Nainita Madurai

Question 1

In 1982, after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature, Gabriel García Márquez gave a speech that portrayed a poignant view of Latin America and its conflict within itself as well as with the rest of the world. Márquez is known for his novels that contain elements of magical realism, a style that can be used by authors to portray the unique and sometimes unrealistic practices, traditions, and situations in different cultures around the world. Integrating reality with myth is often a problem that anthropologists come upon when trying to explain their research. For example, it is very difficult to explain how shamanism is not only a thriving but an effective method of medical treatment in many African cultures. Similarly, it is difficult to explain how many Native American and Inuit tribes maintain such an incredibly close bond to nature that they are able to “sense” the presence of animals that go undetected by the average human. What people cannot understand and what is different than their way of life is often labeled as unrealistic and unbelievable. This is the dilemma that Márquez brings out and criticizes in his acceptance speech. He also points out that the conflict between myth and reality leads to deeper and more embedded problems with the international community.

Márquez first discusses how Latin America can be easily perceived as wildly different solely based on its geographic and environmental characteristics. This is why when the “New World” of present day Latin America was first discovered by European explorers it seemed to be a land of fantasy, magic and myth. Stories of a city of gold and a fountain of eternal life were spread across Europe. Márquez continues to discuss how, even after being independent of the Iberians, Latin American history accounts for the death of thousands of innocent people, and the internal and external displacement of many more. The countless internal problems that still exist today within Latin American countries are unbelievable to North American and European society, but they fail to realize that their countries went through similar problems in their history. The unbelievable numbers that depict the horrors of many wars, poverty, several despots, and military injustice may be unbelievable to the European and American communities but they do not consider that the horrible realities are a part of their history as well. Corruption, destruction, genocide and countless other tragedies are universal problems that are simply part of being part of a human society.

Márquez brings up that Latin America is still forming its identity and for European nations to examine and criticize Latin America in comparison to present day Europe is unfairly labeling Latin America and further complicating issues there. These misperceptions of the unbelievable reality lead to stereotypes. Stereotypes are created about the political and cultural atmosphere of Latin America, and Márquez is quick to discharge the formation of these stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is that they lead to individual judgments of people. Skidmore and Smith1 discuss the vast amount of stereotypes that Americans believe about Latin Americans. Ethnocentrism in European and North American countries clouds their vision; they are not able to see the historical, cultural, and political contexts of the occurrences in Latin America. If these Europeans could change the ethnocentric lens through which they see Latin America, they have the potential to help the region, Márquez says, but unfortunately it has yet to happen. Márquez gives his clear disapproval of the domestic oppression as well as the international exploitation and intervention that occurs in Latin America.

The irony in Márquez’s speech remains evident; Latin America, in all its “solitude” and isolation, is actually a region composed of ethnic elements from around the world including Europe, Africa and Asia. What the western world perceives as extravagantly different is in fact largely influenced by Europe. Even more interesting to see is how much Latin American culture influences Western societies, especially in the United States. Carlos Fuentes2 points out how much the two cultures collide and combine, yet Latin America is still segregated and labeled as an “undeveloped” region by many in the North American and European regions.

Márquez’s speech ends on a hopeful and optimistic note, concluding that belief in a utopia without murder and only love can lead to a conception of the utopia. That paradise seems as unbelievable as some of the horrors that are reality in today’s world, so why cannot the unbelievable become reality and create a better world instead of a worse one? Goodwin3 brings up Márquez in his anthropological essay “Latin America: Myth and Reality”, noting how myth and reality merge in Latin America. The European and North American societies simply need to recognize this factoring the political, historical and cultural context of Latin America, and only then can they help to create the utopia in which Márquez believes.

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Question 2

 The Latin American population consists of many races, mixed and separated, all labeled by the international world as one ethnicity: Latin American. However, domestically, questions of race and the wide spread diversity among the populations in all Latin American countries causes both identity crises as well as social segregation issues. Mark Doyle1 writes about the plight of Afro-colombians in Riosucio, Colombia in his article entitled “The devil wears military boots”. The portion of the population that is of African descent is looked down upon in most Latin American countries. Colombia is one such country. Doyle describes the problems that Afro-Colombians have been forced to deal with and how there is a somewhat positive (yet ominous) outlook for the future. Behind these problems is a much larger issue of social discrimination and racial inequalities.

Before examining the troubles of the Afro-Colombians it is important to point out that the issues of identity and how individual Latin Americans prefer to identify themselves show why African populations are discriminated against. During colonization, the Iberians brought African slaves to Latin American to replace the disease-afflicted indigenous populations. Mixed breeding among the indigenous, European, and African populations created a completely new race that dominates Latin America. Labeling this race is incredibly difficult because there is a strong desire in most Latin American countries to be of European descent. Yelvington2 discusses how people will link their heritage to Europe and Asia rather than Africa, even if they are clearly of African descent. Terms such as *inido claro* (light-colored Indian) and *indio oscuro* (dark-skinned Indian) were formed, creating the idea of there being a ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ race. Ethnic identity is based on individual self-perception. This is the reason it is hard to form identity within Latin American countries. However, integration of the populations is necessary to ensure that injustices do not continue to be committed against the African populations, such as the ones in Colombia.

Even after Colombia’s independence from Spain and the abolition of slavery, Afro-Colombians were still subjected to a different kind of bondage, Doyle says. Paramilitary troops, backed by big businesses, were sent by the government and, under the pretense of controlling rebels, they forced the Afro-Colombians off their land. This increased the separation of these Afro-Colombians from the rest of the population as well as killed and displaced many people. The social and economic disparities between the cities and the rural areas (such as Riosucio) in Colombia and all over Latin America are blatantly evident. According to Saavedra and Arias3, these economic and social separations only feed the continuation of poverty and result in lost potential for the Latin American economy. Doyle describes Riosucio as a “forgotten bit of the third world”. Across Latin America similar situations are apparent; demographic studies show that race is linked with economic, social, and political status. In Brazil, for example, Afro-Brazilians make up the majority of the population in the favelas (squatter towns) of Rio de Janeiro. According to Peter Ortiz4, after the abolition of slavery in Brazil the European populations were awarded the best land and the Afro-Brazilians were left with almost nothing to sustain their livelihood.

Afro-populations in most Latin American countries are segregated economically, politically, geographically, and socially. How can the Afro-populations be a part of the Latin American identity when they are so segregated? Steps are being taken in many Latin American countries to provide opportunities and ensure social and political rights for the Afro-populations. Doyle happened to be in Riosucio when the Afro-Colombians won their case in Court to be allowed to go back to the land that was taken from them by the business-backed paramilitary. Similarly, Ortiz talks of how businesses in Brazil are now implementing affirmative action laws to secure opportunities to those who were previously denied them because of their race. Lopes5 talks about how in the soccer industry Afro-populations have made large strides as well. It is true that economic, political and social integration of the populations through legislation may cause further problems because legislation is only written word and must be enforced as well. The dilemma is so embedded in the culture and society, but it is needless to say that steps towards integration will ultimately help Latin America form a stronger identity.

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 This image is of a victim of gang violence in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

http://www.4seephoto.com/?p=640