



[Fig. 1] Freeman, Charles (“Boko”). *Education in Our Interest* (2001).

A Teaching of History and Culture in South Los Angeles

Charles Freeman, also known as “Brother Boko”, was assisted by Noni Olabisi and Sarika in painting the mural “Education in Our Interest”, located at Jefferson Middle School, on 644 East 56th St. (at Paloma Avenue), in South Los Angeles. Commissioned by SPARC (Social and Public Art Resource Center) the acrylic painting has suffered much damage from being exposed to both climate and tagging since its conception, in 2001.¹ Nevertheless, one can still

¹ The use of the term “tagging” is used instead of “graffiti” to distinguish the act of vandalism of the first from the act of making art of the latter.

clearly understand its message of equality and peace. Taken as a whole, the mural's connotation is the respect for one's history and culture.

Freeman was born in Houston in 1951, moving to New York during his high school years. During the 1970s, he finally settled in Los Angeles, where he was commissioned to complete a number of public murals (Freeman 2010). A political activist, and head of the "People's Party", a chapter of the Black Panther's Party in Houston, (Freeman 2010 and "Boko: The Eternal Panther"), 'Brother Boko' has constantly been involved in promoting human rights and respect among people. His artistic talents are innate, born within. Except for some art classes he took while attending 'Andrew Jackson High School', in New York, he has never received any professional artistic training.

On the occasion of our phone interview (2010), Freeman was living in New Mexico for four months, after spending five years in Atlanta. Even though he is at a different period of his life at the moment - working with fluorescent paintings inspired by the mysterious crop circles phenomena - the main message of his art is human respect. Today, his crop circles imply mysteries of the universe, thinking of humanity on a broader level, beyond the frontiers of Earth. Interestingly, the image of the circle brings up the idea of cycle and the cyclical nature of history. *Education in Our Interest* makes a connection with history, and to how people are linked due to their past. Freeman uses art to unite past and present, physical and metaphysical, an attempt to explain life's mystery through its various paradoxes.

Additionally, Freeman still recalls the unique experience of making murals. According to him, murals allow messages to reach out to a larger public, at the same time that it inspires more

people to use art as a way of expressing themselves (Freeman 2010). His purpose in producing *Education in Our Interest* was to motivate the community to discover their heritage and recognize their cultural history. In addition to the help of Noni and Sarik, the participation of the neighborhood residents was crucial to the mural's concept and composition (Freeman 2010). Freeman wanted to reflect something positive and exciting about the community, and the direct contact with them was the best way to grasp the tension between the different ethnic groups in the area. Through experience, Freeman noticed that the majority of them were composed by people of African and Latino descent, and he start noticing not only the differences, but above all, the similarities between them.

Cleverly, the artist decided to portrait the history of the two groups. As a result, he exposed a wide aspect of human behavior and social construction by telling history. Thus, the piece's main message was that we all come from the same place, and that the two apparently distinct groups had an almost identical way of building their society and passing on their knowledge to future generations. Art would not only embellish the area, but would also act as a mirror of the local community and their past.



[Fig. 2] Freeman, Charles (“Boko”). “Girl from Latin heritage reading a book” in; *Education in Our Interest* (2001).

Education in Our Interest offers a portrait of two young people reflecting about their ancestors. To the left, the African American boy holds the book “The World’s Great Men of Color”, written by J.A. Rogers in 1930, while other publications related to African culture and history are laid as if placed on a shelf, such as “Africa’s Gift to America”, also by Rogers, “As a Man Thinketh”, by poet James Allen, “The Soul of Black Folks”, a groundbreaking treatise by W.E.B. Du Bois, and the afro-centric interpretations of Egyptian history, “Stolen Legacy” and “Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization”. Immersed in knowledge, the boy gazes away as if

lost in his own thoughts. Behind him, characters from the book unfold², and a Zulu couple stands by an *umuzi*³, their traditional home construction type, made of *tamboti* wood. The man holds a walking stick (*knobkerrie*) and wears a two-part apron, similar to a loincloth, covering his privacy and buttocks. The front piece is called *umutsha*, while the length of the rear piece, the *ibheshu*, indicates the individual's social position (Bryant 1948:136-7). In the mural, we cannot see the rear piece, but the man portrayed by Boko is definitely Shaka Zulu, the founder of the Zulu Nation as he is mentioned in Rogers' book. Bryant (1948: 141) states that every Zulu man of mature age carried on the 'crown' of manhood, characterized as "an oval ring, place becomingly round the top of the head and with a slight tilt to the rear", as a sign to the clan that the man had achieved his majority. The man depicted by Freeman also wears the typical armband called *ubuSenga*. (Bryant 1948: 141)

Similarly, the woman is probably a noble, as she wears gold necklaces and bracelets, as well as a highly praised hat – the *isicholo* – decorated with beads (*uhuhlalu*). The everyday costume, called *umHambakáya*, was consisted of one short skirt. According to Bryant (1948:151), a variant of the daily costume - a long kilt - known as *iNgúbo*, was also used during celebrations, or a type of dress made of leather, and a circle of beads around their neck.

The choice of portraying them here must be considered, as it can be a reminder for the people of the local community to acknowledge their history, with both its glories and defeats, and above all, to live their lives with respect for each other's heritage. During the *apartheid* in

² The Zulu man portrayed is definitely Shaka (or Chaka) Zulu, as he is mentioned in Rogers' book, pages 265-275.

Africa, the Zulu people were considered an inferior class and were very much discriminated. Moving in the direction of the mural's center, one identifies the Great Pyramids of Giza, in Egypt, another reference to the African Continent and importance of African descendents as subjects, not objects, of global history.

Freeman's main idea was to portray the similarities between the world's cultures.⁴ Considering that the neighborhood was formed by both the African and Latin American communities, the artist portrayed a girl on the other side. The depiction of the two genders and ethnic groups entails a message of peace. Similarly to the African-descent boy on the left, the Hispanic-descent girl holds the book "Daily Life of the Aztecs". She is contemplative, as if reflecting upon what she had just read. On the background, characters and monuments from the text come to life.

An Aztec man, while his wife and kids gaze to the side, looks straight to the viewer. Their garments appoint to characteristics of the nobility in the Ancient Aztec Empire. The man wears the *tilmatli*, a mantle acting as a cloak worn around the shoulder and knotted in the front of breastplate, the *maxtlatl*, an undergarment wrapped around the lower torso, and the ends tied in front with a distinctive knot, serving for secular as well as functional purposes; as well as sandals (*cactli*), a privilege of the elite. *Quachtli*, a *tilmatli* below the knees worn only by nobles, as the man portrayed in the mural, visually demonstrated the individual's social ranking (Aguilar-Moreno, 2006:364). He holds a feathered fan, probably made out of bamboo and tropical birds by professionals called *amanteca*, they were used by the nobility and highest-ranking officials

⁴ Personal communication with the artist

(2006: 320). The woman is also noble, as is depicted with a decorated long *cueitl* (skirt) and *huilpilli*, and jade earrings and bracelets. Even though the kid wears the *maxtlatl* tied up on his right shoulder, a characteristic more common among commoners, he appears to be the couple's son (2006: 320).

The Aztec was a highly stratified society, and their monumental architecture is symbolized through the image of a tall and steep temple, probably the *Templo Mayor* at Tenochtitlan. In the mural, the design seems to serve more as a symbolic representation of Aztec construction than to one specific temple or pyramid. It is worth noting that the artist paid more attention in detailing the people portrayed than in the buildings that they constructed.

The sun is depicted shining between the pyramids from both continents: African and American. Light burnishes onto an Olmec Colossal Head that brings the inscription: "Know Thyself". According to Diehl, the Olmeca formed the earliest civilization in Mesoamerica (central and southern Mexico and northern Central America) and was one of only six pristine civilizations in human history (2004:11). The first report on Olmec culture was by Mexican Explorer José Melgar y Serrano, in 1869. Through the analysis of the *Tres Zapotes* Colossal Head I, in Veracruz, Serrano proposed that the sculpture depicted an Ethiopian man, thus that the first people to inhabit the American Continent were relocating from Africa. Even though Serrano's view was accepted for many years, scholars today have a different input on the subject. Diehl calls attention to the fact that "today can be no doubt that the heads depict the American Indian physical type still commonly seen on the streets of Soteapan, Acayacan, and other towns in the region" (2004: 112).

Thus, the design of the Colossal Head seems to represent a general American type and not a specific example. Freeman's representation could refer to the people living in *Tres Zapotes*, considering that his depiction is directly linking to Serrano's interpretation of the Olmeca being immigrants from Africa. Nevertheless, Serrano's view was crucial to the implementation of an Afro-centric perspective of history, similar to Mr. Rogers' book mentioned earlier.

The inscription on top of the colossal head (in Greek: *Gnōthi Sautón*) is a parody of a carving on the pediment at the *pronaos* of the Temple of Apollo, in Delphi; traditionally attributed to Chilon of Sparta and associated with Socrates and Plato.(Sholtz 2006:2). The Ancient Greek aphorism refers to self discovery and knowledge, a message present throughout the mural. Charles Freeman painted those words to emphasize the significance of knowing one's heritage.

On both sides of the figure, several titles of books and their respective authors are listed. On the right, "As a Woman Thinketh", "American Holocaust", "Zapata" Mexican Revolution", "Stolen Continents", and "*Mexico Profundo*". In the context of the neighborhood and the school where the mural stands, the mural invites the spectator, in this case, the student, to seek their identity and to understand his or her own culture. At the same time, through the depiction of historical elements from both cultures presented within that community, the work of art incites curiosity from both sides in the culture of the other. As Sholts (2006:3) has noted: "paradoxically, self-knowledge cannot be gained but through others, it is a crucially *social* form of knowledge". The lettering also makes reference to the text "Man, know thyself", by Marcus Garvey, a political activist, journalist, poet, and leader of the movement "Back to Africa".

(Gurvey) Further reference to the leader “Up, you mighty race!/ You can accomplish/ what you will.” “*Levanta a tu, pueblo poderoso y realiza todas suas metas*” appoints to the essence of the mural in being an inspirational message for the neighborhood.

Even though the people in the community have “expressed” themselves through graffiti and tagging, causing damage to the mural, the artist successfully achieved his initial goal of portraying the similarities of two cultures apparently distinct, contributing to the promotion of reciprocal respect between the groups. It was by reaching back to history that he was capable of showing to his audience that we are all very similar. After all, for Charles Freeman: “we are all people, from the same human race and, as flowers, we come in different colors.” (2010)

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