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April 26th, 2022
4:30pm-5:30pm
Beck Hall 101

CHALLENGING THE “CENTER” IN LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN THE USA

The Dagara people of West Africa (Ghana, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire) have a proverb which loosely translated into English says that if a farmer is late in weeding their farm, it does not mean that the farmer’s family will starve. With time, all the farm work will be done within the farming season, and they will get the farm yield that they expect. The meaning of the proverb is that it is not because a plan is delayed that it will never be accomplished. It was about two years ago that I was invited to give this talk. However, it never happened because of the COVID situation. The farmer was late in weeding his farm, but he has eventually come round to accomplishing it.

Thank you, President Bergman, for your generous introduction. And thank you to Dean Kubek for considering me as someone worthy of giving this talk. Thank you to everyone for coming.

In my research work, one of the things I do is collecting proverbs in context. Not just recording proverbs in the abstract for publication—as was and is still done by some researchers—but recording proverbs only when they are uttered in some social context. The meaning of a proverb varies, based on the context in which it is used. When I did some research work that involved collecting and studying proverbs in context among the Dagara people, I recorded a proverb that was uttered by a young male praise singer at a funeral. In Dagara culture, female

praise singers perform at weddings. It is their domain, and no male can enter that space.

Likewise, male praise singers have their domain, which is performing at funerals. We call them praise singers, but they are entitled to, and they do sing insults, depending on how they think the deceased person was treated by their relatives during their lifetime. They chant their praises or insults in proverbs and other types of symbolic language. The young praise singer was urged on to perform because people like his chanting. There are normally two praise singers who perform as a team, and this must be done in tune with the xylophone and drum music. The young praise singer declined to perform. He excused himself because according to him, he was not worthy of performing in the presence of more experienced, astute, elderly praise singers. He would rather defer to them, and he expressed this through a proverb. That was his gesture of humility, but also of respect for the elderly and more experienced. When I was invited to give this lecture, I wondered why someone else who is more worthy was not picked to do it. Anyway, I humbly accepted the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on why I believe we need to challenge what I call the “center” in liberal arts education in the USA. Whenever I use the words “center” and “peripheries”, they are in quotation marks.

Commenting on how liberal arts education should be viewed and practiced, Marvin Krislov, former president of Oberlin College, and currently president of Pace University observes that things have changed over the past decade, but that one thing hasn't: “the value of a liberal arts education”. He goes on to argue that liberal arts education “is the best preparation a young person can have for the job market and a rewarding meaningful life as a citizen of democracy”. It is also significant that he acknowledges that in spite of this, liberal arts education finds itself

under attack more often than was the case in the past, and he attributes this to a failure to communicate. That liberal arts institutions need to better articulate what they do, and why it is important for the country and the world. I applaud him for stressing that the true worth of a liberal arts education “is measured not in dollars but in meaningful lives lived”. I want to argue that “meaningful lives” are lived when liberal arts institutions have the courage and the sincerity to challenge the “center” that persistently delights in creating “peripheries”. Let me pause and say that I have always wondered who came up with the concept of “third world”. Which god (with a small “g”) created the three worlds? The capitalist god, the socialist god, or the communist god? I ask this question, because such nomenclatures speak volumes about what I call the “center” and the “periphery” in liberal arts education.

There has been a lot of writing, speeches, and theorizing on the notion of liberal arts education in the American system. Let me start by using a metaphor to express my understanding of what a liberal arts education means, and I will use a metaphor derived from the culture of my people, the Dagara. We have a saying that the human being is like a pumpkin plant. We Africans have an enduring respect for the value of the sense of collectivity. The individual is expected to sacrifice their personal interest for the good of the community. It does not mean that we don't value individual valor. On the contrary we do. However, individual achievement does not have much meaning if it does not serve the ultimate interest of the community at large. The Dagara people believe that human beings are all interrelated in one way or the other, and the extended family and clan system makes this possible. The pumpkin plant has tendrils that spread all over the ground. Human beings are interconnected the way the pumpkin plant

spreads on the ground. Likewise, in my view liberal arts education creates opportunities for students to make connections among disciplines like the metaphoric pumpkin plant. If part of the plant is missing, that liberal arts education has lacunae. This is the reason why I chose to talk about the concept of “center” and “periphery” in liberal arts education in the USA. I want to share my thoughts on what I consider to be the marginalization of certain parts of the world in liberal arts education in this country. It is at the same time a reflection on why we need to educate students on how “centers” and “peripheries” are created through hegemonic social and political discourses in societies. In order to do both of these in my talk, I am proposing that we must challenge the “center” in liberal arts curricula.

There is a famous Malian sociologist called Amadou Hampaté Bâ who uttered a piece of wisdom that is often quoted. He said it in French [“en Afrique, un vieillard qui meurt, c’est une bibliothèque qui brûle”] but the English translation would be: “In Africa, an elderly person who dies is a library that burns down”. We cherish the wisdom of our elders. I want to believe that even though liberal arts students are not taking courses with elders as it is understood in the African context, a liberal arts education encourages them to look for these libraries and to protect them from burning down. When we create “centers” and “peripheries”, we are metaphorically preventing our students from enjoying the knowledge from the metaphorical library that should not burn down. In African culture for instance, we cherish the wisdom of elderly women, and indeed women in general—in spite, of what some uninformed Westerners might think. So, I ask the question. How many feminist theories that inform our teaching in these liberal arts institutions draw at least some knowledge from African, Asian, Latin American

oral traditions that come to us from women? Why do the sources of these theories have to come from only the “center” (Western culture) all the time, and exclude the rich oral cultures of the “periphery”? In the 1980s, when AIDS was a pandemic in certain African communities, as was the case in other parts of the world, women in those African communities were some of the first people to create songs that were very educative. This has been the case recently with the COVID pandemic. Women in the community from which I come, created some very educative songs. These songs usually become household songs. They are more effective in educating people on COVID protocols than the advertisements that are produced in European and other languages for radio and television. There are no “centers” and “peripheries” when it comes to God-endowed wisdom that benefits humanity. Does our liberal arts education expose students to critical thinking that does not exclude the experiences of these illiterate women that I am talking about? When we talk about the creation of theories that inform our scholarship, there is a tendency to treat oral societies as *tabula rasa* that do not produce theories. But oral societies such as those of the African continent have always produced theories long before the contact of Africans with Europeans and the imposition of European languages on Africans. The wisdom that comes from folktales, proverbs, riddles, folk songs, are sources for the creation of theories. Africans were creating theories in our traditional folklore before the advent of European education, and before Europeans started creating theories which they claimed were universally applicable and relevant in the African context.

For me, liberal arts education is a process of knowledge acquisition and experience which is very incomplete and not completely authentic when it marginalizes what can challenge the

creative minds of young students, because it has excluded certain parts of the world. It is about how humans interconnect through courses that they take with perfect strangers throughout their education, and also how in the process they must think of giving themselves the opportunity to take courses that help foster a better understanding of the world in which we live. Our liberal arts courses should serve as the tendrils of the pumpkin plant in this endeavor to mold a young person who when they graduate would understand better why each of the branches of the pumpkin needs the other branches, to be able to create a plant that is called a pumpkin, and which can provide food as it should. The courses in the different disciplines are more meaningful when the student can approach what we all call the enduring challenges of our contemporary world through knowledge acquired in different disciplines. How can we seriously inculcate in our students a sense of the importance of enduring problems of the world, if most of what we are doing is perpetuating in their psyche the monopolized discourse of the “center”?

Let me use again an example from my research work that involved collecting proverbs in context. One lady who was excited about riding her new motorcycle to an event was being discouraged by her friends and relatives. They told her that it was not a safe thing to do, because she was still learning how to ride a motorcycle well in the rugged terrain of village paths. She dismissed their concerns by using a proverb to express her feelings about how they did not seem to have any confidence in her. She entreated them to allow the leper (a handicapped person) to bathe her baby without any help. There are stereotypes that a leper is too handicapped to be able to bathe her own baby. Her proverb is saying that the leper would

never know how to bathe her baby if she never tried to do it herself. She will find a way to do it if she tries and does it several times. How can the college student get to understand the world the way we expect if he or she does not get out of the comfort zone and plunge into taking courses that do not necessarily have anything to do with his or her major? The college student who seems to have interest in only one discipline cannot be a fully educated person without having the courage to ride that proverbial new motorcycle: that is to say, without venturing into terrains that are unknown to them that are likely to challenge the way others have presented the world to them.

There has been a lot of writing on the concept of the liberal arts. I titled my talk the way I did because I want to challenge how liberal arts education might be promoting only the old canons. Students in liberal arts colleges might be taking courses outside their majors, most often to satisfy general education requirement. We applaud them for taking advantage of what the liberal arts curriculum provides students in terms of courses. However, we might still be failing in one aspect—which is, that their education is characterized by what the “center” provides, in terms of choice of courses but also in terms of the content of those courses. Excuse me to say this. I teach in a liberal arts college which happens to be a church-related institution. So, I am not afraid to invoke God in this context. We Africans believe that a Supreme God created the world, in his own image, much like what we have in Christianity. God did not create a world with a “center” and a “periphery”. He simply created a world. It is we human beings who have re-created the world in our own image and given it a big “center” with artificial “peripheries”.

The liberal arts curriculum of an institution might look wonderful because it provides opportunities for students to contemplate the world with a critical mind. Yet, in the process it might also only be promoting only what the “center” determines is worth learning. Parts of the world such as Africa, certain parts of Asia, or Latin America might only feature—deliberately or otherwise—as peripheral in the curriculum of the institution that taunts its excellent liberal arts curriculum.

The Dagara people have a saying that when you agree to babysit a child you don’t need to ask for the name of the child. The reason is that you will have ample time to get to know that child, so why be in a hurry to learn what the name is. A meaningful liberal arts education gives an opportunity to students to get to know that proverbial baby really well. How can the liberal arts student be a good babysitter if the “center” imposes only one type of baby with only certain character traits, making it impossible for the babysitter to ever experience the joy of babysitting other types of babies. Liberal arts curricula must challenge this hegemony of the “center”.

Liberal arts students can only know the baby well when they are not deprived of opportunities to learn about parts of the world that were marginalized in their high school curriculum. I mean parts of the world that are often portrayed by American journalists as communities that are not worth learning about; but are only worth talking about when they can take pleasure in stereotyping them in their own image. Think of how a whole continent of 54 countries comprising thousands of ethnic groups and languages, is often represented in American media. A good liberal arts education is one which prepares graduates to question the values engrained in how we represent cultures and societies other than our own.

A good liberal arts education encourages students to reflect on enduring questions such as why there is occasionally a drought in Eastern Africa or Western Africa. It means giving students the opportunity to take courses in geography, literature, and the sciences for instance that help them to appreciate some realities: that for instance the people who live in these regions don't sometimes experience famine because they are not hard-working farmers or because they simply are not capable of acquiring knowledge that can help them. Geographers explain to us that there is something called the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ). ITCZ "represents a meteorological dynamic whereby large-scale airflows from generally opposite directions and converge, creating a relatively constant updraft of displaced air" (Gordon 10). They tell us that the ITCZ is the primary rainmaking mechanism not only in Africa but throughout the tropical world. The migration of the ITCZ is crucial for the delivery of rainfall to almost all of sub-Saharan Africa and gives most of the continent its wet and dry seasons. I would like to believe that the literature or the religion major who takes a course that exposes students to such knowledge, and who works for some NGO or for the USAID for instance would be in a better position to understand how the lives of Africans are often predicated on the hazards of nature that are beyond their control. The liberal arts graduate who ventured into the forest of ideas and critical thinking during their college education would challenge stereotypes about Africans. The current generation of students were not born when in the 1980s famous musicians such as Michael Jackson and others produced the music album "We are the World", in order to raise funds to help starving people of Ethiopia. Should we not give them opportunities to take courses in geography, geology, literature, and other disciplines that challenge them to ask critical thinking

questions about why it happened and how the world reacted? How else can liberal arts students deconstruct stereotypes about people who live in those parts of the world? Should those courses not be drawing examples from places in Africa? Should we not challenge students to understand better how being comfortable with their immediate world is not enough? We cannot do that in liberal arts education without challenging the “center”. Because the “center” wants to marginalize those parts of the world.

Africa is often portrayed as a basket of problems. Should liberal arts education not provide opportunities for students to reflect on why that is the case? My argument is that a liberal arts education is more meaningful when it deconstructs the monopoly of the “center” in determining what is worthy of learning. When students take courses and understand these enduring challenges of the world, their intellectual experience, and their subsequent work experience after graduation from college shatters the artificial “peripheries” that have been created by the “center”. Such a student would understand the reaction of Liberians during their years of civil war. When George Bush (son) was president, enraged Liberians in the capital city Monrovia piled corpses in front of the American embassy, because according to them the USA had the military might to intervene and to stop the civil war in the country. So, one might ask, why the USA? It is important for American students to understand the special relationship between Liberia and the USA. The country was founded by freed African slaves from the USA. Its capital Monrovia was named after the American president James Monroe who was a supporter of sending freed Black slaves and ex-Caribbean slaves to Liberia. The country uses the Liberian dollar alongside the American dollar, and its flag is very similar to the American flag.

What is the relevance of all this to my topic? Liberal arts education should provide an opportunity to American students to understand this important story, for them to appreciate the cultural and political relationship between the USA and some African countries. Some of those liberal arts graduates work for the State Department which makes important decisions that affect directly the lives of millions of Africans. Liberal arts students need to be furnished with the tools to understand why there are so many Liberian immigrants in this country. Why they chose to emigrate to the USA instead of another country. Some Liberians came here during their country's civil war. I come from a country (Ghana) that had a whole refugee camp for Liberians and Sierra Leonians sponsored by the UNO. Some of those refugees decided to settle permanently in Ghana after the civil wars in their respective countries were over. If we don't challenge the "center" in our liberal arts curricula, such knowledge would be considered peripheral, of no significance to American students.

Liberal arts education encourages students to reflect on the reasons for conflicts such as the Liberian and Sierra Leonian civil wars. Gold and diamond which are cherished by citizens of the rich countries were a factor in these wars. The African Studies program three years ago had a speaker from the Democratic Republic of Congo—Mr. Kubisa. Incidentally, two of his daughters graduated from Gustavus last year. In his talk, he educated his audience on the correlation between the protracted war in that country—unfortunately nicknamed Africa's World War III—and for instance the precious metals that are used in cell phones—technology that we all use. Courses that draw examples from Africa educate students to understand how the conflict in the DRC has been driven by the quest for the precious minerals that the country is cursed to have.

When Africa is considered only a periphery in our liberal arts curricula, students have no opportunity to contemplate such important issues. Chinua Achebe in his novel *Things Fall Apart* uses an epigraph which he borrows from a line of Yeats' poem which says, "the falcon cannot hear the falconer". When liberal arts institutions push Africa to the periphery, the falcon cannot hear the falconer. There is no dialogue between the "center" and the "periphery" in students' education.

Mentioning Chinua Achebe leads me to other examples of the notion of "center" and "periphery". Achebe wrote his novel *Things Fall Apart* as a reaction to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. *Heart of Darkness* is a typical British, European, novel of 1899 which sought to portray Africa as a dark continent populated by people who did not have any civilization. One of the reasons why Europeans went to Africa was that they pontificated to themselves that they were saviors who had the God-given mission to "civilize" Africans. Hegel said that Africans did not have any history. I wonder how a human being who breathes in oxygen and breathes out carbon dioxide would not have a history. In a speech in 1963, a Regius Professor of Modern History at University of Oxford called Hugh Trevor-Roper unambiguously and unashamedly proclaimed to an audience on the BBC that "perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. But at this time there is none—there is only the history of the Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness". He went on to say, "I do not deny that men existed in dark countries and dark centuries", but for him history was the story of winners. As philosophy professor Kwame Anthony Appiah observed in his review of a book in the *New York Review of Books* in 1998 (December 17, 1998), Trevor-Roper was echoing what Hegel in his *Philosophy of*

History had said about Africa not being a “historical continent”. Is it not lamentable that a university professor who had so much impact on the young minds that he taught would make such a miserable racist proclamation? By 1962, many African countries had gained independence from their European colonizers. Ghana was the first country south of the Sahara to gain independence, and that was in 1957. Guinea challenged French hegemony by voting “no” in the referendum that was organized by French Head of State General de Gaulle in 1958 to determine which of its colonies wanted to stay in the so-called French Union or become independent. The rest of the African countries that were under the yoke of French colonialism gained their independence in 1960. All this before the proclamation by the British university professor in that foul language about Africans. So, for this university professor, people have a history only when they are the victims of shameful European colonial hegemony. The same people who had transported millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean as goods to help in the industrialization of the Americas and Europe. By the way, when these Europeans held their absurd idea of what they called a “civilizing mission” in their imperialist bid, who was more civilized? The community that lived on its own land, organized, and had its socio-political system, and minded its own business, or the community of people who traveled thousands of miles from their homeland to brutalize these people, take over some of their lands and even submit them to slavery? Who was more civilized, I ask? Liberal arts students should be given opportunities to do some critical thinking on these encounters. This cannot happen unless we challenge the “center” in liberal arts curricula.

The discourse of the university professor (Trevor) reminds me of what in the Bible people said about Jesus. What good can come out of Nazareth, they teased? I am not comparing Africans to Jesus. That would be blasphemy on the part of someone who is a practicing Catholic. But I am reflecting on how Europeans wondered in their warped minds what good could come from what they called the Dark Continent. Let us encourage liberal arts students to question the discourse of the “center” vis-à-vis the “periphery” that it has created in dubious manners.

Liberal arts education in this country must challenge the enduring impact of this type of discourse that was uttered in 1962 by Trevor-Roper, because it is poisonous for young minds in liberal and not-so-liberal institutions. Trevor-Roper’s discourse of power should not be allowed to endure in the 21st century. But unfortunately, it still lingers around in both subtle and unsubtle ways. The literary world applauded Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin when in 1989 they published a book titled *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. The thrust of their argument in that book is a critique of Eurocentric notions of language and literature. The way in which postcolonial voices responded to the literary canons of the colonial center. Do you know that in African universities up to the 1960s, literary curricula were all about Western literature? Our students learned a great deal about Shakespeare in the English literature classes, and Molière in their French literature classes. There was nothing about Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, or other African writers. That is why the Kenyan writer Ngugi Wa Thiongo in his speeches and writings called for what he called a “decolonization” of the African mind. Things have since changed in the curricula of African universities. I want to advocate that we need a decolonization of minds in the curricula of

liberal arts institutions in this country. It cannot be done as long as we allow the centrifugal forces of the “center” to subsume the “voices” of the periphery that it has created. Courses on non-Western cultures should never be treated as a token that makes an institution look liberal and welcoming. Our liberal arts institutions must teach students to question why non-Western cultural artifacts and knowledge still tend sometimes to be treated as exotic, strange, enjoyable because they look bewildering. How much do our liberal arts graduates seriously examine what they consume academically and through popular culture about this idea of the exotic. What Edward Said a long time ago called Orientalism.

Anyway, to come back to Chinua Achebe. His novel *Things Fall Apart* is a deconstruction of the sort of discourse that Europeans such as Conrad created about Africans. A liberal arts education invites students to take courses that would challenge them to contemplate how they would react if they were in the shoes of Africans. After all, stereotypes about Africans did not stop after the decolonization of the continent. Indeed, they took on different dimensions, and different types of language and discourses in our contemporary times. The Western world invented Africa in its own image. Valentine Mudimbe wrote a book he titled *The Invention of Africa*. Indeed, the invention of Africa started with the first contact of Europeans with Africans far back in the 15th century and even earlier. In parenthesis, we all know that Christopher Columbus landed in this part of the world in 1492—an important date in the history of contact between the native peoples of this area and Europeans. Well, this Columbus man between 1482 and 1485 traded along the Guinea and Gold Coasts in West Africa; and made at least one voyage to the Portuguese fortress of São Jorge da Mina (Elmina) in Ghana. That was before he

and his people sailed to the Americas. I have always known for a long time this history of my country. That contact between Columbus and the native people along the coast of Ghana in an area that came to be called Elmina (a Portuguese-derived name) was the beginning of an encounter which was supposed to be for trade but turned into the infamous trans-Atlantic slave trade. The forts and castles dotted along not less than 500 miles of the coast of the Gold Coast (current Ghana), changed hands between the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English, the Swedes, and the Danes between the 16th and the 19th centuries. No well-educated African would deny the role played by some of the coastal and hinterland people in the inhumane slave trade. Because they sold war captives and other people to the Europeans. That does not in any way diminish the role of Europeans in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. We have two huge slave castles in Ghana—Cape Coast Castle and Elmina Castle, and they are UNESCO historical sites. When I took students for my J-Term course in Ghana many years ago, we visited those castles. The students were from Gustavus, St. John's University, College of St. Catherine, and University of Saint Thomas. We don't give students such an experience because we want them to feel some guilt. Far from it. Such an experience offers them an opportunity to critically reflect on what the "center" sometimes deprives them of in their liberal arts education. A meaningful liberal arts education must challenge the "center". Indeed, a course on Africa can also address (as I often do in a course that I teach in English—Introduction to Africa) the discourse of "center" and "periphery" in the relationship between the ethnic groups of an African country. The Africans who benefited from the slave trade belonged to powerful kingdoms which were supplied arms by the Europeans, and this facilitated the devastation of communities through wars, and the capture of slaves by slave traders. Our grandparents told us horrifying stories of

how relatives were captured by these slave traders, and how they could not figure out what would happen to the slave captives. The same ethnic groups in Ghana that participated in this inhumane endeavor are the same ones who continue to exercise what I deem to be hegemonic power over other ethnic groups. It plays out in politics, and generally in the development of the country. When the British colonized my country, they named it Gold Coast, because they loved our gold so much. But then, they went on to steal all our gold, so after independence we changed the name of the country to Ghana!¹ Anyway, the British had it as a policy to not establish any formal schools in the northern part of the country where I come from. Why? Because they wanted the northerners to provide cheap labor in the mines and the cocoa farms in southern Ghana. Ghana was the number one producer of cocoa in the world. Currently, it is the number two producer of cocoa in the world, behind our neighbor Côte d'Ivoire. The Catholic missionaries who came to our area through North Africa in the 1930s clashed with the British colonialists on this obnoxious discriminatory policy. They are called the White Fathers or the Missionaries of Africa. These Catholic missionaries went on to establish schools and clinics in our region. Most of us from my region owe it to the Catholic church for the formal education that we had the chance to receive. Because, even after independence of the country, the government schools were few. Very often, in talking about Christian missionary activities in Africa, there is a tendency to highlight only the complicity of Christian missionaries with colonizers such as what occurred in the Central African region where the Belgians established

¹ This statement is merely meant as humor for my audience. Actually, it was the first president of the country who at independence, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, gave it a decolonized name, Ghana—derived from the name of a famous ancient West African kingdom. However, it does not diminish the reality that the British were supremely interested in the gold of the country, and that they did exploit it to their benefit.

one of the cruelest forced labor systems. It permitted European forced labor supervisors to cut off the limbs of Africans, in order to demonstrate to their superiors that they were tough on the Africans. Yet, at the same time the European Christian missionaries saw it as their duty to teach Africans to accept the teachings of the Bible and to be docile. This is not what occurred in the part of the country that I come from. Liberal arts education should avoid the telling of single stories. Students should hear multiple stories and do their own critical thinking over those stories. This would not happen if we did not challenge the “center” which controls liberal arts curricula. The point I am making here is that there is a danger in this center-periphery dynamics. It’s about social justice that is so dear in liberal arts education. The example about my own country is to illustrate how we can even use the experiences of communities outside the USA to demonstrate to students how nefarious it is when we create “centers” and “peripheries”, and in the process deny people of not only learning opportunities but also social justice.

Europeans were interested in Africa for all kinds of reasons, and one of them was what they called a “civilizing mission”. They did not call Africa the Dark Continent because of the color of the people who inhabit that continent. They called it so because for them the continent and its peoples were a mystery. They invented an Africa in their own image, culminating in the 1884/85 Berlin Conference (organized by Bismark). A conference at which of course there was no Black African representation, and during which the European colonizers partitioned Africa among themselves, like the carcass of a huge elephant. Apparently, during their deliberations, they spoke fluent French. And I am also sure they drank a lot of wine and champagne. How else

can you explain how a group of Europeans would impose some border line between the village of my paternal grandmother and that of my paternal and maternal grandfathers, in such a way that one village would be part of a French colony and the other part of a British colony? You cannot do that unless you drink too much wine. This is not banal history, and our liberally educated students should be given an opportunity to do critical thinking on this phenomenon. They should be educated on how the actions of the wine-drinking Europeans in 1884/1885 has made it difficult for contemporary West African States to create a common currency that would enormously enhance the economic policies of what is called the Economic Community of West African States. It has been made difficult because France controls the common currency of French-speaking West African countries—called the CFA—and has for the past decades done everything to stifle economic and political unity between the francophone and the anglophone countries of the continent. This is how the “center” exercises hegemonic power. A liberal arts education should give students the opportunity to reflect on such phenomena. Students cannot learn about everything in the world. Their professors don’t know everything about their world. However, if we do not challenge the “center”, the artificial “peripheries” that it creates can only perpetuate the control of what knowledge it deems worthy for American students.

What happened when Haiti gained independence from France in 1804 after the slaves’ army won the battle with France? The African slaves started a Revolution in 1791. In 1793 they declared abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. On February 4th 1794, the decision was ratified by a national convention which extended the abolition to all France’s overseas colonies. Even though Napoléon Bonaparte revoked this decision in 1802, it had no consequence on Saint-

Domingue. In 1804, Saint-Domingue proclaimed its independence and gave itself its former native name of Haiti. But Haiti's independence was only recognized by Charles X in 1825, with a *sine qua non* condition (listen to this) that Haiti pay an indemnity of 150 million francs, in order to compensate the former slave and property owners who had to flee the island between the beginning of the Revolution in 1791 and the declaration of independence in 1804—payable in five annual terms. This arrangement kept Haiti in a constant state of debt and placed France in a position of power over Haiti's trade and finances. This is hegemony of the "center" over the "periphery". If liberal arts institutions do not recognize the importance of such knowledge for our students, we must challenge the "center". Yet, in this example, we must tell all the stories. We must give France credit for what it has done in more recent times. The "*loi Taubira*" of 2001 made France the first country to recognize slavery and slave trade as crimes against humanity.

A liberal arts education must interrogate hegemonic discourses—and if it does not do that, it is merely reinforcing the discursive practices of the "center" that are to the detriment of the "peripheries" that it has created. We can, and we do discuss what is called the "Code Noir" [Black Code] in our French courses here at Gustavus. I have recently discussed this history in my fourth semester French class. I have even discussed this to a lesser degree in my second semester French course this semester. The Black Code's sixty articles regulated the life, death, purchase, religion, and treatment of slaves by their masters in all French colonies. Among other things, it provided that the slaves should be baptized and educated in the Catholic faith.

In a country that over the years has been the destination for thousands of Haitian immigrants, and in the context of contemporary heated political and social debates on immigration, liberal arts institutions have a moral responsibility to equip students with knowledge to participate in these discussions with well-informed minds. They should be equipped to know how to challenge the “center” with the requisite academic knowledge. They should know that there are other Revolutions apart from the French and the American Revolutions. They should also learn about the American Invasion and Occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934, following the assassination of the Haitian president in July 1915. Students would be better equipped in their critical thinking on immigration and other debates, because they would not be ignorant of these historical events that concern their own country.

I mentioned Mudimbe’s book titled *The Invention of Africa*. Indeed, in another book which he titled *The Idea of Africa*, he asserts that scholarly work from the 1920s to the 1940s questioned the universality of the Western experience and its will to truth in a critical reappraisal. He writes: “The concept of history metamorphosed itself...and it became possible to restore the past of non-Occidental cultures independent of Western presence”. Twenty-first century liberal arts education in the USA must provide students with the tools to interrogate discourses with a critical mind. It is **not** about political correctness. It is about making sure that students of liberal arts institutions do not consume knowledge uncritically.

Liberal arts institutions in this country should challenge the tendency to invent Africa and other non-Western regions of the world by making their curricula truly liberal, and by acknowledging the shortcomings in those curricula. I would echo Joseph Dunn by saying, “Can we find a way of

proceeding that properly values the humanities and reinvigorates a liberal education?" I strongly agree with Lorna Fitzsimmons who in her article titled "Humanities in the contemporary world" argues that "broadened, cross-cultural horizons are the heart of liberal arts" and that "today's liberal arts are a vital interdisciplinary force". She laments that "while students in China and other Asian countries are making great and rapid strides in learning the English language and European cultural history, Western universities still lag behind in preparing future generations for global interrelationships. Liberal studies in the modern university must expand opportunities for students to gain knowledge of other cultural traditions".

A good liberal arts education seeks to allow the stories of all societies and all social and economic classes to be told in courses across the curriculum. The Nigerian writer called Adichie Chimamanda gave a Tedd talk that became very popular. Incidentally she was our Moe lecturer some years ago. The title of her talk was "The danger of a single story". What she did in that talk was to call attention to how myths and stereotypes of peoples, of societies other than our own, are created and reinforced because someone or some people arrogate to themselves a monopoly of what story to tell about them. There are big academic and political bullies who insist on monopolizing the storytelling session. Sadly, some of them tell really tall tales in which the spider is turned into an elephant and the rabbit into a goat. Liberal arts education should encourage students to question how this could happen. During an African storytelling session, it is not acceptable for an individual to monopolize the session with their tales. Every member of the audience gets a turn to tell a tale. Likewise, in the riddling session which normally precedes

the folktale telling session, nobody can monopolize the narration of riddles. Using this as a metaphor, I want to argue that a liberal arts education which thrives on “centers” and “peripheries” denies some members of the audience from telling their riddles and their tales. This is also why in my view the United Nations Organization is like George Orwells’ *Animal Farm*. All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others. We see this in the structure of the Security Council, and in decisions that are not always in the interest of the less politically and economically powerful nations of the world. I made this comment when the Canadian General Dallaire gave his Wallenburg talk here, a number of years ago. General Dallaire served as the commander of UNAMIR (the UN peace keeping mission) between 1993 and 1994 and tried to stop the genocide that was being waged by Hutu extremists against the Tutsi people and Hutu moderates. General Dallaire did not disagree with my characterization of the UN as an *Animal Farm*, but he also rightly commented that the UN is the best thing that we have. Without it, things would be worst. And I agree with him. What is the relevance of this to the topic of my talk? Do liberal arts curricula encourage enough students to interrogate how the UN for instance is metaphorically an animal farm? President Bill Clinton apologized for the US and other bodies not doing things differently in order to prevent the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Do our liberal arts curricula give enough opportunities for students to interrogate how this animal farm functions? I am not advocating anti-Western brainwashing. I am advocating a metaphorical tale in which the spider, the rabbit, the elephant, and the donkey question how much their own behaviors enhance or discourage a sense of collectivity and critical thinking.

Let me for a moment illustrate with a small tale that I have created myself, how we can use African folklore to impart knowledge onto students in a liberal arts setting. Here is my short tale. It's about a symbolic animal farm. Long, long, time ago, human beings and animals interacted "liberally"—helping one another in their farm work, drinking locally brewed beer together, and having among other things frequent communal gatherings. It was not the Biblical Tower of Babel that we know from the Christian Bible. Indeed, human beings and animals spoke the same language. They had no need for a foreign language requirement. The animals gathered one evening; and agreed on a set of norms for interaction among themselves. This animal kingdom believed sincerely in social justice. So, they would not tolerate any behaviors that deviated from the norms. They agreed that they would help one another in turns in their farm work. Moreover, no animal could encroach on another animal's farm. When they harvested their crops at the end of the season, each family would contribute a certain quantity of their harvest to a communal granary, a type of food bank. The purpose was to be able to replenish families that might suffer from hunger during the lean season in years of poor harvest. They put Monkey in charge of this communal barn. Furthermore, the animals agreed that even though they could hunt with catapults, cudgels, as well as bows and arrows, it was forbidden to make poisonous arrows, partly because their children could accidentally kill one another if they played with any poisonous arrows. Everyone followed the set norms. However, Hyena had his own plans. Everyone knows that Hyena is a very greedy, voracious eater. When people slept soundly in the night, Hyena would quietly sneak into people's bean and groundnut (peanut) farms, steal some and go home and cook. He would also steal from the communal barn. He would not even invite his wife and the children to eat his sumptuous meals. Likewise,

during the dry season when everyone was supposed to be extra careful with the amount of water that they drew from the communal well, Hyena would creep into the well, drink as much as he could, and then muddy the water. Hyena was so obnoxious that it upset everyone, especially Mosquito. Mosquito decided he would punish him in his own small ways. At night when Hyena thought he could relax and sleep, Mosquito would buzz around his ears the whole night. Hyena would spend the whole night trying to chase away this little animal that he could not even see. Well, did Hyena not behave like the all-powerful creature who is invulnerable because he has stealthily made himself poisonous arrows, against the norms of the animal kingdom? Unfortunately, Monkey who was chosen to be responsible for watching the well, as well as the communal barn, was in some sort of cahoots with Hyena, because he got a share of everything that he stole. Hyena made himself poisonous arrows that he used for his hunting. When he was confronted with accusations about his behavior, he claimed that the animals on whose farms he encroached were a threat to him, even though he could not prove it. He was using his poisonous arrows to shoot and kill little animals that he roasted and feasted on in the wilderness. Lion and Elephant who were the strongest members of the animal community, and on whom the rest of the community could rely in order to tame those that misbehaved, gave all kinds of reasons why they could not confront Hyena. Reasons such as the risk of creating a fight among animals that would spread into neighboring villages, and even into the kingdom that was inhabited by human beings.

You see, Hyena in my tale is a big bully. This big bully is a man who this year, without any provocation, decided to invade his neighboring country. Lion and Elephant in my tale symbolize

the USA and NATO, respectively. Monkey symbolizes a country called Belarus. Just my little example of how we can use African folklore in liberal arts institutions to teach our students about serious things, and to demonstrate why we need to challenge the so-called “center”.²

To come back to Adichie’s notion of the danger of a single story. Perceptions of peoples of other cultures are created by those single stories. For me, it’s not just a problem of myths about Africa that were created by the Hegels and the Trevors, and which are institutionalized even in colleges and universities that genuinely want to deliver a liberal arts education to young people. It’s also about discursive strategies of power (intellectual and otherwise) that overtly or covertly seek to deny other stories from being told. When institutions that have a liberal arts agenda are content with the so-called canons, they refuse to acknowledge that there are other stories that students need to hear, and indeed to participate in performing (for Africans, storytelling is a performance), in order for them to be true global citizens. To me, it’s not just a problem of narrating those stories in only one way, with a hegemonic gaze. It is also about suppressing the voices, the humanity, of the subaltern. A liberal arts education challenges the notion of subalterns, of “centers”, and of “peripheries”.

For Hegel and Trevor, Africa does not have any story worthy of an audience. Should liberal arts education not question how this way of thinking even came to exist in humanity? Liberal arts education should tell many stories, and those stories should be woven together intricately like

² I plan to expand this tale into a longer allegorical one for eventual publication. The tale will be populated with only animal characters.

the web of the famous African folklore trickster figure: the spider (*Debaɖɛɛ* in the Dagara language, *Ananse* in the Twi language). I mean literature stories, anthropology stories, biology stories, religion stories, art and art history stories, stories of African peoples, stories of peoples of the Americas, stories of Europeans, stories of peoples of the Asian continent, stories of peoples of Oceania etc. When one of those stories is not told or is told with the gaze of the former colonizer or that of the intellectual and political bullies of our time, in my view, liberal arts education is failing in its mission, and for that matter it is failing our students.

CONCLUSION

I would conclude by commenting on the Joint Statement of AAUP and AAC&U on Liberal Arts that was issued in May 2018; and also on a reaction by one Peter Wood. The joint statement observed that “in recent years, the disciplines of the liberal arts, once universally regarded as central to the intellectual life of the university, have been steadily moved to the periphery and increasingly threatened—by some administrators, elected officials, journalists, and parents of college-age children”. In an article in which he criticizes the Joint Statement, Peter Wood attacks their definition of “liberal arts”. For him, what the two college associations define as “liberal arts” are “those fields that have thoroughly hollowed out professors’ intent on promoting their anti-Western political agendas”. He goes on to quip that what the joint statement means by liberal arts is “the thoroughly politicized heap of courses that dwell on

race, class, gender, and sundry forms of oppression and that treat Western civilization as the font of all social injustice". It is precisely this sort of reaction to liberal arts education that made me ponder over what would be an appropriate topic for my talk this evening.

I have already said something about the Haitian Revolution led by African slaves. If Peter Wood and other like-minded academicians think that teaching about the Haitian Revolution is anti-Western discourse, so be it. Why is the exposure of such knowledge to students in liberal arts institutions so threatening to some college professors? I am asking a rhetorical question, because we all know what the answer is. It is about the "center" and "peripheries". Liberal arts institutions have to be honest and teach students why it is important to know some stories that are not at the center of their college curriculum. It makes students better educated to understand the stories of this world, and why they touch all humankind. Liberal arts institutions produce graduates who go into diverse fields of the workforce. They work for big American and foreign companies that compete globally for markets, including markets in Africa. They work for NGOs such as World Vision, for branches of the United Nations such as UNDP or UNESCO, for the State Department of this country. In those responsibilities, they participate in making decisions that directly affect the lives of millions of people in Africa and other places. Decisions that can adversely or favorably affect the lives of my illiterate and economically-disadvantaged mothers in rural areas of Africa. I say mothers because by tradition we Africans always have more than one mother. Why should the knowledge that these liberally educated graduates acquire be considered as some anti-Western propaganda as Peter Woods and other like-minded intellectuals would want to make us believe. Sorry that I have to refer to Peter Woods

so many times, but I am doing so in order to make my argument. The Peter Woods live in the world of “centers” and “peripheries”, and find courses that focus on places such as Africa a threat to their status quo. This sort of academic discourse is what should propel us into reflecting on the dangers of single stories, and how perilous it is for the education of young minds. After all, if I am not mistaken, it is likely that one can find social justice as a pillar in the mission of most liberal arts institutions in this country. To me, understanding the concept and the practice of social justice is more meaningful to graduates of liberal arts institutions when they have been offered an authentic opportunity in their education to examine and to challenge the notion of “center” and “periphery” themselves.

Let me conclude with a story about a Gustavus graduate and how I believe the Gustavus education gave her an opportunity to hear and examine many stories, and not just a single story. Many years ago, I received a post card from a student who had taken our third semester French language and culture course with me. She did not do a French major or even a minor, and she was a Mathematics major. She sent me the post card from Mali (West Africa), and that was a pleasant surprise to me. In her post card she said and I quote, “thank you for opening our eyes to the world”. I cannot be the only one who has received such a gesture of appreciation from a Gustavus graduate. Though she was thanking me for opening the eyes of the students to the world, she was indeed thanking us for the liberal arts education that we gave her. What was she doing in Mali with a degree in Mathematics? She was a Peace Corps Volunteer. I missed meeting her when at the end of her Peace Corps service in Mali she was invited to campus by

the Mathematics Department to give a talk. She wanted so badly for me to be at the talk, but I was not in town that day.

She got the chance to be a Peace Corps volunteer in a francophone country because she had some knowledge of French, and also because she had learned something about cultures other than her own. What she learned at Gustavus in diverse courses was not anti-Western discourse.

Liberal arts institutions in my opinion have an ethical responsibility to remain true to their mission by making the center feel uncomfortable, by helping to deconstruct the “peripheries” for the benefit of the students who come to them with a certain expectation that they will leave the walls of their institutions one day with a better sense of what it means to be human in a world that persistently creates contradictions but also offers opportunities for self-evaluation vis-à-vis other peoples and other societies. We must allow the tendrils of the metaphorical pumpkin plant to spread as much as possible, and to produce pumpkin fruits that can feed hungry stomachs. Yes, hungry minds.

Thank you.

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