

Commitment from the Mirror-Writing Box

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The Triple Bind

Neither black/red/yellow nor woman but poet or writer. For many of us, the question of priorities remains a crucial issue. Being merely "a writer" without doubt ensures one a status of far greater weight than being "a woman of color who writes" ever does. Imputing race or sex to the creative act has long been a means by which the literary establishment cheapens and discredits the achievements of non-mainstream women writers. She who "happens to be" a (non-white) Third World member, a woman, and a writer is bound to go through the ordeal of exposing her work to the abuse of praises and criticisms that either ignore, dispense with, or overemphasize her racial and sexual attributes. Yet the time has passed when she can confidently identify herself with a profession or artistic vocation without questioning and relating it to her color-woman condition. Today, the growing ethnic-feminist consciousness has made it increasingly difficult for her to turn a blind eye not only to the specification of the writer as historical subject (who writes? and in what context?), but also to writing itself as a practice located at the intersection of subject and history—a literary practice that involves the possible knowledge (linguistical and ideological) of itself as such. On the one hand, no matter what position she decides to take, she will sooner or later find herself driven into situations where she is made to feel she must choose from among three conflicting identities. Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties? On the other hand, she often finds herself at odds with language, which partakes in the white-male-is-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations. This is further intensified by her finding herself also at odds with her relation to writing, which when carried out uncritically often proves to be one of domination: as holder of speech, she usually writes from a position of power, creating as an "author," situating herself *above* her work and existing *before* it, rarely simultaneously *with* it. Thus, it has become almost impossible for her to take up her pen without at the same time questioning her relation to the material that defines her and her creative work. As focal point of cultural consciousness and social change, writing weaves into language the complex relations of a subject caught between the problems of race and gender and the practice of literature as the very place where social alienation is thwarted differently according to each specific context.

Silence in Time

Writing, reading, thinking, imagining, speculating. These are luxury activities, so I am reminded, permitted to a privileged few, whose idle hours of the day can be viewed otherwise than as a bowl of rice or a loaf of bread less to share with the family. "If we wish to increase the supply of rare and remarkable women like the Brontës," wrote our reputed foresister Virginia Woolf, "we should give the Joneses and the Smiths rooms of their own and five hundred [pounds] a year. One cannot grow fine flowers in a thin soil."¹ Substantial creative achievement demands not necessarily genius, but acumen, bent, persistence, time. And time, in the framework of industrial development, means a wage that admits of leisure and living conditions that do not require that writing be incessantly interrupted, deferred, denied, at any rate subordinated to family responsibilities. "When the claims of creation cannot be primary," Tillie Olsen observes, "the results are atrophy; unfinished work; minor effort and accomplishment; silences." The message Olsen conveys in *Silences* leaves no doubt as to the circumstances under which most women writers function. It is a constant reminder of those who never come to writing: "the invisible, the as-innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances—diminished, excluded, foundered."² To say this, however, is not to say that writing should be held in veneration in all milieus or that every woman who fails to write is a disabled being. (What Denise Paulme learned in this regard during her first period of fieldwork in Africa is revealing. Comparing her life one day with those of the women in an area of the French Sudan, she was congratulating herself on not having to do a chore like theirs—pounding millet for the meals day in and day out—when she overheard herself commented upon by one of the women nearby: "That girl makes me tired with her everlasting paper and pencil: what sort of a life is that?" The lesson, Paulme concluded, "was a salutary one, and I have never forgotten it.")³ To point out that, in general, the situation of women does not favor literary productivity is to imply that it is almost impossible for them (and especially for those bound up with the Third World) to engage in writing as an occupation without their letting themselves be consumed by a deep and pervasive sense of guilt. Guilt over the selfishness implied in such activity, over themselves as housewives and "women," over their families, their friends and all other "less fortunate" women. The circle in which they turn proves to be vicious, and writing in such a context is always practiced at the cost of other women's labor. Doubts, lack of confidence, frustrations, despair: these are sentiments born with the habits of distraction, distortion, discontinuity and silence. After having toiled for a number of years on her book, Hattie Gossett exclaims to herself:

Who do you think you are [to be writing a book]? and who cares what you think about anything enough to pay

money for it...a major portion of your audience not only cant read but seems to think readin is a waste of time? plus books like this arent sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports?⁴

The same doubt is to be heard through Gloria Anzaldúa's voice:

Who gave us permission to perform the act of writing? Why does writing seem so unnatural for me?...The voice recurs in me: *Who am I, a poor Chicanita from the sticks, to think I could write?* How dared I even consider becoming a writer as I stooped over the tomato fields bending, bending under the hot sun...

How hard it is for us to *think* we can choose to become writers, much less *feel* and *believe* that we can.⁵

Rites of Passage

S/he who writes, writes. In uncertainty, in necessity. And does not ask whether s/he is given the permission to do so or not. Yet, in the context of today's market-dependent societies, "to be a writer" can no longer mean purely to perform the act of writing. For a laywo/man to enter the priesthood—the sacred world of writers—s/he must fulfill a number of unwritten conditions. S/he must undergo a series of rituals, be baptized and ordained. S/he must *submit* her writings to the law laid down by the corporation of literary/literacy victims and be prepared to *accept* their verdict. Every woman who writes and wishes to become established as a writer has known the taste of *rejection*. Sylvia Plath's experience is often cited. Her years of darkness, despair and disillusion, her agony of slow rebirth, her moments of fearsome excitement at the start of the writing of *The Bell Jar*, her unsuccessful attempts at re-submitting her first book of poems under ever-changing titles and the distress with which she upbraided herself are parts of the realities that affect many women writers:

Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing, which remark I guess shows I still don't have a pure motive (O it's-such-fun-I-just-can't-stop-who-cares-if-it's-published-or-read) about writing...I still want to see it finally ritualized in print.⁶

Accumulated unpublished writings do stink. They heap up before your eyes like despicable confessions that no one cares to hear; they sap your self-confidence by incessantly reminding you of your failure to incorporate. For publication means the breaking of a first seal, the end of a

“no-admitted” status, the end of a soliloquy confined to the private sphere and the start of a possible sharing with the unknown other—the reader, whose collaboration with the writer alone allows the work to come into full being. Without such a rite of passage, the woman-writer-to-be/woman-to-be-writer is condemned to wander about, begging for permission to join in and be a member. If it is difficult for any woman to find acceptance for her writing, it is all the more so for those who do not match the stereotype of the “real woman”—the colored, the minority, the physically or mentally handicapped. Emma Santos, who spent her days running to and fro between two worlds—that of hospitals and that of the “normal” system—equally rejected by Psychiatry and by Literature, is another writer whose first book has been repeatedly dismissed (by twenty-two publishing houses). Driven to obsession by a well-known publisher who promised to send her an agreement but never did, she followed him, spied on him, called him twenty times a day on the phone, and ended up feeling like “a pile of shit making after great men of letters.” Writing, she remarks, is “a shameful, venereal disease,” and Literature, nothing more than “a long beseeching.” Having no acquaintance, no friend to introduce her when she sought admission for her work among the publishers, she describes her experience as follows:

I receive encouraging letters but I am goitrous. Publishers, summons, these are worse than psychiatrists, interrogatories. The publishers perceive a sick and oblivious girl. They would have liked the text, the same one, without changing a single word, had it been presented by a young man from the [Ecole] Normale Superieure, *agrégé* of philosophy, worthy of the Goncourt prize.⁷

The Guilt

To capture a publisher’s attention, to convince, to negotiate: these constitute one step forward into the world of writers, one distress, one guilt. One guilt among the many yet to come, all of which bide their time to loom up out of their hiding places, for the path is long and there is an ambush at every turn. Writing: not letting it merely haunt you and die over and over again in you until you no longer know how to speak. Getting published: not loathing yourself, not burning it, not giving up. Now I (the all-knowing subject) feel almost secure with such definite “not-to-do’s.” Yet, I/i (the plural, non-unitary subject) cannot set my mind at rest with them without at the same time recognizing their precariousness. i (the personal race- and gender-specific subject) have, in fact turned a deaf ear to a number of primary questions: Why write? For whom? What necessity? What writing? What impels you and me and Hattie Gossett to continue to write when we know for a fact that our books are not going

to be "sold in the ghetto bookshops or even in airports?" And why do we care for their destinations at all? "A writer," proclaims Toni Cade Bambara, "like any other cultural worker, like any other member of the community, ought to try to put her/his skills in the service of the community." It is apparently on account of such a conviction that Bambara "began a career as the neighborhood scribe," helping people write letters to faraway relatives as well as letters of complaint, petitions, contracts and the like.⁸ For those of us who call ourselves "writers" in the context of a community whose major portion "not only cant read but seems to think readin is a waste of time" (gossett), being "the neighborhood scribe" is no doubt one of the most gratifying and unpretentious ways of dedicating oneself to one's people. Writing as a social function—as differentiated from the ideal of art for art's sake—is the aim that Third World writers, in defining their roles, highly esteem and claim. *Literacy* and *literature* intertwine so tightly, indeed, that the latter has never ceased to imply both the ability to read and the condition of being well read—and thereby to convey the sense of *polite learning* through the arts of *grammar* and *rhetoric*. The illiterate, the ignorant versus the wo/man of "letters" (of wide reading), the highly educated. With such discrimination and opposition, it is hardly surprising that the writer should be viewed as a social parasite. Whether s/he makes common cause with the upper classes or chooses to disengage her/himself by adopting the myth of the bohemian artist, the writer is a kept wo/man who for her/his living largely relies on the generosity of that portion of society called the literate. A room of one's own and a pension of five hundred pounds per year solely for making ink marks on paper: this, symbolically speaking, is what many people refer to when they say the writer's activity is "gratuitous" and "useless." No matter how devoted to the vocation s/he may be, the writer cannot subsist on words and mere fresh air, nor can s/he really "live by the pen," since her/his work—arbitrarily estimated as it is—has no definite market value. Reading in this context may actually prove to be "a waste of time," and writing, as Woolf puts it, "a reputable and harmless occupation." Reflecting on her profession as a writer (in a 1979 interview), Toni Cade Bambara noted that she probably did not begin "getting really serious about writing until maybe five years ago. Prior to that, in spite of all good sense, I always thought writing was rather frivolous, that it was something you did because you didn't feel like doing any work." The concept of "writing" here seems to be incompatible with the concept of "work." As the years went by and Toni Cade Bambara got more involved in writing, however, she changed her attitude and has "come to appreciate that it is a perfectly legitimate way to participate in struggle."⁹

Commitment as an ideal is particularly dear to Third World writers. It helps to alleviate the Guilt: that of being privileged (Inequality), of "going over the hill" to join the clan of literates (Assimilation), and of

indulging in a “useless” activity while most community members “stoop over the tomato fields, bending under the hot sun” (a perpetuation of the same privilege). In a sense, committed writers are the ones who write both to awaken to the consciousness of their guilt and to give their readers a guilty conscience. Bound to one another by an awareness of their guilt, writer and reader may thus assess their positions, engaging themselves wholly in their situations and carrying their weight into the weight of their communities, the weight of the world. Such a definition naturally places the committed writers on the side of Power. For every discourse that breeds fault and guilt is a discourse of authority and arrogance. To say this, however, is not to say that all power discourses produce equal oppression or that those established are necessary. Discussing African literature and the various degrees of propaganda prompted by commitment, Ezekiel Mphahlele observes that although “propaganda is always going to be with us”—for “there will always be the passionate outcry against injustice, war, fascism, poverty”—the manner in which a writer protests reflects to a large extent her/his regard for the reader and “decides the literary worth of a work.” “Commitment,” Mphahlele adds, “need not give rise to propaganda: the writer can make [her/]his stand known without advocating it...in two-dimensional terms, i.e., in terms of one response to one stimulus.”¹⁰ Thus, in the whirlwind of prescriptive general formulas such as: Black art must “respond *positively* to the reality of revolution” or Black art must “expose the enemy, *praise* the people, and *support* the revolution” (Ron Karenga, my italics), one also hears distinct, unyielding voices whose autonomy asserts itself as follows:

Black pride need not blind us to our own weaknesses: in fact it should help us to perceive our weaknesses...

I do not care for black pride that drugs us into a condition of stupor and inertia. I do not care for it if leaders use it to dupe the masses.¹¹

To us, the man who adores the Negro is as sick as the man who abominates him.¹²

Freedom and the masses

The notion of *art engagé* as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre, an influential apologist for socially effective literature, continues to grow and to circulate among contemporary engaged writers. It is easy to find parallels (and it is often directly quoted) in Third World literary discourses. “A free man addressing free men,” the Sartrian writer “has only one subject—freedom.” He writes to “appeal to the reader’s freedom to

collaborate in the production of his work” and paints the world “only so that free men may feel their freedom as they face it.”¹³ The function of literary art, in other words, must be to remind us of that freedom and to defend it. Made to serve a political purpose, literature thus places itself within the context of the proletarian fight, while the writer frees himself from his dependence on elites—or in a wider sense, from any privilege—and creates, so to speak, an art for an unrestricted public known as “art for the masses.” From the chain of notions dear to Sartre—choice, responsibility, contingency, situation, motive, reason, being, doing, having—two notions are set forth here as being most relevant to Third World engaged literary theories: freedom and the masses. What is freedom in writing? And what can writing-for-the-masses be? Reflecting on being a writer, “female, black, and free,” Margaret Walker, for example, defines freedom as “a philosophical state of mind and existence.” She proudly affirms:

My entire career in writing...is determined by these immutable facts of my human condition...

Writing is my life, but it is an avocation nobody can buy. In this respect I believe I am a free agent, stupid perhaps, but *me* and still free...

The writer is still in the avant-garde for Truth and Justice, for Freedom, Peace, and Human Dignity...Her place, let us be reminded, is anywhere she chooses to be, doing what she has to do, creating, healing, and always being herself.¹⁴

These lines agree perfectly with Sartre’s ideal of liberty. They may be said to echo his concepts of choice and responsibility—according to which each person, being an absolute choice of self, an absolute emergence at an absolute date, must assume her/his situation with the proud consciousness of being the author of it. (For one is nothing but this “being-in-situation” that is the total contingency of the world, of one’s birth, past and environment, and of the fact of one’s fellow wo/man.) By its own rationale, such a sense of responsibility (attributed to the lucid, conscientious, successful man of action) renders the relationship between freedom and commitment particularly problematic. Is it not, indeed, always in the name of freedom that My freedom hastens to stamp out those of others? Is it not also in the name of the masses that My personality bestirs itself to impersonalize those of my fellow wo/women? Do the masses become masses by themselves? Or are they the result of a theoretical and practical operation of “massification”? From where onward can one say of a “free” work of art that it is written for the infinite numbers which constitute the masses and not merely for a definite public stratum of society?

For the people, by the people and from the people

Like all stereotypical notions, the notion of the masses has both an upgrading connotation and a degrading one. One often speaks of the masses as one speaks of the people, magnifying thereby their number, their strength, their mission. One invokes them and pretends to write on their behalf when one wishes to give weight to one's undertaking or to justify it. The Guilt mentioned earlier is always lurking below the surface. Yet to oppose the masses to the elite is already to imply that those forming the masses are regarded as an aggregate of average persons condemned by their lack of personality or by their dim individualities to stay with the herd, to be docile and anonymous. Thus the notion of "art for the masses" supposes not only a split between the artist and her/his audience—the spectator-consumer—but also a passivity on the part of the latter. For art here is not attributed to the masses; it is ascribed to the active few, whose role is precisely to produce *for* the great numbers. This means that despite the shift of emphasis the elite-versus-masses opposition remains intact. In fact it must remain so, basically unchallenged, if it is to serve a conservative political and ideological purpose—in other words, if (what is defined as) "art" is to exist at all. One of the functions of this "art for the masses" is, naturally, to contrast with the other, higher "art for the elite," and thereby to enforce its elitist values. The wider the distance between the two, the firmer the stand of conservative art. One can no longer let oneself be deceived by concepts that oppose the artist or the intellectual to the masses and deal with them as with two incompatible entities. Criticisms arising from or dwelling on such a *myth* are, indeed, quite commonly leveled against innovators and more often used as tools of intimidation than as reminders of social interdependency. It is perhaps with this perspective in mind that one may better understand the variants of Third World literary discourse, which claims not exactly an "art for the masses," but an "art for the people, by the people and from the people." In an article on "*Le Poète noir et son peuple*" (The Black Poet and His People), for example, Jacques Rabemananjara virulently criticized Occidental poets for spending their existence indulging in aesthetic refinements and subtleties that bear no relation to their peoples' concerns and aspirations, that are merely sterile intellectual delights. The sense of dignity, Rabemananjara said, forbids black Orpheus to go in for the cult of art for art's sake. Inspired by his people, the poet has to play the difficult role of being simultaneously the torch lighting the way for his fellowmen and their loyal interpreter. "He is more than their spokesman: he is their voice." His noble mission entitles him to be "not only the messenger, but the very message of his people."¹⁵ The concept of a popular and functional art is here poised against that of an intellectual and aesthetic one. A justified regression? A shift of emphasis again? Or an attempt at fusion of the self and the other, of art,

ideology and life? Let us listen to other, perhaps less didactic voices; that of Aimé Césaire in *Return to My Native Land*:

I should come back to this land of mine and say to it: "Embrace me without fear.... If all I can do is speak, at least I shall speak for you."

And I should say further: "My tongue shall serve those miseries which have no tongue, my voice the liberty of those who founder in the dungeons of despair."

And I should say to myself: "And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear."¹⁶

that of Nikki Giovanni in *Gemini*:

Poetry is the culture of a people. We are poets even when we don't write poems.... We are all preachers because we are One.... I don't think we younger poets are doing anything significantly different from what we as a people have always done. The new Black poetry is in fact just a manifestation of our collective historical needs.¹⁷

and that of Alice Walker in an essay on the importance of models in the artist's life:

It is, in the end, the saving of lives that we writers are about.... We do it because we care.... We care because we know this: *The life we save is our own.*¹⁸

One may say of art for art's sake in general that it is itself a reaction against the bourgeois "functional" attitude of mind which sees in the acquisition of art the highest, purest form of consumption. By making explicit the gratuitousness of their works, artists show contempt for their wealthy customers, whose purchasing power allows them to subvert art in its subversiveness, reducing it to a mere commodity or a service. As a reaction, however, art for art's sake is bound to be "two-dimensional"—"one response to one stimulus" (Mphahlele)—and, therefore, to meet with no success among writers of the Third World. "I cannot imagine," says Wole Soyinka, "that our 'authentic black innocent' would ever have permitted himself to be manipulated into the false position of countering one pernicious Manicheism with another."¹⁹ An art that claims to be at the same time sender and bearer of a message, to serve the people and "to come off the street" (Cade Bambara), should then be altogether "functional, collective, and committing or committed" (Karenga). The

reasoning circle closes on the notion of commitment, which again emerges, fraught with questions.

From *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979), 54.
2. Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (1978, rpt. New York: Delta/Seymour Lawrence Ed., 1980), 13, 39.
3. Denise Paulme, ed., *Women of Tropical Africa*, tr. H. M. Wright (1963, rpt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 2.
4. Hattie Gossett, "Who Told You Anybody Wants To Hear From You? You Ain't Nothing But a Black Woman!" *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Morraga & Gloria Anzaldúa (Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1981), 175.
5. Gloria Anzaldúa, "Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to 3rd World Women Writers," *This Bridge Called My Back*, 166.
6. Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1971, rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1981), 211. See Biographical Note by Lois Ames.
7. Emma Santos, *L'itinéraire psychiatrique* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1977), 46–47. For previous quotes see pp. 47, 50, 125 (my translations).
8. Toni Cade Bambara, "What It Is I Think I'm Doing Anyhow," *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. J. Sternburg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), 167.
9. "Commitment: Toni Cade Bambara Speaks," interview with Beverly Guy-Sheftall in *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, ed. R. P. Bell, B. J. Parker, & B. Guy-Sheftall (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1979), 232.
10. Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Voices in the Whirlwind* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 186–87.
11. *Ibid.*, 196.
12. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 8.
13. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations, II Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 97, 112.
14. Margaret Walker, "On Being Female, Black, and Free," *The Writer on Her Work*, 95, 102, 106.

15. Jacques Rabemananjara, "Le Poète noir et son peuple," *Présence Africaine* 16 (Oct.-Nov. 1957), 10-13.
16. Aimé Césaire, *Return to My Native Land* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1971), 60-62.
17. Nikki Giovanni, *Gemini: An Extended Autobiographical Statement on My First Twenty-Five Years of Being a Black Poet* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 95-96.
18. Alice Walker, "Saving The Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in The Artist's Life," *The Third Woman: Minority Women Writers of The United States*, ed. D. Fisher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), 158.
19. Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature, and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 138.