Romais passionately write, "Ask a photography student for the names of five photographers of diverse backgrounds and they will probably fumble."

I will take this one step further and ask the same of photography instructors. Is it because we too have been limited by the limits of others? By that same lineage of prescribed use that passes on only what has been deemed credible and valid through books and museums? If so, do we not limit those in our charge? Will they only recognize what we recognized? Can we risk the chance of limiting them to what defines current trends of copied technical expertise, theories and subject matter? I fear this, as I fear most things that blindly duplicate. From the classrooms of elementary students whose paintings can only be distinguished by their signatures, to the graduate seminars where combined works appear to be created by a single entity. It is that hollow gesture belonging, of being what others wish you to be, that has cemented us into conformity.

This is why I believe diversity is at such a disadvantage. It takes something different and unique to see what is not like everything else. Something that stretches beyond the familiar, that challenges the traditional boundaries and descriptions of acceptance, something that stretches beyond the familiar and challenges the traditional boundaries of acceptance. It takes something we forget to cover in class, something that falls outside the safe confines of the curriculum. It takes courage: a quality of mind or spirit that sets one apart. It takes something that defines our commitment to ourselves, something that cannot be copied or memorized. Courage allows one that chance to go beyond the teacher, the priest, or the parent. It permits brave actions to expand and encompass brave thought that is not deterred by acceptance but is sustained by a determination and persistence of being. If we look to this then we come to an understanding of what diversity is all about: distinction.

Diversity will only be inclusive when exclusivity is sacrificed for the sake of those who may create change. For the lone and frightened, the emerging lesbian or the student with the hard exterior and gentle core, we need to prepare a path that will consider their unique contributions as valid, and their experiences essential to others.

The "playing field" will only change when the players change and from them will come a future of writers and curators, of teachers and artists committed to seeing change come to others. If this is to be accomplished in any meaningful way, then maybe the student in the wheel chair will not feel so confined, the shy or emotional student will feel that much closer to those around them. After all, student knowledge is the beginning of the world's wisdom.

I know you think of these things from time to time. I know that you weigh the fairness of the world that surrounds what you have created. You have more than likely faced the frustrations of exclusion, of trends that turn directly opposite of your beliefs. All I can say is that none of us are alone when it comes to meeting at a table where not everyone is fed. Yet is this not our time for change? Could we not attempt to consolidate our energy to assist one another in working out these issues of diversity? You are here, as I am, and I believe that it is time that we feed ourselves from what each of us brings to the table.

In the end, I appreciate you taking the time to read these thoughts, to consider their substance regardless of judgment or belief. The issues I describe are far wider than I could possibly define in this space and they will continue to be discussed long after we are gone. The important thing I would wish you to remember is not the issues of diversity but the field you first imagined. For some it no longer exists, replaced by a home or factory. For others it now pales in size from the memories it holds. Yet, it is still there filled with light and those individuals who mattered most. Consider where it was and what it meant and know that what made it special was your access to it. Any field is only as important as those who were allowed to play upon it.

E N F O C O

Dedicated to cultural diversity in photography.

En Foco is a non-profit organization that nurtures and supports contemporary fine art and documentary photographers of diverse cultures, primarily U.S. residents of Latino, African and Asian heritage, and Native Peoples of the Americas and the Pacific.

En Foco has remained a leader in documenting the artistic journeys created by artists often overlooked by the mainstream art world. Through our visual arts programs, including *Nueva Luz* photographic journal, artists are free to explore or reinvent cultural traditions, challenge preconceived notions, and engage audiences in a manner that honors all.