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Self and Strangeness

I waited for my high school history teacher to assign World War Two, but I waited in vain. We were somewhere in the Oklahoma Dust Bowl when the school year came to a close.

Later on, after I'd learned a little more history, I decided my teacher had probably intentionally avoided World War Two because she didn't know how, or was afraid, to talk about race and culture. My high school was in the South.

Now, still later on, and seeing how my own students think that the Vietnam War is history whereas to me it is a still-present part of my life, I think maybe World War Two just was not yet historical to my young teacher.

I attended a county high school in Virginia when Virginia was ranked second from the bottom in public education. My biology teacher, a bachelor who tooled around in a red convertible, was fired for teaching the theory of evolution. The guidance counselor asked me what I wanted to be. "I like writing, science, and drama," I said.

"Oh," she beamed, "why don't you write science fiction for television?"

As it happened, my parents didn't purchase a television until the summer after my first year in college. I was killing the summer at home before transferring to the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, which was mostly my mother's idea. I used to stay up late reading the catalogues of colleges I was not allowed to apply to: Vassar and Swarthmore were my favorites, but my parents thought it would be foolish to spend that much money on a school where all you would be doing was reading. You could read for free in a library.

One night, after we had the television set and before I left for New Mexico, and having sadly put the college catalogues away, I stayed up to watch an old movie that had Gregory Peck in it.

The movie, based on a book, was *Gentlemen's Agreement.* In it, a Gentile reporter pretends to be a Jew in order to discover and expose anti-Semitism in the community. I found the movie disturbing, and

instead of going to bed I slept downstairs in the living room, curled up in the wing chair, the better to catch my father before he left for work in the morning. I woke up when I heard him come down the stairs. "Dad," I asked, even before he could get to the kitchen, "what is a Jew?"

Of course, I sort of knew what a Jew was. But why were people so mean to them?

In our family, *Jew* was synonymous with *smart. Jew* was synonymous with *good musician.*

Perhaps a writer thinking about race in the South is expected to address the relation between black and white people, but I want to start here, with Jews.

I had known some black people. My best friend when we lived for five years up North was a black girl named Mary Elizabeth. In her bedroom, Mary Elizabeth had one of the most wondrous objects I had so far seen in my life, a bank in the shape of an owl. The owl had big wise eyes, and when you dropped a penny in the back of its head, the eyes opened even wider and briefly lit up. Mary Elizabeth and I would spend an entire afternoon putting a single penny in, making the owl blink, shaking the bank to make the penny fall out onto the bed and then putting the same penny back in.

And when my family moved back South, spending the first year in a tenant house on a farm, my sister and I tried to make friends with the black girls from the other tenant house but they chased us off the dirt road and called us names because—well, my sister and I didn't know why. They just didn't like or approve of us. We were poorer than they, so they may have dismissed us as "white trash," except they didn't merely dismiss or *diss* us, they threw sticks and stones. At six and nine, my sister and I didn't realize they might have other reasons. All we knew was that they weren't at all like Mary Elizabeth, who had been fun to be with and liked to play paper dolls and came to my one and only birthday party.

But I had never known a Jew, or at least had never known I knew a Jew, and, as I say, I also had never got to the end of the history book. I trailed my father into the kitchen, where he made himself a cup of coffee. Before instant coffee became widely available, he used to mail-order coffee from Louisiana so he could get it with chicory. "Dad," I asked,

while he was still blowing on his coffee to get it cool enough to drink, "what, exactly, is a concentration camp?"

Within two months of this conversation, I was engaged to a Jewish graduate student at New Mexico Tech. He was doing research in atmospheric physics. Instead of an engagement ring he gave me a piece of lightning trapped in a plastic cube.

Don't ask me what this meant or even how he got the lightning inside the cube, or if he did or if "lightning trapped in a plastic cube" was shorthand for some kind of scientific experiment—I was still just a sophomore, studiously drawing vectors in my physics-lab notebook, and I knew only that, one way or another, I possessed a thunderbolt. I believed a thunderbolt, even encased in plastic, was superior to a ring any day.

This engagement lasted, I think, one week, but it made an impression on me, so that when I was, myself, in graduate school, in North Carolina, and a young Jewish artist named Jonathan Silver appeared on the scene, I got engaged again, and this time there was a wedding.

It was sparsely attended, because Jonathan's family disowned him for marrying me. Naturally, my father then threatened to punch out his father. Jonathan's brother conferred with my brother. His mother sent best wishes but stayed away, just as her husband had ordered her to. My mother wondered how any mother could be such a wimp. In the midst of all this, Jonathan and I were pronounced man and wife, borrowed my father's car to drive off in, and checked into the Honeymoon Suite at the Thomas Jefferson Hotel in downtown Richmond. That night, we were hit by a blizzard, and the next day, on the way back, we drove into a ditch.

Which is pretty much what you could say about the whole marriage.

A couple of weeks before the wedding, while Jonathan and I were sitting at the kitchen table at my parents' house in Richmond, my mother had said she thought he and I should be apprised of a situation we might face. She disappeared into the dining room, rummaged through a drop-leaf desk, and returned with the deed to the house. This particular house was the fourth and last one my parents had in Richmond, the one they'd saved all their money for. "Read this," my mother said, pointing to the small print.

Property in that subdivision, which had been annexed to the city of Richmond, was, it seemed, under no circumstances to be sold or leased to *non-Aryan* persons.

"On one hand," my mother said, "it doesn't mean anything and everyone knows it doesn't mean anything. It's a common clause, irrelevant to any real situation. On the other hand, it means, and everyone knows it means, that black people are not allowed to live here. Who knows what it could mean, if someone tested it? And on the third hand, it means, even if nobody has ever thought about this, that the two of you would not be allowed to buy a house here either."

My mother did not say this to scare us. She was an energetic soul who liked nothing better than a good fight. She was not interested in keeping up with the Joneses, because she had only contempt for the Joneses. Nobody ever told *her* what to do. For example, it was about this time that my parents were invited to attend a choral concert at an all-black church in downtown Richmond. The invitation was a considerable honor. Members of the church wanted to say thanks for the courageous way my parents had represented them in insurance transactions.

My mother finished her speech. Then, having exactly zero money and no expectation of owning a home anywhere, Jonathan and I laughed simultaneously.

"I just wanted you to know what you're getting into," my mother said.

Perhaps we still didn't know *that*, but though Jonathan and I laughed my mother had succeeded in making us realize, with a sudden sharpness, what it means to be a second-class citizen. The feeling reminded me of College Day for High School Students, which was held at the good school inside the city limits. I'd managed to get a ride, skipping classes at my county school. I was fifteen, and another of the colleges I dreamed of was Princeton—because that was where the Institute for Advanced Study was, and the Institute was where Einstein was. I went up to the Princeton booth. Teen-aged boys and blazered college reps looked at me as if I were crazy. I stated my mission. The boys and the reps hooted. If it had not been so un-Princetonian, they would have slapped their khaki-clad thighs. "A girl!" they said. "A girl wants to go to Princeton!"

These things—race, gender, class—become so mixed up that it's impossible to separate them out. Did Jonathan seem to me an ally against a world of WASP privilege? Was I drawn to him out of, in part, a sense of guilt for the transgressions of history? Did we founder because I was angry with a category of human beings—men—for having control over my life? Or because I was, amazingly, too *obedient* to him, this one individual man, relinquishing control (for that was also true, to my mother's distress)?

A writer raises these questions in disguised ways, weaving them into the very fabric of her fabrications. All my novels are somewhat about money, or the lack thereof. Two unpublished novels wrestle with issues of racial integration, and one published novel, *Augusta Played*, treats of, among other things, Judaism. In every fictional work, there is for the writer the problem of point of view. Whose point of view will she use, and why?

At the outset of *The Second Sex*, which remains and will remain an extraordinary book no matter how many revisionist biographies of its author may be published, Simone de Beauvoir states, "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought," remarking that the duality of Self and Other was not, in the beginning, sexed.

But for a writer, Self and Other *are* sexed. (And one means, here, *sexed* and not merely *gendered.*) A writer, obliged to select a point of view, has to choose between a male and a female point of view or else write something extremely experimental. When I look back at the poems and fictions I wrote before I began to publish much, I find that most of them adopted a male point of view. A sinister male protagonist named Dev chills a young female character's heart with his erotic nihilism. A sinister red-headed male protagonist goes to Mexico for the Day of the Dead and experiences a Thomas Mann-like baring of his essential self. A younger, but still sinister, male protagonist who lives out in the country paints his more-or-less-oblivious (she's very sound asleep) pregnant wife a bright orange. An even younger male protagonist, named Rubicon Bright because he is smart and has a Rubicon to cross, is not himself sinister but everyone around him is. And *he* probably *will* be, when he crosses that Rubicon.

Recently I stumbled across this shrewd observation by Joanna Russ, who is speaking about the female writer writing from a male point of view:

> She is an artist creating a world in which persons of her kind cannot be artists, a consciousness central to itself creating a world in which women have no consciousness, a successful person creating a world in which persons like herself cannot be successes. She is a self trying to pretend that she is a different Self, one for whom her own self is Other.

I wish someone, maybe that high-school guidance counselor, had explained that to me in time to spare me a lot of wasted effort, wasted because it was effort I put into writing falsehood rather than fiction. And yet, and yet. What young writer can fail to be thrilled by the magnificent aim of renouncing the Self for the sake of the expression of the Other? Keats, we all know, located greatness in "*Negative Capability*,...when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." For Keats, a great writer was one who was willing to forego a point of view in order to render other points of view fully.

Here, then, are two poles of thought, and these days it may sometimes seem that a writer, especially a female writer, is being asked to hang herself between them. A female writer wants to imagine the world as it may exist for an Other—a male self, or a black or Jewish self, perhaps a self whose economic background is unlike her own. She wants to do this because she wants to know a wide world and she wants to know it intimately, and because she comes to understand her own point of view better by understanding other points of view, but also because fiction is, first of all, fiction. Fiction *is* falsehood, and what was wrong with my sinister male protagonists was simply that they were incompletely imagined. I didn't know a lot about men, and I knew even less about sinisterness. It will seem ironic, to a female writer wanting to seize the same rights to ambition as have been traditionally granted to the male writer, that contemporary critics of literature condemn her for "appropriating" experience that "belongs" to someone else. A writer is told she must not explore the experience of people whose skin color differs from hers.

An American writer is told she must not explore third-world experience. Sylvia Plath is anathematized for attempting what, in a kinder light, may be seen as a very young writer's empathic, if arguably clumsy, memorialization of Holocaust experience. Experience becomes a boutique commodity, something like a pair of designer shoes, and nobody gets to walk in anybody else's shoes.

And yet and yet. The woman writer wants to be faithful to her own consciousness, for her experience *is* different from anyone else's and especially from men's experience. She agrees that she has a special responsibility to convey her experience precisely because it has for so long been marginalized and may therefore, unless she takes steps to see that it is not, be overlooked. History imposes obligations, of which this seems to her to be one. Moreover, experience, her experience, has taught her that if she is not careful she may dissolve her Self in the acids of desire, wanting always to be who or what she is not. There is a longing to escape the Self that is so great that it may appear to be a kind of philosophy when, really, it is only boredom, frustration, or self-contempt. A writer must find a way to be both true to herself and free of herself.

Here is everything I know, whether it is sufficient or not, about how this is to be done: To begin with, the writer needs to acquire mastery of techniques, and in my opinion, the more techniques the better. The goal is a confidence that permits forgetfulness: The writer can focus her attention on her subject. And in the second place, a writer needs to deepen her acquaintance with this self of hers with which she is seeking to establish a working relationship. If she does, she will find that, no matter how different the Other, at first glance, seems, it is inevitably the Self that is lastingly exotic, sometimes alienating, and, for sure, as strange as an unidentified species. It is the Self, protean and, so to speak, submarine, that tempts us to dangerous, unfathomable depths. Here we encounter a solitude as huge as if it contained creation and as local, concentrated, and unrelieved as if all the layers of creation weighed on it. Nearly, but not quite, overwhelmed, we reach out to an Other to share an identity.