

## 10/13/2023: ON THE BODY

*A person's body affects the way they navigate the world, and their experiences in it. How much power does a body (with regard to, for instance, race, gender, sexuality, physical ability) have over, or in, an artist's work? And, with what devices can a writer affect issues their body can present—for instance, via symbolism, or by changing media, or in the physical circumstances of reading and writing?*

### 3. Wesley MACHESO (Malawi)

A person's body affects the way they navigate the world and their experiences in it, since bodies are subject to social strictures and cultural matrices beyond the individual. As a cultural script, the human body is read variously by different social orders which, in panoptic fashion, regulate how it must present and perform according to their biases and preconceptions. The very definition of the body in the English Dictionary, as "the physical structure of a person or an animal", is limited. Firstly, it emphasizes corporeality, likely deliberately leaving out the mind, which is not seen as being part of the body. Such renditions point to Cartesian binary thinking and notions of otherness, which produce discourses of exclusion that have perpetuated racism, sexism, compulsory able-bodiedness, and compulsory heterosexuality, among others. The juxtaposition of light and darkness to contrast Europe from Africa in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, is a stark example of such thinking. In that novel, the European is the mind; the African, the body.

Ironically, defining the body as a separate and independent entity also renders it unique; according it agency for creative impulse – a sense that there are no general rules to occupying a body and/or re/presenting it.

Consequently, we come to realize that not all bodies are equal. The privileged body (which is considered the subject) must have some cultural and sociopolitical power to occupy and maintain that position, and this is usually the body of a heterosexual-white-middleclass-man. Then there are bodies that manifest as objects in mainstream cultures – those on whom things may be done without consequences; what Michel Foucault calls "docile bodies" – the objects. These may include racial minorities, queer people, and women on the margins. And Julia Kristeva posits that some bodies cannot be classified as above and are rendered abject – "the jettisoned object" radically excluded. This is just how challenging it is to live in a body. You become an entity to be defined and regulated. *Other* times, you become nothing.

Considering this, it is important to talk about the power that embodiment has on an artist's work and to try and fashion tools for best representing bodies that are often on the margins. Some critics have proposed that marginalized identities must shoulder the burden of representing themselves in literature. The argument is that living in a certain body offers you the privilege of experiencing what it means to be in that condition, and as such, your narration of that experience should be more trustworthy than that of someone who lacks the same. So, gay people must write

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

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Busisiwe Mahlangu (South Africa), Kevin Chen (Taiwan),  
Wesley Macheso (Malawi)

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about gay lives, black people about blackness, and the disabled should be trusted with stories of disability, and so on. Then who will tell the story of someone who is deaf, blind, and cannot speak?

To me, such a perspective is as limited as the dictionary definition of the body itself. To begin with, every lived experience is different and no two bodies have exactly the same encounter. My experience as a black man in a modern city in Malawi is not the same as that of another man living in some remote village there. The stories that can be told by a transgender woman in Iowa cannot be the same as what can be told by a trans woman in the South Bronx. Human experiences are very much shaped by forces outside the body, and identifying with a group of people due to “similar” embodiment does not guarantee similar experiences. As such, we cannot attach authenticity to representations in narratives simply because they are told by a writer in a certain body. That, in itself, is stereotypical. All creative writing (either fictional or autobiographical) is a product of recollection and imagination. When readers approach literary texts, they should not be looking for facts and/or hard truths, but rather, possibilities and alternatives.

And when you ask: what are the devices that a writer can use to sail through the turbulent waters of difference? My answer is two-pronged: 1. Imagination. 2. Sociopolitical intelligence.

In his poem “On Imagination,” Phillis Wheatley writes:

*Imagination!* who can sing thy force?  
[...]  
We on thy pinions can surpass the wind,  
And leave the rolling universe behind.

Here, the persona attests to the power of imagination in transcending spaces, situations, and I may add, embodiment. That’s what creative writing should do. I believe a writer’s greatest asset is their ability to imagine otherworldliness. Writers must be able to create possible worlds and modes of being beyond themselves. The writer’s body must not be a border. To quote Heidegger, embodiment must rather be the point where “something begins its essential unfolding.” Writers must be allowed to imagine and represent different bodies and experiences, even beyond the world as we know it.

On the topic of sociopolitical intelligence, a writer must be conscious of the world around them. They must discern the biases and historical inequalities that have shaped dominant cultures and be cautious not to replicate them in their writing. In the end, good writing must work towards mobility, enablement, and querying/queering discourses. A reader must walk out of your story defamiliarized. Creativity must transcend the shores of what is and soar toward what could be.

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