

The Event of Becoming

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When I was about eleven years old I was visiting the small city in Rhode Island where my mother lived with my stepfather. Pawtucket was a failing mill town, predominantly white, of various ethnicities. Its working-class homes were spiraling downward in the late 1950s, before the phenomenon of gentrification. It was a cheap and manageable town for my fair-skinned, straight-haired mother, who resembles the Wampanoag side of the family more than I do. It had seemed like a comfortable place for her and her white husband.

One day, while sitting on the steps outside my mother's home I was approached by a boy a bit younger than I. He eyed me warily and asked what nationality I was. I replied that I was an American. He looked puzzled, then said, "No, I mean what nationality are you?"

I was adamant. "American."

"No," he said, "you know what I mean."

The beginning of anger stretched my words tightly in the air.

"You said what nationality, that means nation. I'm from America, so I'm American. What are you?"

He looked at me in fear and then disgust and said, "You don't know what you're talking about," then ran down the street to his own stoop.

He went back, I'm sure, to his white parents who'd sent him. He had the air of a child on a mission he did not quite understand, but he knew I had not responded satisfactorily. I was sure that he'd expected me to say I was a "nigger," just as his father and mother had probably identified me. The look of expectation in his eyes was a betrayal. In siding with his parents' ignorance he betrayed our natural alliance as children. I felt crushed.

But I had a major advantage over that child. I knew what he was doing and he

did not. As a black person in the United States—even as a child—I recognized a trap being set by a white person. I saw, at eleven years old, what black meant to white America, and I knew that by stating my blackness I might set in motion a series of events that had historically never meant anything good for me. So, precocious little wench that I was even then, I whipped out another identity I knew would stump him and his parents, whose devious hand I sensed guided his bumbling inquiries.

And lest my behavior be dismissed today as fanciful paranoia, the fact is that within months of that encounter my mother and her family were besieged with hate phone calls; garbage was dumped and burned on her tiny lawn. Her neighbors threatened her home and her life when they realized that by American I also meant black.

So the question of identity and its complexities is not just an academic one for me. I never had the privilege of relaxedly theorizing who I was in this world, even as a child. Each hypothesis I might create was met with a specifically defined reality and the question of survival. Interestingly enough, this reality and the experiences it offered me did not seduce me into an insistence on a rigidly guarded identity. I recognized the wondrous spectrum of elements that begin the construction of my identity—lesbian, African American, Wampanoag, Ioway, Bostonian—to just begin. Coming of age during the political movements of the 1960s helped me learn an early appreciation of the power and the value of identification. But the complexity of identity didn't escape me. After all, my mother was an acceptable neighbor on one day and a target of violence the next, simply because of others' interpretation of her identity. This life lesson also helped me develop a critical stance toward any element that was viewed as fixed, unmitigated, or eternal.

Now that I've been given the opportunity to do some theorizing, I'd like to share some linked but not necessarily linearly related thoughts and feelings on my two responses to the question of identity—appreciation and caution.

First, I suggest that the question of identity as posed in this country is one that would be almost unrecognizable in other countries. Most nations begin from a more articulate definition of who its citizens are, rightly or wrongly, and then develop attitudes and institutions which allow for assorted variations, as well as for colonialism. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the concept of a "British subject" became so expansive that it could, at one time, have taken in just about every existing ethnic group. I'm not suggesting that the British have been especially liberal in their acceptance of immigrant African or Caribbean "subjects" any more than the citizens of Germany today absorb Asian and African immigrant workers. But those nations start from a unified whole—whether real or imagined—and the United States does not.

The idea of "American" (and I, of course, use that word imprecisely when I use it to speak only of U.S. citizens) embodies resilient refugees from many

other shores. Constrained for citizens seeking a way to pull when we speak of American immigrants who escape because of its mythical place where one could social, judicial) and c

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other shores. Consequently the struggle for identity is more focused, more strident for citizens of the United States. We are continually, as a nation, seeking a way to pull together the unifying threads that make us a nation. And when we speak of Americans we think of an amazing array of mostly European immigrants who escaped their countries, explicitly choosing the United States because of its mythology. Most often the United States has been extolled as a place where one could escape the oppressions of the past (religious, economic, social, judicial) and create a new life, that is, a new identity.

It is this tabula rasa ideal that sets much of the tone for the development of the American national persona. After being bathed in the fire and water of a transatlantic journey and surviving to step on to the frightening and alien shores of America, the new arrivals must surely have deemed it only fair that life be allowed to begin anew. And that idea of newness, that disconnection from all that went before, alongside the sense of a vast expanse of wilderness (supposedly unclaimed) shaped the embryonic American identity.

That American identity most often comes into greatest relief when we speak of the deeds of explorers/exploiters such as the Pilgrims, cowboys, and settlers of the western migration or those who survive victimization—European immigrants who endured antagonism to become successful. Both mythologies were shaped to emphasize a simplistic heroism—good against bad. Personal fortitude and ingenuity winning out over mindless evil or ignorance. John Wayne versus the wild Indians; Horatio Alger versus poverty. In this country politicians play most successfully to people's belief in this mythology. The good citizens are asked to defeat the forces of evil: antifamily homosexuals, pornographers, the lazy poor, the violent people of color, all those too "weak" to overcome their circumstance. The polyethnic nature of our beginnings makes such fractionalizations an easy strategy.

There has been much discussion in literary circles in the past few years of the deconstruction of words and ideas, stripping them down to allow them to stand independent of meaning, stark against a page; that old tabula rasa, if you will. We learn much when we are able to look at roots and at the flotsam and jetsam that have little meaning in and of themselves, but that linger in the wake of words and ideas. We strip away the attendant realities until we look at the empty space that lies there, waiting to form itself into motion, object, concept.

But people are not artichokes. It is very helpful in a therapeutic situation to peel each leaf and get to the heart of what has formed a personality. But in human social interaction it is by exploring the full construction and interaction of the layers of character that we find the heart. To twist an old geometry principle—the whole equals more than the sum of its parts.

Any writer or literary critic would acknowledge that it is those layers both personal and social that make our fictional characters memorable. When most effective our stories reflect the plurality of who we are both individually and as a nation. Because of who I am when I wrote my novel *The Gilda Stories*, the

questions of real (fictional) life and those of national identity had to be considered. I made the choice not to discard but to utilize those questions in developing the plot, themes, and characters. If a youthful-looking, dark-skinned woman is walking down a lonely country road at night and encounters two men dressed like beds, that is, wearing sheets and hoods, with what dilemma are they presented? Well, two conflicting desires begin: both are rooted in fear and need for a sense of power. So there is murder and there is rape. The conflict: whether to rape her or kill her. Of course the resolution is that they can do both, first rape, then lynch. They assume that they can accomplish both deeds successfully, anonymously, because history has shown them it's possible.

But shortly into the encounter they realize they have misidentified their prey. Like the little boy on my mother's stoop, they see only what they've been told to see. On that road she is not simply a lone dark woman; she is that and more. She is someone with powers—physical or mystical, or maybe just a gun. She is a lone dark woman who is also more than simply that description, and the inability of those men to absorb a constructive concept of who she is will cost them their lives. For them identity is reached through a reductionist theory. It says that black women are one particular set of things: powerless, sexual prey, not intelligent. These men are unable to see her identity in a constructive way, that is, a circle of elements forming a whole. But whether this encounter takes place in the eighteenth century or the twentieth century, whether it is on a dark country road or in a U.S. Senate judiciary hearing room, the definition of the identity of that lone dark woman will not (for the white males who've intercepted her) be broad enough to include other things she might be—a crack shot, a black belt in karate, a reputable lawyer who'll no longer be silent about harassment, a vampire.

Many of us who've been categorized and oppressed fear that to identify oneself as a specific thing—black, lesbian, Jewish, Italian, American—is to reduce yourself to a single element that excludes all other possible elements. The concept of identity as a reductionist rather than constructive expression is continually reinforced in this culture, where ethnic or social identity is rarely used as part of a normative stance. Sociological surveys pinpoint specific identities in order to categorize and assess and market information. The Kinseys, the Niensens, the Bureau of the Census introduce the slots into which we must all fit. And once we are slotted, wheels will turn and things will happen. Homosexuals will be known as lonely white men, television shows with all-black casts and no laugh track will not be produced, and candidates for office will decide on which neighborhood to focus their campaign. We have come to accept negative social consequences from such identification.

Why is that, when evidence also shows that creating specifics doesn't have to be limiting or exclusionary? The success of the film and television business depends on precisely that principle—anyone in the world should be able to identify with Shirley Temple, Sylvester Stallone, or a purple dinosaur. The concept of "world literature" also presumes such identification. People rarely think, What an ethnic oddity Leopold Bloom is, let's drop Joyce from the canon;

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or, the working poor of Victorian England are irrelevant, so don't bother reading Dickens. We can accept the perspectives of Joyce or Dickens as extremely specific and at the same time broad and relevant. We now must insist on giving the same credence and value to other perspectives, including our own.

Marilyn Frye speaks of "the event of becoming a lesbian (as) a reorientation of attention in a kind of ontological conversion." When we use this constructive approach, identification becomes a shift in perspective rather than a closing of one's eyes. To identify ourselves can open a way into discussion. Rather than reducing us to familiar elements, it can offer an introduction into the many layers that construct who we are. To say that I am a lesbian is not the same as saying that I am *only* a lesbian. Identifying myself as a lesbian shifts the emphasis, suggesting a place to begin, not a place to end.

I first read James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* around 1961 and was not surprised to find that it was about gay men. In one section one of the characters, seated in a bar, coyly observes the patrons and says, "All these men, all these men and so few women. Doesn't that seem strange to you?" "Ah," said Giovanni, "no doubt the women are waiting at home."

Because I knew myself to be a lesbian I identified with the men in that bar, eyeing each other in a way that was forbidden. I experienced the thrill of recognition of my place with these people. I saw the hot mix of limbs and sweat that was the reason for being there and found joy in it. At the same time I transmuted the experience and was able to understand that I was also at home with the women—the women who I knew were not merely waiting. Our imagination allows each of us this possibility of being party to both experiences.

Perhaps it would be easier for us to acknowledge the many places where we reside if we could learn to accept the basic, natural permutation that is our lives. We are perpetually defining and redefining ourselves. The baby, the youth, the teenager. I am now learning my identity as middle-aged in preparation for my identity as an elder. These are precise identities that we take on, reshape, fill up as we need to over the course of our allotted time on this planet. As we move into the next definition, what we have been does not evaporate to make way for the next phase. It is embedded in who we are. That infamous inner child! We can hold on to all those other things we've been and make what we are more whole. My identity as a lesbian is tied up with James Baldwin's literary representation of gay men; with Mercedes McCambridge, a particularly dykey actress of the 1940s; with Gwen, my high femme best friend from high school; as well as with Stephen, the heroine of *The Well of Loneliness*. My early experience of lesbians as women in flannel shirts and Frye boots gives more resonance to my experience today of lesbians in three-piece suits or in transparent body stockings. When I can reconcile those experiences, those identifications, I have created a larger whole, not a smaller self.

In order to really appreciate the opportunity that the advent of lesbian and gay studies presents, I must also explore the history that made the idea possible in

our lifetimes. The labor movement, the civil rights movement, and the antiwar and women's liberation movements each created new realities to be layered onto the idea of what it meant to be an American. In examining that process of development I see the areas where we need to continue to expand our idea of what our identity as lesbians or gays can mean. And in doing so, I hope we avoid making the same mistakes made in the past.

The emergence of black studies and Africana studies departments, the result of student activism of the 1960s, provided a strong base for the redefinition of black identity in this country. But what it also did was help to isolate blackness from the other layers that made up the totality. I think this occurred not because there is inherently anything wrong with black studies, but rather because black identity was not being looked at within a full political context. Blackness was being taught in reaction to racism. The effort was to affirm the goodness and value of being black, to retell the history of being black in a positive light. Offering a fuller political context rather than being simply reactive would have accomplished the goal and would have allowed for a linking of the struggle for black liberation with other liberation struggles in general. This is not what happened: consequently women and lesbians and gays were (and still are) relegated to lesser roles in the development of that area of study. And students of the various ethnic studies programs see each other primarily as competitors for limited funds and greater victim status. Again, this is not because there is anything wrong with black studies; rather, the programs have eschewed any active political position other than the one immediately connected to that one element of identity—blackness. The idea of what black means is reduced to the most obvious.

The advent of women's studies in the 1970s created another whole set of political dilemmas, but it did offer the possibility for fuller development because it was not just trying to reshape the idea of who women are but was also advocating a specific political philosophy—feminism. Modern feminism grew naturally out of a reassessment of the political movements in this country's history. It postulates the inclusion of all elements when assessing a political situation. It calls for a constructive perspective rather than a reductive one. Raising the questions of race, ethnicity, physical difference, and class broadens our analysis to include not just vindication of those who are oppressed at the moment but also an examination of how oppression occurs systemically. The implication is that not just one element of society needs to be changed; all the power dynamics of society are due for realignment. The questions about the focus and effectiveness of women's studies (or any of the attempts to address the inadequacies of traditional educational institutions) as an academic discipline remain, but the value of feminism as a political perspective should not be overlooked.

The insult often hurled at "minorities" by conservatives is that we're practicing identity politics. Well, all politics is identity politics, whether it is built around an affiliation with African Americans, Chicano farmworkers, the Family

Values Coalition, the Team can Party. There is nothing ment of one's group position picture and rely on only or action. We usually end up taken into consideration, t In politics, as in our personal identities we hold and understand. It is much easier to reinforce it than leave the fall the new information t Virgo, a Bostonian, a woman ties for which I qualify. At that one of those must pr Pawtucket didn't understand American, which is sort of

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Values Coalition, the Teamsters, the National Rifle Association, or the Republican Party. There is nothing innately wrong with making a case for the improvement of one's group position. The problem comes when we ignore the full picture and rely on only one element of our identity to direct our thinking and action. We usually end up with the belief that our position is the only one to be taken into consideration, that there is one perspective that must predominate. In politics, as in our personal lives, we must learn how to integrate the many identities we hold and understand that those identities are sometimes fluid, not static. It is much easier to grab onto a picture of ourselves and continually reinforce it than leave the picture frame open like a shoebox, into which will fall the new information we gather. I enjoy being called a lesbian, a writer, a Virgo, a Bostonian, a woman, an African American, or any of the other identities for which I qualify. And I will gleefully correct you if you seem to indicate that one of those must preclude the others. The little boy questioning me in Pawtucket didn't understand what he saw or heard when I called myself an American, which is sort of the equivalent of saying "all of the above."

In her writing Audre Lorde repeatedly insisted on her right to be seen as all the elements of her identity: black, poet, mother, lesbian, warrior. She said, "There's no such thing as a single issue movement, we do not live single issue lives." Moving through and yet carrying each of the issues and identities that form us create this event of becoming ourselves. It is an ongoing work whose shifting perspective I consider a burden sometimes, but more often a gift.