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Rethinking the “Ethnic” Village

by Roberto Avant-Mier

Several months ago Salt Lake City, and the U.S., hosted the Olympic Winter Games. Since then the Olympic flame has dwindled and the Olympic hype has now become almost silence (with the exception of the occasional figure skating judge’s scandal updates), and it seems more than appropriate to think back now about how we did as a nation in the eyes of the world, at least about how we did as a city. I would like to begin with a reconsideration of the “Ethnic Village.”

As a university teacher in Utah, I have been teaching my students for several years about recognizing the importance of ethnicity and culture of “minority” or “disenfranchised” groups. Although I have always regarded my students as very bright students with a good work ethic, I often worry that dominant culture in the U.S. in many ways inhibits my efforts. This suspicion was confirmed during the Winter Olympic Games recently played in Utah. Being Salt Lake City residents, my family and I spent a day in downtown Salt Lake to witness some of the Olympic hoopla. We were excited to be downtown amongst the masses of people walking, shopping, buying and selling tickets, and making their way to various events and competitions.

Unfortunately, my experience was rather tainted as we made our way through the Gateway Center downtown-Salt Lake’s newest mall and part of the Olympic Plaza. We had come upon the “Ethnic Village” which was part of the Olympic-related activity downtown. As television commentators reminded us on the night of the opening ceremonies, the Olympic motto is “sport, culture, and environment.” As such the Ethnic Village is apparently supposed to be part of the cultural events that many people these days find quaint, enchanting, or at the very least politically correct. On the surface the Ethnic Village was a genuine attempt by organizers to create a presence of “ethnic” people, and my guess is that it also fulfilled organizers’ obligations for political correctness and *diversity* representation for these “world” games.

However, the meaning of ethnicity is something that I believe was quite lost on Olympic organizers and probably now on the hundreds of thousands of tourists and locals that made their way into the Ethnic Village. As we saw it in February, there were booths and tables set up where “ethnic” people were selling their traditional foods and treats, selling their traditional clothing, masks, and souvenirs. Some played music, and others danced. There were Hawaiian clothing and masks, Mexicans *marachi* singers, African-American rappers, Ecuadorian food, Native-Americans books, blankets, and feathery things. And there was Mexican *pan dulce* as well as Navajo tacos, and even a gentleman from Ecuador selling plantain (banana) chips. Everywhere you went in the

Ethnic Village, people of color were present and obviously quite proud to be representing their cultures. It was a nice experience after all, but I couldn't stop thinking that nowhere in sight was there an ethnic Englishman, a proud-to-be-Irish woman, or a German-American. There was no Polish food or Scandinavian food. Interestingly, there wasn't even a Mormon booth or display.

The mere suggestion may seem funny to many, but the truth is that all people in the world are somehow "ethnic." Like I tell my students constantly, ethnic doesn't just mean brown person or black person. Ethnic doesn't just mean Asian or Indian. Ethnicity means attachment and affiliation to a group. By that definition, all humans are somehow "ethnic"-the Chicano, the Jew, the Mormon, the "plain White American." All of us have or have had some kind of attachment to a group identity, whether it is based on tradition and custom, religion, language, nationality or geographic origin. We are all ethnic.

By reiterating this, I only hope that "Whites," "Caucasians," "Anglos," or "Euro-Americans" will finally start to see themselves as ethnic people too. Only then will we reach a point where diversity and freedom-for-all are mantras that are realized in the U.S. and not just gestured at. By leaving out booths, foods, and displays from non-brown-skinned people, the Ethnic Village was cheating us of truly appreciating humanity in all its color and diversity. I felt cheated because I didn't see English people pushing *beans and franks*, or proudly frying *fish and chips* like the kind I have tasted in London. Sadly, there were no English-Americans selling their wares, or talking about the history of the migration of their people to this country. I felt my family was cheated because we didn't get to eat a *bratwurst* with *sauerkraut*, and wash it down with *ein bier*. And I don't just mean beer. I mean the robust, hearty German kind of bier. We didn't get to sample any *polska kielbasa* either. And what about Irish-Americans? I have had some great *corned-beef-and-cabbage* at a friend's house for St. Patty's day. And I would have loved to see some of their dancing. Of course, then there are the locals... the Mormons.

The past few years here have taught me that Latter Day Saints are quite proud of their history and heritage. They even celebrate it every year in July as "Pioneer Day" in Utah. My most recent lessons from locals have been about Utah's fascination with green Jell-O. Yes, green jello! My students tell me this is no stereotype. I've been told that the locals here in Salt Lake consume quite a bit of that stuff, and wouldn't that have been a great booth in the Ethnic Village? My wife and I would seriously love to hear about how that got started. Of course, there are other strange local customs as well. There is a thing called "fry sauce" that Utahns seem to love with their french fries, and my wife told me that she has heard something about a dish called "funeral potatoes." They could've been dressed as pioneers, selling books, postcards, or calendars about the Mormon migrations, selling bowls of *green jello with pineapple*, and saying classic Utah phrases like, "Oh, my heck!" But we missed out on that. Nobody with pale skin dressed up for us to show us their culture.

On top of that under-representation, the Ethnic Village was always in financial trouble. It seemed that every day that we turned on the local news, we heard stories about how the Ethnic Village was going to be shut down. Once or twice, somebody put up a few thousand dollars to keep it going for a few more days, until it happened again later. All I could think about was how ridiculous it was that organizers were spending millions for the games while the little Ethnic Village was struggling for a few thousand dollars -“chump change” for America’s Olympic budget- just to operate for another day or two. I have to wonder if it would have been better funded had there been more economically diverse cultures represented in the Ethnic Village.

I don’t mean to suggest that the Ethnic Village is a bad idea, or that it should be done away with. I just wish we could have better representation in things like the Ethnic Village, and in this case, that means more “White” people. Having an Ethnic Village with only brown and black skinned people just sends the wrong message. It says that everybody else is “ethnic” and White people, well they’re just “normal.” I also think it tokenizes people that were there, reducing their pride and crafts into curiosities and fascinations that are available for purchase for a few weeks only... so buy now! Moreover, having an Ethnic Village with constant financial problems also sends the wrong signal. It reinforces the idea that ethnicity, culture, and diversity are a burden. Diversity is always a “problem.” Unfortunately, this seems to be quite common theme in current discourse about diversity and multiculturalism.

I just hope that someday soon, we can have an Olympic festival or celebration where more people are included in cultural events like the Ethnic Village. Otherwise, how else will my newborn daughter ever get to learn about English or Irish culture? Will she ever be able to see people in costumes of their various styles of historical garb. How else will she get to experience a grilled *brat* and real *sauerkraut*? Will she ever get to taste green jello? And since we’re speaking Spanish with her at home, how will she ever learn about these interesting, talented, and brilliant English-speaking people that are in her country?

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