

## ***IDENTITY POLITICS***

“Not *politics* again,” sighs the white guy in a gray shapeless sweatshirt on the far side of the table. “I’m here to learn to write a novel.”

“*Woman* poet?” she whispers audibly to her neighbor during the reading. “Not a *black* poet. Not a *black woman* poet. A *poet*.”

### **WHO CARES . . . AND WHAT ABOUT?**

On tour, at readings, during workshops, the visiting writer fields any number of predictable questions: “How did you arrive at the idea for your poem (novel, play)?” or “How can I get an agent?” or “What time of the day do you write?” or “What contemporary writers have influenced your writing?” In published interviews, questions range over process, product, poetics, the profession, and personal politics, but politics are, for some, the shark under the surface. It is far easier to discuss the first four Ps—including technique and talent and “the business” of writing—than to articulate the way the fifth P—politics, or ideology—affects a text or reflects the way a writer’s identity has been formed in response to intersecting communities. The *Writer’s Chronicle*, as the publication representing “professional” creative writers, focuses on the first four Ps—particularly the fourth and the situation of writers within English department hierarchies—while *Poets and Writers*, which features regular themed issues focused on groups of writers, more regularly focuses on the fifth P: identity politics.

A perennial conference panel question: “As a self-labeled lesbian feminist, why did you choose a male speaker for your historical persona poem?” The possible subtext here? “Shouldn’t you have written and celebrated a woman’s life since these have been so often overlooked; as a woman shouldn’t you write about women?” Try another version of the question: “Can a white, middle-class, male liberal like you truly present

the Vietnamese experience as you attempt to do in these short stories?" The possible subtext here? "Aren't you unfairly appropriating the voice of the 'other'?"

Depending on their understanding of writing as based in aestheticism—which is championed within institutions of higher learning—or on writing as a social process—a focus that reflects the daily realities of many freelance writers—the answer to these questions will vary from author to author: The poem needed to be constructed, with a male speaker, no matter the gender politics of the writer, because *women* during that period *couldn't* take the initiative in a love affair; the story's Vietnamese character *demand*ed that the author follow him from the old country to the new. For these writers, art and verisimilitude shape inventiveness. For another poet, representing her own gender's experience, even in historically based poems, might be paramount, and for another novelist, the narrator's character is crucial but can only be developed in the context of what the writer has experienced, researched, and decided he is ethically able to claim; that is, character development may at times be a matter of following but is always a matter, as well, of shaping and deciding. In fact, these and all writers are guided by innumerable other constraints as well: genre (mystery), audience (young adult), assignment (fewer than three thousand words) . . . to say nothing of the ability to put an idea into action.

Put another way:

- The Aestheticists say "Yes"; the artist (and the art) requires a writer to use his or her unique imagination to create new textual realities of the highest order.
- The Political Activists say "Maybe," particularly if one's heart and motives are honorable (often this means green, liberal, socialist, or Marxist).
- The Foundationalists say "No," because *only* someone of Vietnamese heritage may credibly share these events, having earned that right via untransferable experiences.
- The Postmodernists say "Which Vietnamese? American born? Biracial? Still living in country? Fishermen in Louisiana bayous? Old, young, gay, Catholic, of the professional class now fallen on hard times? There is no unitary 'Vietnamese experience but 'many Vietnamese experiences.' And by the way, who is the audience? How will the text be received and read?"

Here, we can recast Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that "[t]he word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention" (1975, 294). So too, most theorists and many writers this century acknowledge that identity in culture is always mediated. Writers, if they focus exclusively on constructing creative worlds, risk overlooking their own construction, the myriad experiences and influences that combine to make up the ever-evolving identity each individual recognizes as "self."

### **RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND OTHER "OTHERS"**

For the theory averse writer, the term "identity politics" may be less familiar than the critical mantra: raceclassandgender. It doesn't take long as a professional to understand that it was not only during the McCarthy era that the relationship of a writer's politics and activism influenced an agent's willingness to read a script or an editor's decision to recommend a book. Some years certain narrators are bankable, sometimes they are box office poison. Financial gain (particularly for the publishers) can focus the flame of attention down to certain groups or genders or political positions. Because of this, an author's choice of a narrator may be influenced by community relationships and an investment in that community (developing a work to highlight the loss of an ecology or a group of individuals); on a writer's willingness, desire, and ability to be seen as a spokesperson for this (or other) communities (writing out of and to illustrate the black experiences in America); and on a writer's ability to understand and successfully negotiate the power relationships inherent in "the writing business" at the local, national, and global levels.

Equally, and sometimes without fanfare, identity politics may determine creative writers' choices of genres and techniques (feminists refusing traditional genre constraints), shape their literary taste (subscribing to Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgendered [GLBT] literary journals), impact their values and beliefs (resisting being labeled as a woman poet, editing a book that highlights the writings of authors whose work has been banned in their home countries) support their efforts to form or leave writing communities (starting a new theater to highlight working-class dramatists and drama), and influence their writing theories and teaching practices (teaching poetry in homeless shelters).

Which is to say that a writing life is built upon, grounded in, and shot through with cultural influences and beliefs that we place under this umbrella term. Consider this brief compilation, a litany of “politics r us”:

#### On the Environment

I do not believe we can bypass our relationship to the land if we hope also to improve this culture’s relationship to women, to children, to people of color, to the poor, the illiterate, the homeless. . . . We can’t be good to each other if we can’t even be good to a tree, to a forest.—Rick Bass

#### On Race

Although I am quite Americanized, my book focuses on many of my feelings and identity and my “Cubanness.” I intended for my book to commemorate at least a few aspects of the Cuban psyche (as I know it).—Oscar Hijuelos

Writing becomes a way to be exacting about images in a world where generalizations lead to stereotypes; it is a way of showing how varied and complicated the black experiences (yes, plural) are in this country, on this continent, on this planet.—Colleen McElroy

#### On Class

I saw that the people I was working with . . . were voiceless in a way. In terms of the literature of the United States they were not being heard. Nobody was speaking for them. And as young people will, you know, I took this foolish vow that I would speak for them and that’s what my life would be. And sure enough I’ve gone and done it.—Phillip Levine

I see my work emerging from some kind of imaginative collectivity, not from solitary genesis. That approach has been nurtured by my working in writers’ groups. As a writer, I still strongly identify as a worker . . . partially as a result of my class background.—Valerie Miner

#### On Gender

“Coming out” is partially a process of revealing something kept hidden, but it is more than that. It is a process of fashioning a self—a lesbian or gay self—that did not exist before coming out began.—Shane Phelan

*Did you come out while you were at Penn State?*

I don’t want to go too much into that. . . .

*Why don’t you like to talk about it?*

I don’t want to talk about it because first of all I don’t want it to be the central element of my identity as a poet. And secondly, well, it doesn’t interest me as

a poet, except when it inadvertently appears in my poetry, the way God may appear, or love may appear, or childhood may appear.—Agha Shahid Ali

Politics r us, but some creative writers aren't comfortable when "the political" appears to trump or influence the "aesthetic." In one pair of quotes above, one writer suggests that exploring gender is an valuable part of creating a (writing) identity while another views gender as a secondary issue, which may or may not arise during composition (Phelan, Shahid Ali). In another pair of quotes, one writer speaks *for* his eclipsed community and another writer speaks *out of* her formative community (Levine, Miner).

Like any group or guild, creative writers have a number of common causes but no absolute consensus. Still, judging from *Poets & Writers* in particular, and the *Writer's Chronicle* to a lesser extent, writers find themselves increasingly obligated and moved to articulate their understandings of how race, class, and gender influence their work. Those who feel there is no need to do this—that the art is all—may focus in this manner because they believe minority positionality is a given: historically, writers have claimed outsider status as rebels, innovators, experimenters, and minority members of certain established coteries and groups by choice. And writing, for many, appeals as a way to champion radical or outsider positions. At the same time, by claiming the radical edge in the "Republic of Letters" (Pease 1990, 110), authors seek to mark themselves as "other," even if this separateness is more a sense of style than substance (bohemian dress and digs and speech and manners—the lesser rebellion of arriving drunk or lecherous or dialectical and *damn*-ing at the reading and insulting the institutional hosts). As a result, in the past and perhaps even more ferociously today, "nationalism is currently being shaped to defend a beleaguered notion of national identity read as white, heterosexual, middle-class, and allegedly threatened by contamination from cultural, linguistic, racial, and sexual differences" (Giroux 1995, 48). For those writers who position themselves not only as aesthetically threatening but also as activists, identity politics include the right to speak—to wage peace and politics as well as poetry—not just the right to learn how to speak.

#### WHAT DOES IT MATTER WHO IS SPEAKING?

The writer who believes that "literary texts are among the most powerful form of cultural discourse, and as such they may attest to, perpetuate, or critique the class divisions prevalent in a given culture at a given

period of history” or who understands that her texts may “simultaneously perpetuate and critique the class structure” (Murfin and Ray 1997, 47) understands as well that it does matter who is speaking and that whoever has the stage (the microphone, the authority to write and so to represent) holds certain enviable powers.

In pursuit of authorial power, which powers will writers choose? Political activism or separatism? Are they in support of “others” or *are* they the “other”? Do global communities appear to be a source of cultural pluralism or a scene of contact zones and conflict? Are writers willing to accept and accommodate all other writers in a *mélange*, believing the whole benefits from all parts, from multivocality? Or does experience tell the seasoned writer that majority and minority will always clash, suggesting that nondominant cultures must always proceed from a regrounding in their own heritage?

Underlying such questions is the larger issue of a writer’s worldview, epistemology, and set of intellectual and experiential understandings. Are identity choices made or do they happen, in which case response to events is everything; that is, does writing simply reflect (powerfully, aesthetically) or change (make a difference)? For instance, do all Vietnamese writers have the responsibility to recuperate and revitalize their war-devastated culture? Some would say yes. Charles Johnson describes himself as being “committed to the development of what one might call a genuinely systematic philosophic black American literature, a body of work that explores classical problems and metaphysical questions against the background of black American life” (*Charles Johnson* 1992). But Ray Gonzalez complicates such a position, demanding recuperation for one group while suggesting alignment with other groups: “Latino writing incorporates a great deal of magical realism—though it is not the only style Latinos use—because the culture and the background of many of these writers call for this kind of style. By this I mean that racial, political, and cultural forces in the U.S. fractured Latino artistic sensibilities long ago. In today’s slick ‘era of the Hispanic,’ it is often necessary to write about a world where truth and make-believe clash against one another as they form a more realistic view in a country that, historically, has not been generous to people of color” (Tabor 2001, 36).

John Yau resists cultural stereotyping: “One of the ‘codes of authenticity’ that Yau has struggled with over the years is the idea of an Asian-American style of writing. ‘If you are an Asian American, as I am, many people expect you to write transparent or autobiographical poems,

poems about garlic, soy sauce, ginger etcetera.’ In a time when identity politics is the keystone issue for many artists, Yau’s concerns turn elsewhere. Instead, he tries—like so many of the abstract artists to whom he’s drawn—to circumvent the personal and social codes in search of a purer expression” (Rohrer 2002, 23).

Colson Whitehead recasts the question as the problem: “Well, people talk about pop and commercial African-American fiction—the urban romance, the B-boy novel. And I think that people are always surprised when someone like Paul Beatty or Danzy Senna or me pops up and we’re not doing the expected thing, what’s been done before, but that’s the point of doing this. . . . I guess if I wanted I could write some sort of weird commercial thing . . . well, it wouldn’t be weird; it would have to be commercial. But that’s not my ambition or aim. I think the white press is always like, Postmodern Black Person? They’re more shocked than they should be because there are actually a lot of us who aren’t doing what’s expected” (Ratiner 1994).

And here’s the catch about cultivating a unitary identity—contemporary writers, like all citizens, arise from not one culture but many cultures: many Vietnamese cultures, many Asian American and black American cultures, Hispanic cultures, and European cultures. Hybrids all. And the more hybridity writers experience, the more likely they may be to value and seek to understand what was lost from each formative tributary. In fact, identity politics may be or become the writer’s central subject. Garrett Hongo explains: “My project as a poet has been motivated by a search for origins of various kinds, a quest for ethnic and familial roots, cultural identity, and poetic inspiration—all ultimately connected to my need for an active imaginative and spiritual life” (Ling and Cheung 2002).

Identity politics complicates life for those who hold a more monovocal worldview and who seek a more aesthetically oriented identity; or, perhaps, it is the first step on the road to acknowledging complexity in the scene of writing. Consider the student in the workshop who blurts out one frustrating day: “I’m tired of feminists and any ‘ists.’ I’m a white male and I’m never going to get my fiction placed because only minorities get published these days. I mean, all the journals you look at spotlight this or that special group. Like ‘Latin American Jewish Women Writers’ or ‘Gay Writers of Conscience.’ Man, I’m just trying to write about alligators and Wakulla County and no one is gonna do a special issue on me.”

There is no doubt that at times, movements to include appear based on exclusion, as if the tables have been turned. However, what appear

either/or regression is often a step on the journey toward both/and . . . a progression that takes time and commitment. Charles Henry Rowell, founding editor of *Callaloo*, articulates his responsibility to serve the African American community in this manner: “African-American writers, from the time of Phillis Wheatley to today, live in desperate circumstances. We don’t have a great number of forums in which to speak. *Callaloo* provides that space for our creative writers, intellectuals, and visual artists. If, like white America, we had hundreds of journals, then you could say that *Callaloo* is trying to do too much. *Callaloo* is a journal of necessity. I don’t know if I can repeat that enough. We are a people in desperate need of outlets for our creativity” (Masiki 2003, 25). Here, Rowell argues not for hundreds of journals but for *this* journal. Not all the space but *necessary* spaces.

#### LOCAL AND GLOBAL

If decisions can be made, no one but the writer can make them. Each has to tally up personal allegiances. And such work takes place in both majority and minority communities. Consider writers who choose political activism. In a review of Carolyn Forché’s poetry collection *Angel of History*, her politics and her poetry are discussed together: “For her, the decisive moments of our history are its large-scale calamities: World War II, fascism, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, El Salvador, Chernobyl. All of these events have a ghost-like presence in Forché’s poetry. . . . Haunted by the weight of the dead, the volume speaks with a finely elegiac voice that gives it a singular intensity. The characteristic feeling in these poems is one of desolation” (Thompson 1995).

This very haunting concerns others who ask, Who is haunting whom? “The brand ‘political poet’ was used to both damn and lionize her [Forché’s] work. She found herself mired in what she now sees is ‘the cyclic debate peculiar to the United States concerning the relationship between poetry and politics. . . . And I felt that the debate wasn’t a useful one, that the grounds were reductive and simplistic and unhelpful to anyone who wanted to think about the responsibility of citizens, much less writers. . . . There was no notion that language might be inherently political or perhaps ideologically charged whatever the subject matter and even when the person isn’t aware of [it]’” (Ratiner 1994).

For some in the creative writing community, Forché’s work is opportunistic even though interviews detail her active, on-site involvement in many of the cultures she writes about. If Forché were an ethnographer, not a poet, similar critiques would arise—particularly regarding the



amount and quality of time she has spent “in the field,” collecting her data, compiling her notes. For these days postmodern ethnographers are suggesting approaches similar to that advocated by Gayatri Spivak, who “asks that researchers stop trying to know the Other or give voice to the Other . . . and listen, instead, to the plural voices of those Othered, as co-constructors and agents of knowledge” (Fine 1994, 75). Some postmodern ethnographers attempt shared authorship, coauthoring field reports with informants in the effort to co-construct. Such a practice will take longer-to-forever for activist creative writers due to the field’s long-standing proscription against coauthoring. While we are not suggesting that Forché coauthor with “The Colonel,” it might be worth considering the degree to which she has been able to create poetic polyvocality: the goal of many involved with identity politics. Perhaps this could become one useful evaluative criterion.

When creative writers choose such a route—listening for voices and working toward social justice, no matter how difficult to attain—they may, like Maxine Hong Kingston, do so from the belief that “[a]n artist changes the world by changing consciousness and changing the atmosphere by means of language. So I have to use and invent a beautiful, human, artistic language of peace” (Perry 1993, 173). They may, like Nega Mezlekia, consider writing and writers to have dual functions and multiple responsibilities: “Writing shouldn’t be entertaining only. It should be informative as well. Particularly for a person like me who has lived under very, very terrible regimes, he or she has an obligation to bring this to light” (Eiben 2002).

Even writers who cannot be optimistic about the possibilities of creating a socially just world may believe that multivocality continues to trump monovocality and that cross-cultural dialogue is of the highest value. These writers seek to understand rather than to voice for. Sensitivity of this sort could be modeled for novice writers, in part, through workshop exercises. If workshop participants were asked to help peers understand, deepen, complicate, and improve an “alien” voice in a text instead of dismissing it or embracing it out of hand, issues of authorial appropriation might be better understood, resolved, and resisted.

#### **BORN TO WRITE: AESTHETICS VIS-Á-VIS IDENTITY**

Hard-working writers may shy away from the degree of theoretical and political commitment overviewed in this entry, given that there is so little time to learn to write well and excel. Or writers may be provoked to ask again, “But what does this have to do with writing? I want to prac-

tice writing, not politics—to be a novelist, not a working-class novelist.” Creative writers in the United States who vie to be recognized for their literary excellence tend to invest deeply in aestheticism, that familiar and enduring nineteenth-century movement “that insisted that art need not be moral to have value” (Murfin and Ray 1997, 4). For these individuals, a writer’s desire to “do art” and to “do good” are often at odds. Consider another series of quotes, some from the same writers listed previously, which illustrate this tension:

#### It’s Not Enough

As witness, I know there has always been a political element in my life. I’ve always been interested in matters of political conscience and of fairness. There was a time when I would forgive many poems because I liked their sense of compassion and humanity, even if the poems were not very good, particularly when I agreed with their politics. It took me a long time to realize that good politics don’t necessarily mean good poetry.—Agha Shahid Ali

#### It’s Less Important

If you’re a writer, you’re a writer and if you’re any good at all you get beyond terms like “southern” or “feminist.”—Susan Richards Shreve

You don’t want to make art about your color, your race, your culture, or your community. You want to use your community, your race, and your culture to make a piece of art.—Charles Henry Rowell

*How do you feel about being defined as a writer of color or other categorization?*

I think it can be a convenient tool at times, but it’s finally very boring as a writer. It’s interesting that others talk about it, but when you are writing I think you should only be committed to how good you can make your poem.—Agha Shahid Ali

#### It’s Inevitable

Part of the reason I wouldn’t call myself a Jewish writer is because I’m not trying deliberately to write Jewish themes. My Jewishness is like the wallpaper in every room I’ve been in.—Susan Fromberg Schaeffer

I write because I must. . . . if you write from a black experience, you’re writing from a universal experience as well.—Sonia Sanchez

#### It’s Consequential

Let’s just say that though I am a woman, and though much of what I’ve learned that I will say here I learned as a consequence of being a woman in my body

and in this culture; nevertheless, I still use the concept of gender as an organizing principle and metaphor for other kinds of marginalization, which I further define not as absolutes but rather as positions along never-fixed continua, stretching not two but many ways from an imaginary center we recognize largely by instinct. Principle, metaphor, position: Gender as a function, which can become inclusive if we are not stingy with our experiences and meanings. . . . Speaking as a woman, what I would say is that it is never enough to know what we know; we also need always to know how we know it, and, most especially, to know what we don't know. To know the knowing, as well as the not.—Katharine Haake

Some writers know their positions and their politics from the moment an image arises, or a character turns around in the mind's eye, or the pen first touches journal and fingers a keyboard. For others, identity evolves more slowly and requires developing the humility to “know the knowing, as well as the not” to which Katharine Haake alludes. Shane Phelan suggests: “If we ask why certain metanarratives function at certain times and places, we find that the answer does not have to do with the progress of a unitary knowledge but rather with shifting structures of meaning, power, and action” (1993, 767).

For a writer, considering politics means asking not only “Will *my* work last?” but also “What other works have lasted and why?” Understanding our positions means asking what we don't know. If the personal is political, then the person's art is likely to be as well. Identity question breeds identity question: Why do class prejudice, sexism, ageism, and racism exist—if they do—in our workshops and classrooms and contests? Why is there so little tolerance for diversity of this sort within a population that claims to value the original, the new, the radical? Why should it be important that the aesthetic value of “art” be so regularly reaffirmed? Why is dialogue regarding politics, theory, and pedagogy often avoided? What are the stakes here? What are your answers?