Scratching Heads: The Importance of Sensitivity in an Analysis of “Others”

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One discussion currently taking place in the literary community is the question of whether or not racial or sexual identity as it applies to academic writers should be considered an influential factor that enables or assists one’s ability to critically analyze a text. Clearly, it is to the advantage of some that the rift currently existing between colored and white women increase; to harness the energy of female intellect is deconstructive, I would argue, to certain spheres of academia. With this in mind, it occurred to me that a black woman’s examination of her own writing might begin to explain the implications of insensitivity and exclusion consciously or unconsciously demonstrated by white academics, whether in organizing conference panels or in writing or teaching about texts by minorities.

I offer that examination in these pages; but first, let me make some straightforward observations about the issue. Clearly, black women bring an invaluable cultural familiarity to the interpretation of black texts that is important, indeed essential, to the discussion, interpretation, and analysis of works by black women writers for scholars and students alike. Not only are we able to code switch at will, but we also have the advantage of comprehending and interpreting the language of these texts—black English and its oral traditions, including idioms such as the verbal “girl” and “chile” and the nonverbal rolling
of eyes, and *sith* (sucking of teeth). I personally would be upset listening to an interpretation of a novel by Toni Morrison, for example, that lacked the rich flavor that comes naturally to black language—written, spoken, physical, academic, anecdotal, or analytical. It would be like meat without gravy, cornbread without greens, black-eye peas without rice, and wings without hot sauce for most black women writers/readers.

When approaching black literature, scholars of color or ethnicity are armed with a fine-tooth analytical comb. Positioning the text between our legs like sisters often do when scratching heads, our mental thighs embrace it, enabling us to steady the pain as we dig deeper into the textual hair; sensitively we scratch the sickness out of and conduct further analysis into what hides beneath and within the scalp of the subtext; as it begins to breathe it exhales the hidden messages encoded within the narrator’s voice.

This is not meant to deny the value of white female scholars’ interpretation of a black woman writer’s work. But it is critical that we seek researchers and critics who bring special cultural memory to literature by black writers.

But the issue takes in far more than this. “What is Black?” I wonder. The transatlantic slave trade forced Africans to migrate to Europe, the West Indies, and South and North America, and their descendants adopted, creolized, mixed with, and assimilated the dominant cultures’ behavior particular to geographic locale, often at the cost of their own beliefs and customs. Once transported west, members of strong religious cultures such as those found among the West Africans could no longer freely practice their beliefs in ancestor veneration or the continuum of life after death (opening the way for the establishment of control through the fear of death). Although we were dispersed and altered, our cultural memory remained intact as many groups diversified and developed into what is commonly referred to as “black people.” Moreover, there are threads connecting the African within us: underlying philosophical trusses, a central cos-
mology, or controlling ideal bind us together as “black” and make us unique, rather than opposite to white North Americans. Our “blackness,” therefore, is exhibited in various forms of expression encompassing unique and vastly different experiences.

All of us—black, white, red, yellow, brown—feel, think, see, and write in order to communicate. But often, the purpose of writing for those who live on the margins has been to keep at bay feelings of impending madness generated by the perpetual contradictions that motivate society. The notion of writer as chronicler, recorder, promulgating the oddities, absurdities, and ironies of human existence and behavior, struggling to coexist with nature and society, is familiar territory. For black women-artists-writers, the struggle to maintain sanity, balancing the mundane with the world of our imaginations, is profoundly challenging.

Like the characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,* black women writers often have one foot in this world and one in the next in order to cope with the deafening silence and blinding invisibility suffered under the yoke of colonization. Our sanity and survival have depended on our ability to express artistry through work—in cooking, quilting, tending gardens, and telling stories to our children. What makes one stew tastier, one quilt more comforting, one garden more appealing to the eye, or one story better or more valuable than another is the writer’s innate ability to “story tell.” What one has been through and how one expresses her experience is commonly known as *flava’* (flavor or flair) in our communities.

We are people of the Nommo (word), keepers—rather than owners—of the word, whose cultures dictate sharing and passing on, through verbal, visual, or written expression, the knowledge of the circle of life and death. We process our experiences, understand and transmit knowledge through the power of words. Originally the oral tradition was the main form of expression used to accomplish tribal socialization. Our sojourn in America, however, resulted in the repression of our languages and denial of access to the written English
tradition; the knowledge of books that relate ideas, communicate, educate, and inform was the legacy of the white privileged class and forbidden to the slave.

Still, we found the words to tell our stories, listening to them evolve as we relied on the cultural memories of our African past, living now within the context of slavery: Congo square, sugar cane, full moon, Jim Crow, sharecropping, and the blues are some things that reshaped our narrations, metamorphosed native tongues into Creole languages as a way of communicating. Teeth sucking, soft moaning, low grunting, eye rolling, head shaking, "Chile . . .," non-verbal codes, and what we did not say were highly important subtexts flavoring the dullness of servitude.

It follows then that as we write, even though it is not always our intention, the gift of narrative voice unconsciously engages an unknown audience’s ear as if they were sitting down with us by the fireside resting their weary bones. To fiercely engage the mind from beginning to end, to suck it into the whirlwind of a novel from which one surfaces only for necessary breath or tears is the accomplishment of black women writers such as Toni Morrison.

But whether the writer is known or unknown, her storytelling captures our imaginations, transporting us through doorways. The creation of different, colored, unfamiliar realms is as necessary as life-breath itself; it is what fills our emptiness, what satisfies our intellectual hunger, what keeps our very essence from flying apart, what grounds us in this world, what allows us to let go of the pain of rememory. We are writing a missing ingredient of literature: the story of the strong and powerful black female voice.

Since the time the system of patriarchy began colonizing the jungles of the world, man has conquered other people, uprooting them, imposing laws, standards, customs, and institutions, including politics, language, and education, on the subjugated in order to maintain control. At first the master has a direct hand in the metamorphosis from a free thinking-acting people to the altered state of slave, usu-
ally by inciting the fear of death through cultural and racial annihilation, as in the case of Nazi Germany. But later, the master controls indirectly through enforcers elected from the lower classes: the Roman guard, the slave catcher, and the police are examples of those anxious to release their frustrations on the powerless because of their own condition of diminished social or economic power. Next, the master further removes himself while still maintaining control through a select group of puppeteers; delegates chosen from the ranks of the colonized, including overseers, house slaves, religious leaders, and educators, enforce his will. The last and most complex level of colonization occurs when the slave, caught in a world bereft of color and voice, polices herself.

Not until the slave is psychologically free can she be truly free. A unique form of self-hatred develops from the condition of voiceless invisibility; we fly apart as we become desensitized, accepting the conditions of servitude. Although we are not grounded within the framework of dominance, we do not flee, because we are not willing to risk the consequences of capture; hand in hand we lead our daughters to the master’s special cabin in the slave quarter in exchange for a blanket or petticoat, and piece by piece, like scraps of quilting, we unravel at the seams of our true essence as our voices slowly disappear. We commit acts of self-genocide such as drive-by shootings and gang warfare because we cannot let go of self-hatred steeped in the pain of rememory.

Eventually, we begin to ignore our condition, having been taught that we are less than perfect, or less than animal. With downcast eyes we turn our heads when children are sold away from mothers, husbands are sold away from wives. We block out screams in the night of slaves being tortured by the lash, or burned at the stake like Morrison’s Sixo as the master fumes, incapable of understanding his dying song as his spirit transcends the flesh.

It becomes, therefore, necessary for black women writers like Morrison to assist us in understanding and transcending the pain this
world has inflicted on itself. To name the fears that help us perceive the ghosts, invisible to others yet clearly visible within the voices of our narrations, is the black woman writer's primary task; using words, she sculpts our experience, claiming it, creating doorways through which the stench of blistering flesh cannot intrude. As she scratches the sickness of dehumanization onto paper, the writer transmutes the experience into powerful Nommo, defining, protecting, releasing the spirit necessary for transformation and survival in a world that does not include our voice.

Some may argue that times and attitudes fostered by four centuries of institutionalized racism, sexism, and prejudice have changed in this country since slavery was abolished, or even within the last twenty years, since the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement of the 1970s. I, for one, believe that not much has changed except the scenery (else why are we discussing this matter?). Yet I do believe that the potential for change, though invisible, still remains.

If we are to embrace the dawn of a new era together, although we may not fully understand each other, we must insist on and actively practice sensitivity. Sensitivity—simple acts of human kindness—is called for, and indeed necessary, if the pursuit of scholarly study is truly about developing a clearer understanding of ourselves and where we stand in relation to textual analysis of the literature of "marginal" cultures. White scholars writing about black literature, and white professors teaching it, must at the least be sensitive to the history of heinous crimes committed during and after slavery, to the rape, terrorism, torture, maiming, and killing of a people, which arrested its development and continue to haunt and sicken our society today. The tree carved by the white boys on Sethe's back while the schoolteacher looked on from the tower of icy objectivity is scarred onto our cultural memories. That tree must not be reinscribed on us by an insensitive, icily objective scholarly pen. Our writing is our hope; it must not be the object of further exploitation.

Although we are not enemies, still we fear. But what is it that we
fear? Perhaps by naming it, by scratching heads, by identifying and exchanging our views, whatever our race, our sex, our class, we do what is sorely needed to ease the pain of rememory. We fear the madness of Miss Anne’s kitchen; we fear the touch of the master’s (her husband’s) hand on our behind, whispering in our ear that he will be at the cabin after supper tonight; we fear that instead of voicing her anger at his licentiousness she will instead turn a deaf ear to her own heart, and inflict her pain, grief, and inner turmoil on the slave woman out of a growing sense of powerlessness to act against inhumane behavior.

To look at our fear, at the ghost babies transfigured and different from ourselves, to hear the invisible voices whisperscreaming what was not said, what was never allowed to be spoken or written, is the only way we can transcend the underlying fear that breeds a lack of trust and an ever growing chasm between Miss Anne and Beulah, between black and white, between white feminist literary critic and Colored humanist reader/writer. We must put a stop to this fear and this estrangement if we are sensitive, strong, and spiritual enough.