

SOCIETAL DUENDE

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Columbia University loves to promote diversity and points to the multitude of ethnic, religious, political, and other activist groups present on campus as evidence of its wide variety of students. I question, however, whether these clubs promote diversity in practice or actually lead to division between groups. My roommates and I recently attended a party at a local bar hosted by the Korean Student Association. Dates with members of the group were being auctioned to raise money to support local public schools. We are not members of the club, but Adam, our friend's brother, was being auctioned as a representative of Columbia's Student Council, and we went to watch and support him. Adam was the only non-Korean on the auction block. At least seventy-five percent of the audience was Korean; almost everyone else was just tagging along with friends. This scene is not unusual. The same organizations heralded as the foundation of campus diversity rarely attract a diverse group of members. Korean students join the Korean Student Association, Jewish students join campus Hillel, homosexuals join the Queer Alliance, and Republican voters join Columbia College Republicans. Our pride in having so many diverse groups fades when we realize that these groups are more homogeneous than we like to believe.

Richard Rodriguez sees the same trend involving the homosexual population in San Francisco. In his essay "Late Victorians," Rodriguez gives a personalized history of the gay community in California. He describes the attitude toward homosexuality in general, toward gay households and families, toward gay artists and interior designers, and the San Franciscan reaction to the AIDS epidemic. Rodriguez also understands and explains the cultural and socioeconomic boundaries that define the separate boroughs of San Francisco. He describes neighborhoods known as the "homosexual address in San Francisco" (126). Other neighborhoods are the "black and working-class parts of the city" (Rodriguez 122). Each neighborhood has its own identity, and its inhabitants rarely have close connections with people from outside areas. Vivian Gornick sees the same division between ethnicities in New York City. In "On the street: nobody watches, everyone performs," Gornick wanders through the city experiencing the rich variety of cultures. She recalls interactions with a writer on her block, two "tough old Jewish guys" on Greenwich Avenue, a black couple on Ninth Avenue, and many different kinds of people at various points along her journey (3). She is aware that individual "neighborhoods accumulate personalities" (18). She pins the fabulously wealthy to Park Avenue, the bourgeois to West End Avenue, and the remnants of bohemia to her area of Greenwich Village. Just like in San Francisco, New Yorkers stay within their neighborhoods and rarely venture out into relationships with people from other areas.

Human beings are by nature extremely xenophobic. People with a common trait or background tend to group together for support and comfort, and they rarely reach out to other groups. Each community is expected to take care of its own members. The Korean Student Association has its own parties for its members, and other clubs at Columbia have their own programs. Gornick seems to be the exception for her ability to blend in and involve herself with so many types of people. However, even she is shocked when she happens to spot “someone from [her] block . . . in another neighborhood and the first impulse of the brain is, What are you doing here?” (2) I had a similar reaction when I happened to see a classmate on my subway in the area outside Columbia campus. Both Gornick and I expressed our shock with surprised laughter and a friendly greeting before continuing on our way. Unfortunately, in other situations, this shock is more controversial and far less friendly.

Rodriguez experienced the transition of the San Franciscan homosexual community from a discreet lifestyle hidden in bars on Polk Street to a vibrant, flamboyant culture on Castro Street. As the population of gay men in California grew, the classic Victorian homes of the area were divided up into apartments for these non-traditional households. The growing population of homosexuals in San Francisco was not welcome in these areas. They were seen as “blockbusters” that were destroying “the discreet compromise” between the different neighborhoods of a “tolerant city” (Rodriguez 122, 126). As soon as a couple arrived and began to fix up their new home, the neighbors would express their shock at seeing gays outside their traditional neighborhood with an “anonymous reply . . . on the sidewalk out front: KILL FAGGOTS” (Rodriguez 123). This xenophobic response stems from common stereotypes and over-generalizations.

Rodriguez contends that “society’s condemnation forced the homosexual to find his redemption outside nature”—namely, fashion and interior decorating. Homosexual interior decorators are attempting to “make up” for their sexual orientation by performing a useful service for the greater community. This is a prime example of Federico García Lorca’s essay “Play and Theory of the Duende.” Duende—the passion that appears in great art—is discovered only after great struggle and conflict. Art produced with duende reveals “the culture, the sensitivity of a people who discover man’s best anger, bile, and weeping” (Lorca 58). The community of gay decorators, painters, dancers, and other artists described by Rodriguez has definitely seen the worst of human beings’ anger and negativity. Finding and using duende to produce art is like “crying tears of blood” (Lorca 61). This is easily applicable to the artistic homosexual population of San Francisco, whose members have to bear people who pity them—“they don’t seem real, poor darlings”—and dismiss them and their supporters as infantile “yuppies” (Rodriguez 127). At the same time, they have to deal with the terrors of the AIDS epidemic and the grief of losing their partners and friends to such a horrific death. All of this opposition has given the homosexual the duende

what they needed to succeed in the art world. This impulse to “challenge the rule of nature” is actually a pure expression of duende (Rodriguez 124).

Duende is not confined to interior decorating and visual art; “Duende is a power not a work” (Lorca 49). This power can be seen in the tremendous response of Californians to the AIDS crisis. The horrors of AIDS quickly spread throughout the entire city of San Francisco and enveloped the heterosexual as well as the homosexual community. In a united effort containing streaks of duende, the city came together to fight this evil. Rodriguez vividly defines the far-reaching effects of AIDS:

[I]ts victims were as often black, Hispanic, straight. Neither were Charity and Mercy only white, only male, only gay. Others came. There were nurses and nuns and the couple from next door, co-workers, strangers, teenagers, corporations, pensioners. (133)

This type of communal duende appears whenever groups have each cried “tears of blood” and come together to fight a common evil (Lorca 61). Gornick relates several experiences that stand out for the deep connection formed between herself and inhabitants of different neighborhoods, both literal and figurative. One such example is the brief conversation she has with a “skinny, young, black” man in the middle of Times Square. A young boy had just committed suicide in front of them by lying down in the road in front of oncoming traffic. In emotional shock, Gornick turns to a member of the boy’s community for support and explanation. This brief bond between the two worlds sprang up as a direct result of a common tragedy. Later, Gornick recalls the night that her neighbor’s husband dies. Although they live in the same building, the two women never speak and appear to live in two different worlds. One night, Gornick sees the woman crying in the lobby in deep distress over the loss of her husband. In the face of such a crisis, the two very different women come together to support each other and to offer help and encouragement.

The Korean Student Association charity date auction showed duende on a smaller scale. Students from different groups all came together to raise money for public education. The current problems in the public school system affect everyone, and Columbia students rose above ethnic lines to support this worthy cause. In the face of a common enemy, divisions between clubs no longer mattered. My friends and I were welcome at the KSA party because it was supporting a mutual interest. Through our efforts to support public education, a community was formed that crossed cultural, religious, racial, and political boundaries. These new friendships, however brief, were filled with duende that will push the effects of our efforts higher than we could have hoped to achieve as individuals.

“Where is the duende?” asks Lorca (62). It is in the pure sense of community responsibility that drives all different types of people to overcome their xenophobia and learn “to love what is corruptible” (Rodriguez 134). It is what connects the people

walking with Gornick on the streets of New York and what pulls all the individual clubs at Columbia together to form a vivid diversity fair. It allows my roommates and me to feel accepted at the Korean Student Association's charity auction. And it drives the homosexual community in San Francisco to find its niche in the artistic sphere in California. Each community still maintains its own individual identity and territory, but a mutual bond of tolerance is formed whenever different groups face a common obstacle and put aside their disagreements to work together to produce a solution filled with societal duende.

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