

America as One Continent

By MUNA LEE

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The following article consists of excerpts from an address given at the University recently by Muna Lee, '14, poet and author who has been serving on the staff of the Cultural Relations Division of the State Department. She is the wife of Luis Munoz-Marin, president of the Puerto Rican Senate. Her appearance in Norman was in connection with the annual Pan-American Fiesta held on the campus.

WHEN I STUDIED geography in the public schools of Hugo—in the days when the town was not in Oklahoma but the Indian Territory—I was taught that there were two American continents: the continent of North America and the continent of South America. I have spent a good part of the past quarter-century in learning that there is one American continent, and that it includes not only the 18 republics of the mainland but also Canada and those mountain-peaks that rise as islands into the tropical lands of the West Indies.

By each of the five definitions that Webster gives, America is in scientific fact a continent. But only through cultural relationships, more binding and more enduring even than its mighty mountain chains, can it become a continent in spirit as well as in geology.

Cultural interchanges are not new in the history of America. They are older than the European within its shores; older than English or Spanish or French or Portuguese in its many-cadenced speech. From the Arctic to southernmost South America, and circlewise through the Caribbean island arc, its indigenous peoples exchanged their produce and their art.

During the colonial period, too, there was certainly a continental unit, as there was also during the period of Independence. When the day of independence was assured, the concept of continentality vanished. What seems to me essential today is a return of America's continentality. What we must attempt first is to form this continent by awakening understanding, for it is in their national cultures that people express themselves.

The program of the United States government in cultural relations is not a wartime measure. It was planned and initiated when this hemisphere was at peace, and it looks beyond limitations and barriers of a world at war to the widening horizons and opportunities of a world at peace once more.

More than three years before Pearl Harbor the Division of Cultural Relations was established in the Department of State "for the purpose of encouraging and strengthening cultural relations and intellectual cooperation between the United States and other countries."

The best proof of the enduring value of cultural relationships established or explored in the pre-war world and building toward the post-war future is the fact that they are actually increasing in number and significance under wartime pressure. Nobody cares about gestures now, unless they are an integral part of action. And it is in this mood, this atmosphere, this stern conviction that only essentials matter that the cultural relations program is everywhere striking deeper into democratic soil and producing not only flowers or fruits.

Within the scope of the program are comprehended all fields of intellectual and cultural interests: the sciences, including technology, the medical sciences, public health; the social sciences, including those especially concerned with social welfare; the humanities, including literary, linguistic, historical and philosophical studies; library and museum economy; education at all levels and in all fields; and the creative arts in all media of expression—the visual arts, literature and music, including the popular and applied arts.

This program, which obviously taps all confluent sources of our national life, is carried out, not by draining their wealth away from us, but by a series of mutually profitable interchanges—interchanges of leaders of thought and opinion, teachers, students, cultural objects, radio programs, books and periodicals, scientific and scholarly apparatus, and films.

Unquestionably, the United States has a store of knowledge and experience that can be enormously useful to the other countries of America; but they too have learned a lot on their own account, and we can save ourselves time and worry and expense by making use of what they have to offer in many fields.

Let me end with a wartime utterance by Ezequiel Padilla, foreign minister of Mexico:

"A great cause unites us. A great cause, that shall endure as long as the soul of man shall breathe in mortal clay: the cause of freedom. It nourishes the doctrine of continental solidarity, and constitutes the last and most transcendent of the reasons that have made an understanding between our countries logical, imperative, and indispensable."