

9/29/2023: WRITING THE NOT SELF

In one way or another, writers can't avoid creating some characters different from themselves. When such a character is depicted as "belonging" to a distinct, recognizable group—perhaps a minority—what if any is the writer's responsibility toward representing the "other" accurately? Are there comparable challenges for an author writing from a marginalized position?

1. Marina PORCELLI (Argentina)

Virginia Woolf published her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, in 1915. What stands out in her book is the part of the story that takes place in Brazil. Absurdly, Woolf locates Brazil in Argentina. I am bringing this to your attention because I first want to talk about what Mary Louise Pratt calls *imperial eyes* or *the imperial gaze* – the dynamic that puts *the eyes, the gaze* of the colonizer into the determining position. In fact, an early example of this can be found in *The Journal of Christopher Columbus*. It is enough to read these entries to understand how Columbus names, conceives, and conquers the land in ways illustrative of this concept. How his molding of others through his gaze did lasting damage to the narrative of the peoples of the so-called "new world." The imperial gaze necessarily results in distortions not only geographical.

What does it mean to be the Other? What, in a general sense, is called the otherness dimension? The philosopher and anthropologist Franz Fanon states that the human paradigm has been formulated on the basis of the image of the Western white man. This entails that "others" are all those not included in that representation: women, migrants, indigenous communities, etc. Those of us who were constructed by the words and eyes of the "master." Those who have a story that was created under the gaze of this "master."

There is a paradox in Latin America. The struggle for independence from Spain that took place all over the continent at the beginning of the 19th century did not lead to linguistic independence. Around 1810, the vast territory was linguistically homogenized, with the Spanish language being imposed all the way from the Río Bravo, along the border between Mexico and the United States, to the southernmost tip of Patagonia. Subsequently, this Spanish that was imposed on the different regions came to be modified, molded, rearranged – altered by the other languages that had already existed in these places. The Spanish that emerged was a hybrid, with traces of Arabic, languages of the indigenous peoples, etc, giving it linguistic variety, robbing it of its "colonial purity."

Spain, then, sees our pronunciation, our way of speaking, as "incorrect" Spanish. It is very interesting to also observe the moral sense this "incorrect" Spanish has—its ethical burden. The different pronunciations across Latin America speak of different historical processes of domination that lie in the speech. This may sound obvious but I still want to say it: our (every) pronunciation is a political issue.

To speak wrongly is a way of breaking the logic of language, which is also a way of dismantling the logic (or lack thereof) of the system in which we are immersed. A form of psychic decolonization.

International Writing Program Panel Discussion Series (Fridays 12-1 pm) Iowa City Public Library

9/29/23: Writing the Not Self.

Azhar Noonari (Pakistan), Li Kotomi (Taiwan/Japan), Marina
Porcelli (Argentina)

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I remember that when I attended elementary school, the Spanish I was taught, the correct Spanish, was different from the language spoken at home or in the streets. Tenses were changed, for example. And this is very important, because by then the “wrong” Spanish was speech, our orality, and the “right” Spanish was the official language, the written language, the one to be taken seriously. And I believe one of the most important aspects writing in Latin America has is precisely this: to include orality within prose.

This idea is also in an extraordinary essay by the Cuban writer Fernández Retamar, published in La Habana in 1972: *Caliban*. Caliban, as you may know, is a character from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, who is the first inhabitant of a desert island, the wild and brutal man, in the eyes of the white man Prospero. In Shakespeare's play, Caliban provides the material conditions so that his conquerors can live comfortably. In many ways, Caliban symbolizes the Latin American situation.

In *Caliban* the gaze of the invader is condensed, and at the same time, Caliban synthesizes one of the strongest marks of that invasion: language. Fernández Retamar quotes Shakespeare: “You had taught me to speak and the benefit that it has brought me is to know how to curse! May the red plague fall on you for having instilled in me your language!”

Bad pronunciation, orality, agrammatical use of language, cursing: these are some of the possibilities for writing in Latin America. Because “that Spanish” does not represent us, we have to constantly modify it, break it, take it to limits where our realities can appear. As such, I will always distrust “well written” books that gracefully appropriate the language of the colonizer. Those books that are easy to translate.

It is also worth noting that it is the editorial market that establishes rules of how the Spanish-language production is supposed to be, deciding which books should circulate on the continent and which should not, which books will be visible and which condemned to obscurity. What topics become fashionable, which stories, and which viewpoints on those stories are taken up and which are left aside? Ultimately, what is at stake is the question of which images of Latin America will be elevated as literary representations? My point is that we have a huge responsibility as writers. We must respond to the stereotypes, and account for our stories, in our territories, with our identities. Our writing is not for pleasing the colonizer's eye. The rates of illiteracy, semi-illiteracy and the percentages of our populations that do not have access to books are alarming in Latin America. The editorial system keeps things as they are. So immersed as we are in these conditions, we have to wonder: who are we writing for? And maybe (or more than maybe) we have to create another way of being writers.

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