

# **Immersion in Obama's Multicultural Discourse: A bite of multicultural literacy**

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## **Introduction: multicultural being and multicultural competence**

Similar to Indonesia's motto "*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*", meaning "unity in diversity", the cultural life in the USA is reflected in its motto "*E Pluribus Unum*" – meaning "of many ... one". In spite of many ways being offered to see the ethnicity of America, the metaphor of a salad bowl probably remains the most popular (see Lott, 2010, p. 2), as it does express the notion of unity - as a salad - and that of the diversity at the same time that may be perceivable in terms of the ingredients that make it up – the incoming groups that keep maintaining their distinctiveness.

The former notion of melting pot, that was originally meant to prescribe newly integrated immigrants to leave totally their old world's culture behind and then adopt the new culture of the new world, is becoming lesser in importance. The metaphor of a salad bowl to describe the kind of multiculturalism in the U.S.A is more proper since it underscores the notion that more rooms are open for preserving the enriching cultural roots side by side with the expressed allegiance to the common denominator of the mainstream culture of the new world.

It would be useful, in the first place, to know the distinction between liberal multiculturalism and pluralist multiculturalism. Liberal multiculturalism holds the belief that individuals from diverse backgrounds share "a natural equality" and "a common humanity"

(Kinchelou & Steinberg, 1997, p. 10). In some respects pluralist multiculturalism has things in common with liberal multiculturalism. However, unlike liberal multiculturalism that focuses more on the issue of sameness, pluralist multiculturalism emphasizes more on the issue of differences. Pluralism involves not only the rights of all individuals from diverse background, but also equal respect to marginalized groups having different historical and cultural tradition (Kinchelou & Steinberg, 1997, pp. 10-15).

American society is aptly said to be heterogeneous, and as a result is becoming more acceptable to call for those who live in such circumstances to be multicultural human beings (Lott, 2010, p. 1). Johnson & Johnson (2002, p. 4) call people living in such multicultural settings as being multicultural individuals, i.e. as people who have internalized several cultures, which then coexist inside them.

In order to be able to live harmoniously in a society consisting of groups that maintain their distinctiveness, Lot (2010, pp. 1-2) argues for the importance of facilitating students with an appropriate competence for such circumstances. Such a competence is called as multicultural competence, i.e. a competence that has in its core the ability of understanding one's own culture, respecting other cultures, and performing successfully appropriate culturally sensitive interpersonal skills.

As such within the existing curriculum in the educational setting, there must be built-in instructional activities aiming at teaching students to acquire the required social skills resulting in students' attitude not to hold prejudices against individuals from diverse backgrounds. Kincheloe & Steinberg (1997, pp. 15-16) argue that in order to acquire such skills students must be geared up to learn about the knowledge, values, beliefs and patterns of behavior that set apart various groups. In the educational setting, from the point of view of

pluralist multiculturalism, therefore, students are expected to develop consciousness construction of multicultural literacy. Thus students are to learn to acquire some level of multicultural literacy, i.e. they are to be enabled to operate successfully in cultural or subcultural differences.

In the context of education in Indonesia, Mahfud (2006, pp. 5-7) argues that multicultural education has gained more importance as the concept of multiculturalism is deemed to be more appropriate for the pluralist multicultural communities at large in Indonesia, especially since the era of autonomy and decentralization that started in 1999/2000. Since then the political liberation that was not accompanied with adequate multicultural literacy has given way to various kinds of conflicts – be they of ethnic, cultural, or subcultural backgrounds – that have torn down societies/communities. Multicultural education is expected to be able to respond to such needs by underscoring the importance of fostering consciousness construction of multicultural perspectives and attitudes so as to contribute to the need to diminish the widespread destructive conflicts.

This paper is encouraged by the awareness that education must be able to offer intellectual alternatives, among others, as done on this paper to select and design instructional activities that may foster the consciousness construction of multicultural literacy. This paper was written against the backdrops of the curriculum of most English Departments in Indonesia that may accommodate suggested lesson plan in this paper within the framework of some pre-existing courses such as American Studies, rhetoric, stylistics, reading, and listening,

## **Method**

In line with the purpose to provide teaching materials that may foster the consciousness construction of multicultural literacy for students majoring in English, this paper focuses on obtaining authentic materials of the speeches of Barack Obama in the light of Tomlinson's argument for using the authentic materials in language teaching (Tomlinson, 1997). They are valuable materials that just about every English teacher may have better access to internet sources wherever they are. The speeches were collected in the forms of hardcopies of the speech transcripts and the audios, from which then selection was made to obtain excerpts focusing on multicultural issues that may be used for the classroom discussion in American studies. Whereas the complete transcripts and audios from which the assorted excerpts are derived may still be useful for language enrichment in a number of different ways in skill courses such as listening and reading, and also valuable sources for analytical activities in courses such as rhetoric and/or stylistics. Both complete texts and audios may also become valuable resources as part of students' structured assignments pertaining to some related courses within the existing credit system.

Excerpts containing multicultural issues are selected to become the focus of the instructional activities. Since the texts are in the forms of excerpts, they must be properly contextualized so as not to pose any serious problems on the part of the students. Important issues to discuss are then identified and followed by activities to be directed toward the students' consciousness construction. The goal is always to learn about the knowledge, values, beliefs and patterns of behavior that are reflected in the particular excerpts being discussed pertaining to multicultural issues in the USA. On top of those important multicultural issues they have learned, the students are directed to get involved in the reflection of the knowledge, values, beliefs and patterns of behavior on multicultural issue

with similar issues in the Indonesian context. The point is that the students's multicultural literacy must be broadened and enriched by consciousness construction derived from the immersion in the multicultural discourse as suggested in this paper. Such things are feasible and workable on ground of the fact that the students have previously completed courses like "*Manusia dan Kebudayaan Indonesia*" (People and Culture of Indonesia). The classroom activities may supposedly proceed in the forms of active participation of the students by preparing a short reflection of their own focusing on multicultural issues on the excerpt being discussed and then giving each student the opportunity to share their ideas in a small group discussion.

### **Analysis: immersion in Obama's multicultural discourse**

#### **1. Excerpt 1: Barack Obama's Presidential Announcement Speech**

**1.1 Context (excerpt 1):** Obama announced officially his decision to run for the U.S. president against the backdrop of the Old State Capitol Building in Springfield, Chicago, Illinois. The choice of place in itself was symbolic of the continuation of the American tradition – part of the long journey having been made by his predecessors – to do something for the unfinished job of perfecting the nation. As often found in most Obama's speeches, this speech is also characterized by the higher structure of the messages as obvious in the forms of the structural repetition to magnify the messages being presented to his audience. The higher structure in this excerpt is presented by the repetition of it-cleft construction as many as three times.

#### **1.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 1):**

What important multicultural issues are emphasized by Obama in the use of the high structure of three "it-cleft" constructions in this excerpt?

#### EXCERPT 1

It was here, in Springfield, where I saw all that is America converge - farmers and teachers, businessmen and laborers, all of them with a story to tell, all of them seeking a seat at the table, all of them clamoring to be heard. I made lasting friendships here - friends that I see in the audience today.

It was here we learned to disagree without being disagreeable - that it's possible to compromise so long as you know those principles that can never be compromised; and that so long as we're willing to listen to each other, we can assume the best in people instead of the worst. That's why we were able to reform a death penalty system that was broken. That's why we were able to give health insurance to children in need. That's why we made the tax system more fair and just for working families, and that's why we passed ethics reforms that the cynics said could never, ever be passed.

It was here, in Springfield, where North, South, East and West come together that I was reminded of the essential decency of the American people - where I came to believe that through this decency, we can build a more hopeful America. And that is why, in the shadow of the Old State Capitol, where Lincoln once called on a divided house to stand together, where common hopes and common dreams still, I stand before you today to announce my candidacy for President of the United States.

([http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_11.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php), accessed November 2, 2009)

### 1.3 Consciousness construction

1) Paragraph 1: Obama states that Americans of all backgrounds clamor to be heard.

2) Paragraph 2: There are things that can be compromised, but there are also things that cannot be compromised. Obama asserts the need for the people to be broad-minded, hence multicultural beings, in that: (a) People must recognize very well things that cannot be compromised. (b) People must be willing to listen to each other. (c) People must build up a workable consensus based on things that can be compromised. Based on (a), (b) and (c), Obama was able to bring in more social reforms in death penalty system, health insurance, and tax system in the community .

3) Paragraph 3: By understanding the decency of the American people, Obama was enabled to build a better America.

#### 1.4 Reflection for consciousness construction 1.

1) Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What multicultural issues have you learned from excerpt 1 ? (b) What benefit did you learn that could be applicable in Indonesian context?

### 2. Excerpt 2: Barack Obama's Presidential Announcement Speech

**2.1 Context (excerpt 2):** Obama held the idea that his political stand had to be based on the coalition of the most diverse backgrounds of Americans. Both coalition and change became the twinned themes of his campaign trails for President of the USA. This excerpt underscores multicultural practices in the U.S.A. Despite their differences, Americans are reminded that they are one unity.

#### 2.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 2):

(a) What facts are emphasized to support Obama's assertion of the unity of the American people? (b) Discuss the intertextuality of the two distinct traditions as illustrated in Excerpt 2.

#### EXCERPT 2

That is why this campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us - it must be about what we can do together. This campaign must be the occasion, the vehicle, of your hopes, and your dreams. It will take your time, your energy, and your advice - to push us forward when we're doing right, and to let us know when we're not. This campaign has to be about reclaiming the meaning of citizenship, restoring our sense of common purpose, and realizing that few obstacles can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change.

.....  
The genius of our founders is that they designed a system of government that can be changed. And we should take heart, because we've changed this country before.

.....  
We welcomed immigrants to our shores, we opened railroads to the west, we landed a man on the moon, and we heard a King's call to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

.....  
By ourselves, this change will not happen. Divided, we are bound to fail. But the life of a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer tells us that a different future is possible. He tells

us that there is power in words. He tells us that there is power in conviction. That beneath all the differences of race and region, faith and station, we are one people. He tells us that there is power in hope.

([http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks\\_of\\_senator\\_barack\\_obam\\_11.php](http://www.barackobama.com/2007/02/10/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_11.php), accessed November 2, 2009)

## **2.2 Consciousness construction (excerpt 2) :**

- 1) Evidence from the excerpt illustrates Obama's political stand to be in unity with the American people: *"That is why this campaign can't only be about me. It must be about us - it must be about what we can do together"* and the use of the first person personal pronoun (plural) *"we"*, *"us"*, *"our"*, and his use of the jargon like *"our sense of common purpose"*.
- 2) Obama asserts that he works within the social cognition of the intertextuality of two distinct traditions, that of the white cultural tradition represented by Abraham Lincoln – *"a tall, gangly, self-made Springfield lawyer"* - and that of the Afro-American cultural tradition represented by the outstanding civil right activist – Martin Luther King Jr in *"a King's call to let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream"*.

## **2.3 Reflection for consciousness construction (excerpt 2).**

Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What multicultural issues have they learned from excerpt 2 ? (b) What values and beliefs did they learn that could be benefitted in Indonesian context?

## **3. Excerpt 3: Barack Obama's Speech on Race - "A More Perfect Union" Speech**

### **3.1 Context (excerpt 3)**

This speech was delivered after a great number of serious injections of racial issues that could have been potentially damaging to Obama's campaign.



### 3.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 3)

- (a) What gap existed between the ideal of equal citizenship under the law guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and the realities? How did Americans do about the gap?
- (b) What must Americans be doing in spite of their differences as asserted by Obama?

#### EXCERPT 3

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union ..." — 221 years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars, statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least 20 more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution — a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty and justice and a union that could be and should be perfected over time. And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part — through protests and struggles, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience, and always at great risk — to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign — to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

( <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>, accessed October 6, 2009)

### 3.2 Conscious construction (excerpt 3)

- (a) Slavery existed in the past was evidence of the gap between the ideal of equal citizenship as guaranteed under the law as vested in the U.S. Constitution and the realities in the

American society. What Americans in successive generations did were to narrow the gap between the promise of the ideal and the reality of their time “*through protests and struggles, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience*”.

(b) Despite their differences, Americans must perfect their nation by working together that may help them solve the challenges ahead.

### **3.3 Reflection for conscious construction (excerpt 3)**

Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What American experience did you learn that could be benefitted in Indonesian context?

## **4. Excerpt 4: Barack Obama's Speech on Race - "A More Perfect Union" Speech**

**4.1 Context :** Obama asserted the conviction that Americans would have to proceed with the call to perfect their union, and this could be done better by uplifting the remaining racial wounds in the American society.

### **4.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 4)**

What real deeds had to be done to uplift the remaining racial wounds in the African-American community?

#### **Excerpt 4**

But I have asserted a firm conviction — a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people — that, working together, we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances — for better health care and better schools and better jobs — to the larger aspirations of all Americans: the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man who has been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family.

.....  
In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination — and current incidents of

discrimination, while less overt than in the past — are real and must be addressed, not just with words, but with deeds, by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

( <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>, accessed October 6, 2009)

#### **4.3 Consciousness construction (excerpt 4)**

(a) In order to perfect the union, justice must be upheld in every aspect of American life.

(b) America has to invest better in schools and communities; to enforce civil rights laws and ensure fairness in the American criminal justice system; to provide ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.

#### **4.4 Reflection for consciousness construction (excerpt 4)**

Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What American experience did you learn that could be benefitted in Indonesian context? (b) Share the lesson learned in the small group discussion.

### **5. Excerpt 5: President Barack Obama's inauguration speech**

**5.1 Context :** President Obama asserted the nature of multiculturalism in the American society.

#### **5.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 5)**

(a) Why is it that the American life is called a multicultural one? (b) What made America to emerge as stronger multicultural country?

#### **EXCERPT 5**

For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus — and non-believers. We are shaped by

every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

(<http://www.indianexpress.com/news/text-of-president-obamas-inauguration-speech/413457/0> , accessed November 10, 2009)

### **5.3 Consciousness construction (excerpt 5)**

(a) America is a nation of many different religious believers and even non-believers; shaped by immigrants of different languages and cultures. (b) America has emerged stronger as a multicultural nation due to the best lessons learned from their former bitter experience of civil war and segregation.

### **5.4 Reflection for consciousness construction (excerpt 5)**

Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What American experience did you learn that could be benefitted in Indonesian context? (b) Share the lesson learned in the small group discussion.

## **6. Excerpt 6: President Barack Obama's inauguration speech**

**6.1 Context (excerpt 6):** American challenges ahead are new and the ways and instruments they are using to face them may be new, but Obama urges America to return to the strength of their tradition.

### **6.2 Issues to discuss (excerpt 6)**

- (a) What old values does Obama urge Americans to return to? Why?
- (b) What multicultural points are asserted by Obama in his inauguration speech as Presidents of the USA?

#### EXCERPT 6

Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends \_ hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism \_ these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility \_ a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task.

This is the price and the promise of citizenship.

This is the source of our confidence \_ the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed \_ why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall, and why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.

( <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/text-of-president-obamas-inauguration-speech/413457/0> , accessed November 10, 2009)

### 6.3 Consciousness construction (excerpt 6)

(a) Obama asserted the importance of returning and holding tightly to the American old values such as hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism. They are so valuable as they have evidently become the quiet forces for the American progress in the past.

(b) Men and women and children of every race and every faith participating in the celebration of the inauguration of the first Afro-American President of the USA were in themselves evident of multiculturalism in the USA.

### 6.4 Reflection for consciousness construction (excerpt 6)

Asking the students to write a short reflection: (a) What American experience did you learn that could be benefitted in Indonesian context? (b) Share the lesson learned in the small group discussion.

## **Conclusion**

The excerpts selected from Obama's speeches as discussed in this paper have shown some multicultural issues to be defended, held, and furthered in the realities of the American life. For students majoring in English, they provide with the lessons learned to enhance consciousness construction of Indonesian students' multicultural literacy to be benefitted in the Indonesian context.

Immersion in multicultural discourse as presented in this paper is expected to be able to further the attempts to improve multicultural literacy for students majoring in English in particular, and to further improve multicultural education in Indonesia in general.

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