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Building social capital with bonds and bridges

Nancy Cantor
Syracuse University, ncantor@syr.edu

Building Social Capital with Bonds and Bridges

Chancellor Nancy Cantor[1]

I want to speak today about *social capital*—the bonds of trust that we form between neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, new and old—and how essential it is to the health and prosperity of any community. More specifically, I want to talk about our communal responsibility not only to build social capital with those easily within our familiar frame of social reference, but also to bridge to others, less obviously or directly a part of our "social family."[2] And, I want to take note of how hard this is to do, and analyze some of the commonplace obstacles, with the hope that reflection on them will help us all overcome these social hurdles.

First, though, consider the following anecdote about one town's resistance to opening up to "outsiders," and how that plays out in the most mundane of daily life struggles.

A recent *New York Times* article told the story of Clarkston, Georgia, a small town outside of Atlanta.[3] Long a mostly white community, Clarkston was "just a

sleepy little town by the railroad tracks," in the words of its mayor—that is, until it was identified by refugee resettlement agencies in the 1980s as an ideal haven. Fast forward 20 years: today, Clarkston's population of 7,100 is among the most diverse in the nation, with residents from Afghanistan, Bosnia, Burundi, Congo, Kosovo, and Sudan—more than 50 nations in total.

On one side of the equation in this "us" and "them" story are the longtime Clarkston residents, seeing their community undergoing sweeping change beyond their control. On the other side are the refugees, bearing the traumas that forced them from their homes and homelands, struggling to remake their lives in an alien landscape. There are many high-stakes issues that could be at the center of this scenario—but the conflict plays out most poignantly on the ball field.

Playing soccer has become common ground for Clarkston's refugee children, a context in which they overcome fundamental differences such as language and religion. Indeed, in an act that symbolized the formation of their identity as a group, they took for the name of their soccer team "The Fugees"— short for "refugees."

They faced myriad challenges: none of the kids had decent equipment—some showed up in baggy jeans, one in hiking boots, one in socks. As if their own personal situations were not harsh enough, the only place they had to play was a barren, rutted, sand-scarred lot behind an elementary school. That's because the mayor of Clarkston refused to open the manicured fields of the town park for soccer. Fifteen years earlier, he had run for City Council as a declared representative of "Old Clarkston." Now, he was saying of the park: "There will be nothing but baseball and football down there as long as I am mayor…those fields weren't made for soccer."

Despite the hurdles, the Fugees had moments of triumph, as they outplayed teams of well-funded players from other towns and suburbs. There also were many moments in which the worst in people came out, as some opposing players and their families hurled racial epithets at them. And, as often happens when different groups get pit against each other, some longtime African American residents of Clarkston openly expressed resentment of the refugees, complaining that the town's parks and community center were "overrun" with them and that "It's just give me, give me, give me."

In many respects the inter-group tensions that erupted over a soccer field in Clarkston are at once shocking—how could people be so blatant about their desire to keep "strangers" out?—and all too familiar, as it is the mundane resources of daily life over which the fraying of community often is revealed. And it isn't just a matter of whether to welcome literal "newcomers," as in this story of refugees settling in Georgia, because every community across our nation is divided into numerous interweaving groups of insiders and outsiders, even if many of the divisions are carved deep in our histories. In fact, these themes are readily recognizable to so many of us that it also shouldn't surprise us that Hollywood has already picked up on this story and is working on a movie deal for the Fugees and their coach.[4]

The commonplace nature of these stories of inter-group conflict and distrust, and the mundane incidents in which they play out present a problem for us. In a world full to the brim with horrifyingly violent inter-ethnic conflicts, from Sudan to Iraq, it is too easy for us all to ignore the daily symptoms in our own midst of a society not comfortable with pluralism. It is too easy to forget our own communal responsibility for reducing the gap between those who belong and those who don't—insiders and outsiders. By nurturing the bonds of neighborliness everyday

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4 Michael Fleming and Dave McNary, "Universal Buys Soccer Story," *Variety*, January 24, 2007.

in the small and large opportunities, we build social capital—rather than erode it—in our own communities.

I would suggest that it is in our national interest to apply to this state of affairs the same deep thinking that we apply to understanding how to respond to our increasingly "flat world," in which the crumbling of economic barriers between nations has accelerated.[5] In fact, thoughtful analyses of group dynamics and communal responsibility in a pluralistic world may actually help us better face the "flat world." As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. has often been quoted: "We may have all come on different ships, but we're in the same boat now." Instead of competitively fighting among ourselves for a shrinking piece of the pie, shouldn't we learn to live and work together and find innovations that enlarge the pie? Wouldn't that get us closer to fulfilling the agenda of universal human rights that lies at the foundation of a just and effective society?

Taking Groups Seriously

Many people's reaction to the task of building bonds of trust in a pluralistic world is to suggest that we all just turn our backs on groups altogether—as when

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5 Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century,* New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2005. On the importance of strengthening pluralism as a global priority on par with poverty alleviation and conflict prevention, see His Highness the Aga Khan, *Pluralism: Key to Peace and Development*, Keynote Speech at the Prince Claus Fund's Conference on Culture and Development, Amsterdam, September 7, 2002.

people call for a color-blind or culture-blind or gender-blind society.

Unfortunately, experience suggests that we can't simply build social capital person

to person and avoid the discomfort that comes with trying to bridge the gaps of

culture, class, religion, race/ethnicity—thereby attempting to leapfrog the

intricacies of the groups that have tended to divide us through history.[6]

Moreover, taking groups seriously can be constructive both for those who

are frequently on the "outside" trying to get into a particular community—even

one where they have lived for generations—and for those who are more securely

established as insiders. We need to build effective multicultural communities to be

both prosperous and just, so we better start taking groups seriously.

That is precisely what I see at the heart of the *Crossroads Charlotte*

initiative—a community-wide effort to take groups seriously, to give voice to

many, insiders and outsiders, younger and older, and to build networks of trust

within and between these groups, creating the social capital that can serve as a path

toward community prosperity and justice.

The Social Benefits of Group Life: Bonding with Like Others

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6 See D. Shoem and S. Hurtado, eds., *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

When we think about building social capital from the ground up in a pluralistic world, it is helpful to start from some basics about human social behavior. We all gain a great deal from healthy engagement with others—in social groups, communities, organizations, and the like.

Anthropologists have long documented the universality of this bonding within groups,[7] and evolutionary accounts of our hunter-gatherer ancestors suggest the survival value of group living.[8] Meanwhile, social psychologists have spent the last 40 or so years showing how easy it is to create a "we" and "they" distinction (and all the in-group favoritism that goes with it), even when the group members are previously unacquainted and arbitrarily assigned to groups.[9]

As affirming as these group bonds are, there is also another side to them, as social psychologist David Myers suggests: "like sexual motivation, which fuels both love and sexual exploitation, the need to belong feeds both deep attachments and menacing threats. Out of our need to define a 'we' come loving families,

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7 W. Sumner, *Folkways* (New York: Ginn, 1906).
8 L.R. Caporeal and M.B. Brewer, "Reviving Evolutionary Psychology: Biology Meets Society," *Journal of Social Issues* 47.2 (1991) : 187-195.
9 M. Sherif, *In common predicament: Social psychology of intergroup conflict and cooperation.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1966).

faithful friendships, fraternal organizations, and team spirit, but also teen gangs,

isolationist cults, ethnic hostilities, and fanatic nationalism."[10]

Communities, wonderful communities like yours and mine, all across our

nation show this mix of supportive group bonds and distrustful inter-group

relations. And judging from the survey results that rank the Charlotte-

Mecklenburg region as second in the nation in charitable giving and volunteerism

and fourth in faith-based engagement, I am clearly talking to an audience today

that values what sociologist Robert Putnam calls "bonding social capital," which

builds trusted networks of confidants. However, as this region also ranked 39th out

of 40 in its level of interracial trust on that same survey, you also know the

obstacles we all face in building trusted networks with those outside our familiar

groups—or what Putnam calls "bridging social capital."[11]

The Social Costs of Group Life: Excluding Unlike Others

Clearly there is a problem to consider. The problem is that we are very good

at bonding with what one might call "groups of convenience"—groups populated

with people like ourselves, groups based on shared values and traditions and

geography—but we find it much more difficult to reach out to groups that are not

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10 David Myers, "Close Relationships and Quality of Life," *Well-Being: The Foundations of Hedonic Psychology*, ed. Daniel Kahneman, Ed Denier, and Norbert Schwarz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1999), 374-389.
11 *Social Capital Benchmark Survey: Executive Summary*, Foundation for the Carolinas, February 28, 2001.

familiar. Moreover, once ensconced in our own groups, we are prone to insularity,

less likely to explore outside our own group.

More worrisome yet, the more we spend our lives in the safety of our many

familiar groups and social relationships, the more the "we" and "they" distinction

takes root. With every satisfying in-group experience comes out-group exclusion

of some sort that social psychologists have also documented across a wide range of

cultures, ages, and types of groups.[12] Frequently, such exclusion is merely a

reflection of favoring one's in-group, as when we give members of our own group

more benefit of the doubt, or we care more about their welfare. Other times, it may

take a more disagreeable turn, as when we distrust or derogate groups simply

because they are different. And discrimination often grows out of our very real

ignorance of other groups and our tendency to see them as monolithic and

homogeneous, even as we perceive the great variety within our own groups.

Add to the mix any perceived threat or danger, and the reaction can be

extreme and tragic. For example, several weeks following the horrific events of

September 11, in the countryside just north of Syracuse, a pair of teenage boys set

fire to an aging farmhouse that a religious group had purchased and adapted for its

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12 See M. Brewer and R. Brown, "Intergroup Relations," *Handbook of Social Psychology, Vol. II,* ed., D. Gilbert, S. Fiske, and G. Lindzey (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998) 554-594.

use. The boys had seen dark-complexioned people, some wearing head wraps, frequenting the house and noted that a sign mounted on the outside read "Gobind Sadan." They took that sign to be a rendering of "Go Bin Laden" and took the group to be Muslims expressing support for Al Qaeda, rather than members of the international interfaith community Gobind Sadan, which draws on the Sikh tradition.

A tragedy such as this one reveals so much about the dangers of group life. We so quickly generalize from one threat—in this case the events of 9/11—to seeing threat everywhere and innocent strangers through the lens of threatening "otherness." Sadly, what also often gets lost in the midst of these "mistaken" identity stories of hate crimes is the deeper threat to community that they pose.

There are obvious innocent victims—the members of Syracuse's Sikh faith community in this story. But there also are less obvious innocent victims—the perfectly innocent Muslims tarnished by the monolithic brush of the stereotypes that followed 9/11—who go largely unnoticed and unsupported. They too are victims of 9/11, and we are as well because the more we are drawn into dividing the world this way, the less likely we are to overcome our ignorance and the more

likely we are to perpetuate a "clash of civilizations" that will do no one any good at all.[13]

Overcoming the impulse to stereotype takes deliberate work in a society whose media are obsessed with promoting them and in a world in which we are flooded (electronically) with sad and tragic examples of inter-group hostility. And that is precisely the work that an organization in Syracuse—Women Transcending Boundaries—set out to do after 9/11.

This organization was born in the wake of 9/11, when a small group of Christian women from a local church expressed concern among themselves about the potential for discrimination against Muslim women. One of the women reached out to the Islamic Society of Central New York on behalf of the group. That led to a discussion over a cup of coffee with one of the Muslim women, which in turn led to a potluck among nine of the Christian women and nine of the Muslim women.

At that potluck, not only was Women Transcending Boundaries formed, which has gone on to help bridge the divides between seemingly disparate cultures,

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13 Vartan Gregorian, President's Essay, *Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith*, 2001 Annual Report, Carnegie Corporation of New York.

but the individuals found affirmation in their own cultural identities. Indeed, one would not have happened without the other. The initial, one-on-one meeting of the groups' representatives served as a means of evaluating the authenticity of the interest in more members of each group meeting on equal terms. Once it was clear to the Muslim women—outsiders in mainstream American culture—that they would be safe in forging a relationship with the church group, the walls were breached. All of the women quickly became comfortable in airing their vulnerabilities, enabling them to perceive and respect each other's identities as individuals and as members of their respective groups.

In just a few, short years monthly meetings of Women Transcending Boundaries have grown to attract more than 50 people. They have partnered with two international organizations to provide relief to women in other countries, including micro-credit financing. They also participate in efforts closer to home, aiding inner-city youth, refugees, women victims of violence, and local women struggling to feed their families.

Today, the woman who made that initial gesture of reaching out across groups that started it all says, "I thought all I was going to do was have coffee…I had no idea the women we invited would become a dynamic group. I didn't realize

what sort of response our little group would engender. I didn't know we had touched a nerve in the community and that we would become a salon of discussion for many spiritual women with complicated questions."[14]

Insiders and Outsiders and the Asymmetry of Group Life

When the process of building social capital in a community works well—as it has with Women Transcending Boundaries and with the projects funded by your foundation's *Front-Porch Grants: People Building Bridges* program—there is a transformation that levels the playing fields of inter-group interaction. Individuals who felt like "outsiders," marked by their group membership and made vulnerable through it, become "insiders" able to settle in and productively engage with others in the community. And those who had been "insiders" express some of their own vulnerabilities, such that empathy can grow on both "sides." How does this happen, and what are the obstacles to it?

Within groups, there is considerable cohesion—often involuntary—that serves as an undercurrent in communities, undermining the trust that insiders and outsiders want to build. More problematic still is the relative ignorance that most of us have to the vulnerability of feeling "marked" by one's group. There really is

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14 For further information on Women Transcending Boundaries, see *http://www.wtb.org.*

a different psychology for "outsiders" than "insiders," and most of us are largely unaware of it, even as we acknowledge that we each feel like an outsider in some situations. Nevertheless, more typically we are insiders—either by virtue of power, history, resources, or all of those assets—and we rarely feel marked by our groups, but instead operate as individuals and engage in voluntary associations with our groups. We have the luxury of taking an "arm's length" relationship to our groups, engaging them when convenient and dissociating from them when we disagree. Therefore, it is frequently hard to understand why others dwell on and feel cornered by their groups.

However, it is precisely because the insiders in a community typically are blind to, or skeptical of, the sense of "otherness" constantly felt by members of outsider groups that we must devise avenues through which outsiders can be heard beyond their group and insiders can listen to other groups. The crucial question is: How do we create such avenues? This is when deliberate projects to build inter-group insight and then empathy become critical. I see this objective at the heart of the Foundation's *Front Porch Grants Program*. I also see it as a precursor to making the most of the bridge-building and sharing of power and resources at the heart of *Crossroads Charlotte* because while it may begin by giving voice to outsiders and allowing insiders to listen, it likely ends with a sharing of

vulnerabilities that builds a sense of common fate. Also, when insiders begin to

acknowledge that outsiders have little or no choice but to be seen through their

groups, then suspicion often evaporates, and the potential for collaboration and

community grows.

From Listening to Building Bridges to Sharing Power

Cultivating empathy of mind (by hearing others' narratives) can go a long

way toward seeing disparities in voice, status, and opportunity in one's

community. In turn, with that empathy and insight comes the basis for trust—that

is, taking some communal responsibility even if as an individual you had little to

do with creating that inequality. This often requires a willingness to air conflict on

all sides to prepare to share resources and power, and work toward the Eye-to-Eye

scenario of access, inclusion, and equity articulated in *Crossroads Charlotte*.

Dialoguing, not debating

As your experience here undoubtedly has taught you, airing conflict through

dialogue can become rapidly unproductive unless it is structured in a way that

establishes ground rules for respectful listening and speaking by all parties

involved. Crucially, the goal is to promote dialogue, not debate. In Central New

York, we are fortunate that hundreds of key community members have gained

some experience in this practice, owing to the Community-Wide Dialogue to End

Racism, a project of a community group named InterFaith Works.

The Community-Wide Dialogue to End Racism—or CWD—was launched

following an exercise similar to, but more modest than, *Crossroads Charlotte*. A

group of community leaders got together to ask themselves just what kind of

community Central New York was and to collaborate on constructing a vision of

what it should be. They found a diverse and hopeful community, but one whose

potential could never be realized without addressing the inequality of opportunity

rooted in racism. They specifically focused not on overt acts of discrimination, but

on the subtle and pernicious racism deeply embedded in stereotyping, structural

prejudice in social institutions, and the inherent privileges of whiteness. They

understood that to dissect and eliminate racism in our community, it needs to be

identified when it happens and talked about. Then, those participating in it—again,

and I underline, usually with no overt, ill intentions—can become conscious of

what they're doing and begin to find paths to interracial understanding and healing.

CWD employs dialogue circles conducted by trained facilitators that enable

diverse groups of people to discuss their perceptions of race, uncover stereotypes

and their effects, and explore the ways in which racism affects them personally.

Sharing this difficult dialogue deepens the commitment of all involved to become allies in taking action to end racism at home, in their workplaces, and in their communities. This is a powerful model that makes participants profoundly aware of racism. For many "insiders," it is the first time that they actually have actively listened, in person, to individuals telling them about how pervasive the oppression of racism is in their lives—how it not only constrains them in the mundane aspects of public life, such as choosing where to get a haircut or buy groceries, but also affects their very self-perception. Conversely, "outsiders" frequently leave these dialogues with some understanding of the less pervasive, but still debilitating, vulnerabilities that can haunt insiders too. For both insiders and outsiders, then, airing conflict through structured dialogue breaks down monolithic group identities and reveals credible individuals.

CWD has trained 250 facilitators who have conducted more than 300 dialogue circles in workplaces, elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities—including, of course, SU—and numerous community organizations. To date, more than 5,000 Central New Yorkers have participated in the circles, toward a goal of at least 10,000. Feedback from participants provides a sense of the program's effectiveness, not just in raising awareness of racism, but helping participants devise mechanisms for confronting racism constructively when they

encounter it. After a six-week dialogue circle series among white and minority business leaders, one senior vice president of a bank, who is white, said, "This project provided a unique opportunity for corporate executives to witness firsthand how widespread racism in the workforce really is….[It] has opened my eyes to situations that I have seen too many times to recall but now understand how wrong and hurtful they are."[15]

Breaking barriers, sharing power

Indeed, so many of the barriers to building social capital are right in front of our eyes, but often so familiar that it takes deliberate work to acknowledge and dismantle them. We see this in Syracuse, where the University (actually three universities and several major medical centers) sits atop a hill overlooking and distanced from several of the main inner-city neighborhoods. This divide is symbolized by the scar that is the elevated section of Interstate 81 that bisects the city and separates the "hill" from downtown. And while there are transportation systems to physically breach the "81" divide, the barriers to bridging social capital are deep and wide.

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15 Allen J. Naples, Senior Vice President, Manufacturers and Traders Trust Company and President, Syracuse Division, quoted in "Community Wide Dialogue to End Racism: Stories from the Dialogue," Central New York Community Foundation, January 2007.

We are engaged in a substantial effort to do just that—a thoroughly collaborative one, with others in the corporate, foundation, and governmental sectors. It includes renovating old warehouses downtown for shared academic and community space, building networks of arts organizations, forming the Partnership for Better Education with the Syracuse City School District, and collaborating on issues of urban environmental sustainability.

Although these are all important initiatives, they alone cannot bridge the "81" divide, without the hard deliberate work to bring in the voices of the inner-city downtown neighborhoods—the "outsiders" in this particular community landscape—and to turn the tables on who sets the agenda and who responds. Several such efforts are well under way, many promoted by two important local foundations, the Gifford Foundation and the Central New York Community Foundation, and I want to briefly describe one that we have joined that is happening on the South Side of Syracuse—a majority minority neighborhood.

Residents of the South Side had been "burned" too often by University projects that were short-lived and structured more to meet the needs of faculty and students than of residents. Consequently, it was important for South Side residents to feel empowered to take the lead on new projects with the University. These

cover a variety of areas, from building a South Side Entrepreneurs Association to opening a technology center in the local library and an Urban Arts Education Initiative. And the first stages of the work revolved around listening. We heard narratives of distrust and discussions of the strengths of the neighborhood that are rarely seen or acknowledged by us as "outsiders" who see it through the fog of stereotypes and the very real but incomplete statistics about crime. Out of these meetings, came a South Side Community Coalition, with a University liaison—a staff member with ties to the neighborhood.

Ultimately, the South Side Community Coalition members identified a list of potential educational and economic development needs that University resources—intellectual and otherwise—could help address. They issued this list in the form of a Request for Proposals (RFP) to the University; faculty members interested in working with the South Side group had to adhere to the RFP guidelines, compose proposals, and submit them by a deadline. In very concrete ways, then, the roles of teacher and student—evaluator and evaluated, outsiders and insiders—were reversed. The result: the South Side group has been empowered to prioritize and regulate the projects to be conducted.

Among the many signature projects are a technology center in the local

public library that includes a wireless Internet hub and laptops; a cooperative

food-buying program that is expected to develop into a full-scale, physical food co-

op; and a South Side Community newspaper to tell the "real" stories of the

neighborhood. The landmark South Side Innovation Center, formed with

University support, is a business incubator for women- and minority-owned

businesses, and the youth of the neighborhood are also getting involved.

Not only will these projects all have sustainable physical and programmatic

presence, perhaps more importantly, they are built on networks of people—

outsiders and insiders in the neighborhood—who trust each other and take turns

being the experts and the novices. Of course, it isn't all smooth sailing, as years of

distrust don't vanish easily, and even within the South Side there are conflicting

neighborhood agendas and groups. Yet, there is the momentum that comes with

social capital building, especially when we are willing to turn the tables on power,

share resources, and think of the next generation as taking over a place where some

eyes have begun to focus on each other—as you would say, Eye to Eye.

If We Can't Erase the Past, We Can Look to the Future

And speaking of the next generation, as we all work to build these bridges, to open our eyes and listen, and to take the heat of conflict in the hopes of forging some inter-group trust, we must also listen closely to the children. They see it all with great clarity and their voices need to be heard. We are doing this in Syracuse, as are many communities around the country, in a series of literacy-through-the-arts programs, sponsored with corporate and foundation support and cooperatively organized by our faculty and the teachers of the Syracuse City School District. For example, we are giving cameras to elementary through high school students—to photograph their friends, families, and homes—and asking them to write poetry and prose describing their lives and our community.[16] The results tell a lot, as you can see in the following photograph and poem by Justus Lacey, a fifth-grader at Edward Smith Elementary School in Syracuse.

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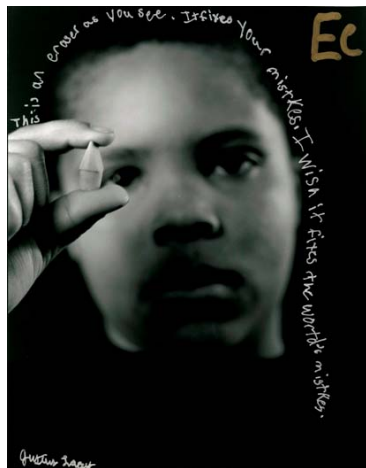
16 This approach to giving voice to children has been employed most famously by Wendy Ewald. See, for example, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*, New York: Writers and Readers Publications, Inc., 1985.

It reads, "This is an eraser as you see. It fixes your mistakes. I wish it fixes the world's mistakes."

As we leave here today and return to our communities—whether that's Charlotte, Syracuse, or wherever we call home—let us remember that we cannot erase history and we cannot easily bridge our divides, but we must at least acknowledge them. We must come to know more about each other so we can stop being blinded by the lens of "otherness," and instead reinforce communal responsibility. Then perhaps, as the "Fugees" in our midst take the field, we will all be on the same team.