

Thinking Out Loud: Democracy, Imagination and Peeps of Color

Keynote Speech: "Diversity Revisited: A Conversation of Diversity in the Arts"

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A caveat, at the top. These comments should not be viewed as a call for some kind of new social realism or ideologically driven Art. After spending all of my adult life on what I will generously call the Left, I have become suspicious and uninterested in any Art tied to an ism. I agree with Adrienne Rich's call for an art that "goes to the edge of meaning" as well as Art that discovers new resonance in the familiar. But, if ever we need an avant- garde (for lack of a better term), it is now. It would be useful to journey to and dwell in that fragile space in which meaning seems to collapse into new meaning and new forms. I am most interested in a Cultural Revolution. I almost wrote "Renaissance", but that sounds too square, too smug, too safe.. "Revolution" sounds like upheaval, urgent, funky, and seditious... in a cultural sense, if that's possible. But that would take old and dangerous imaginings.

In the great preaching tradition of the Baptical Experience of the Church of What's Happening Now, I'm going to tell you what I'm going to tell you, then I'm going to tell you. And at the end, I'm going to tell you what I told you.

When I was thinking about "my text for today", I was acutely aware that I was speaking at something called "Diversity Revisited: A Conversation on Diversity in the Arts". And I understood two things: That this is a "people of color" thing. That it is, roughly speaking, about my "peeps" And that it was born, in large part, out of a sense of exclusion and invisibility in relation to a larger gathering called the "National Performing Arts Convention: Taking the Arts to the Next Stage".

The obvious question is: What do People of Color have to talk about that they are not able to address at the National Performing Arts Convention? And although I know this gathering is not supposed to be focused on “historical patterns of exclusivity and invisibility”, and what those patterns have to do with the production and distribution of art in American society... although I know that is not the focus, it is the elephant in the room and we cannot pretend it does not exist. In fact, these "patterns of exclusivity and invisibility" are historical practices that make an otherwise diverse group of people to organize under what I think is a shaky banner called "People of Color".

I think "People of Color" is a shaky term because it represents empty calories. If it weren't for white people, and for what one of my colleagues, Dr. Gary Lemons, calls "the whiteness of whiteness", there would be no People of Color. We would just be Japanese or Indian or Cuban or Haitian or Native Americans. In other words, what we called ourselves would be rooted in geography and language and culture and religion and mythology and so on. There might be a hyphen or two in there, but the point is we would be grounded in complex and particular histories that express and assert our humanity. But, to my mind, “People of Color” represents a history of subjugation to white supremacy and colonialism, more than anything else.

I read a statement about this gathering that said the purpose is to " push dialogue beyond the diversity considerations of the past 15 years into the realm of active coalition building dedicated to bring about excellent art and civic engagement for artist and cultural workers now and in the future". This is a good idea because I am not interested in warming up old discussions. I'd rather use the time to think out loud about the last part of that statement: *and civic engagement for artists and cultural workers now and in the future.*

“Cultural Workers”... now there’s a term that made it out of the radical politics of the 1960s and 70s. I first heard that term in Cuba in the early 70s where it was used to signify and honor Art as labor, and to link cultural labor to the transformation of society. It is that sense of the term that I would like us to keep in mind as we talk about “civic engagement”:

“Civic Engagement” is a big thing these days. It’s in the air, and it’s probably in the drinking water. It’s the new Now. “Civic Engagement” means many things to many people, and it can be found in under different names in different places around the country: Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life; the American Assembly; the Pericles Project, Arts and Citizenship, and a few years ago, Animating Democracy. This is not an accident that “jes’ grew”. This intense interest in intersections of Art, Humanities, Science, Technology, Media and Citizenship is a response to the unprecedented pressures and realities of American and global society.

All of this motion around “Civic Engagement” underscores the fact that this conversation on diversity, is happening at a critical moment in time when there is little room for disengaged neutrality, little time for “sitting it out” as events unfold, because we are all implicated in ways that we have yet to understand fully. But, it should be clear to us at this point that the meaning of democracy is heavily implicated. So, if we are going to have a conversation about diversity and civic engagement, it must also be a conversation about the ideals and practice of Democracy at home and abroad?

Like many Americans, I have been recalled to Citizenship in the past few years. Not an unexamined Citizenship of flag waving and fear, but a Critical Citizenship that demands radical new ways of imagining and acting in the world. If the fall of the Berlin Wall signaled the end of the Cold War, then 9-11 and the Aftermath brought us

into a completely new reality. And at the advent of new realities, artists have always been called to respond to the shifting grounds of their life and times, to give weight and meaning to those times. Think the Surrealists and WWI, the Be-bop musicians and WWII, the Beat poets in the Cold War era, and so on.

For those of us living and working in America in these times, it is impossible to ignore or deny the imperial power that America exerts in the world as well at the consequences of that power at home. I came across an article that does a good job of framing this new reality:

... what word but "empire" describes the awesome thing that America is becoming? It is the only nation that polices the world through five global military commands; maintains more than a million men and women under arms on four continents; deploys carrier battle groups on watch in every ocean; guarantees the survival of countries from Israel to South Korea; drives the wheels of global trade and commerce; and fills the hearts and minds of an entire planet with its dreams and desires ¹.

The subtitle of the article posed a question that gets to the heart of the matter:
With a military of unrivaled might, the United States rules a new kind of empire. Will this cost America its soul?

Look at the power of that language, America:

...drives the wheels of global trade and commerce

... fills the hearts and minds of an entire planet with its dreams and desires

Will this cost America its soul?

With so much at stake, and after decades of discussing diversity, why do we find ourselves "revisiting" it? The studies have been done. The Diversity Committees have

reported. The Target of Opportunity positions have been filled. And the puny engines of the Diversity Initiatives have been set in motion. And, most of all, the books have been written. But, here we are, at “the same ol, same ol”: colored people trying to break off something proper for themselves. Why are we here, again? What needs to change in our thinking?

I don't have any definitive answers, but I do have some ideas. The first has to do with language and how it can conceal even when it seems to reveal. "Diversity", for example, is a very neutral sounding word for a complex issue. It has come to mean so many things, that it actually means not much. In the Black Power days we fought for more black people in the media, on the police force, in the boardroom and so on. That got translated into some "black faces in high places". Just get some black faces and put them in there.

I am old enough to remember when certain “time saving” products hit the market. “Time saving” products were a big thing in the first half of the Cold War. I can recall the firsts commercials and ads for food that came in boxes, and all you had to do was “add and stir” and presto! “Presto!” was also a big word back then. Presto! you had your meal. It was a sign of progress. That approach carried over into the social sphere. As if you could "add and stir" to achieve something called Diversity. Same thing with women. And Latinos. And Asians. Add + Stir = Diversity.

Somewhere along the line, the militant, radical principle that brought about the demands for change got lost in "strategic planning" and "measurable objectives". I am using the word: "Diversity", but what I really mean is "Democracy". When you say "Democracy" the discussion has to expand, it has to elevate, it has to point us towards the purpose of "diversity", and the discussion has to be about more than "colored faces in high places". I think that we have to insist on linking diversity to democracy. Post 9-11 diversity conversations must have a different sense of time

and place and urgency than those old, tired pre-9-11 conversations. Once again, just look at the language describing this gathering, how diversity is linked to the notion of artists and civic engagement.

"*Democracy in the arts*" brings us to a different place in our thinking than "*Diversity in the arts*". "Democracy in the arts" fosters critical conversations about funding and programming and audience development, and, **at the same time**, frames those practical matters as matters of national security. And that is precisely the way I've come to think about the arts in America: as a matter of national security. And if liberals and progressives don't understand that, then conservative and right wing forces do because when they attack works of art they don't bombard them with critiques about craft and form and the meaning of beauty. They attack on the basis of ideas. You and I may see Art, with a big A. But, they see ideas. And they attack because they want to control the flow of ideas in society because they know that whoever controls the ideas controls the society. In other words, they want to organize your thinking in the image of theirs. That is why their unrelenting moves to silence, shut down and disqualify any art that they find offensive are finally anti-democratic. That is why when I say "diversity" I am not talking about a diversity of colors but a democracy of ideas as expressed through different cultures. And that diversity of ideas is absolutely essential to democracy. That is why the arts are a matter of national security.

Think about the recent news about Michael Moore's new film *Fahrenheit 9-11*; a film that is highly critical of George Bush and the Bush family ties to wealthy Saudis. Disney, which financed the film decided not to release the film because it was so critical of the President. Michael Moore has since found other ways to release it, but the point stands: silence dissent.

Think about the case of the Poet Laureate of New Jersey, Amiri Baraka. Baraka's poem "Somebody Blew Up America" implies that the Israeli government (and others) had prior knowledge about the 9-11 attacks. He was then attacked as an anti-Semite, and asked to resign. He refused. But, according to law, they couldn't fire him. He had to serve out his term. So, the courageous and principled members of the New Jersey State Legislature abolished the position altogether. If it can't have the poet it wants then it will have no poets!

I want to be as clear as possible about the following point. Democracy in the arts or anywhere else, for that matter, is useless without what Professor Elaine Scarry calls "authorizations".² I take this term to mean the need for actual structures (voting laws, programming, staffing patterns, public policy, and etcetera) to realize and to enforce the strategies and tactics democracy. Without "authorizations", the practice of democracy depends on what she calls "generous imaginings". In other words, it is not enough to rely on a generous heart or mood to imagine others. Sentiments and moods come and go. I have used this idea to think of the "authorizations" as constituent elements of an even larger enterprise, but to my mind they are not goals in and of themselves. They exist as strategies towards a greater good, called Democracy.

I should take the time to define what I mean when I say "Democracy". For the moment, I want to set aside the idea of democracy as it relates to matters of state. I am talking about Democracy, now, as a principle that underlies matters of state. I am thinking of it as a humane social practice that elevates and promotes the best in individuals because it requires each of us to see and accept the Other as both different from us and the same as us at a fundamental level.

It makes each democratic practitioner a better citizen and a better person because it brings together the inner need for the freedom to be who you are with the outer need

for a social and political and economic ecology that can feed and care for the whole human being. And when I say “the freedom to be who you are”, I am talking about the freedom to be whoever you have come identify yourself to be: Straight, Transgender, Master Carpenter, Professional Dissenter, African American, Latino, Pioneer, Explorer, Space Cadet, A Being Disrupted and Displaced During Interplanetary Travel, Cowboy Poet, and, yes, A Peeps of Color. You should be free to be all of that without facing punishment or brutalization or murder or subjugation because of it. Short of committing acts that violate basic human solidarity (rape, murder, political and corporate corruption, for example), you should be free to realize the Self that comes from the interior life of the mind and soul. And although it may come from this interior life, it is shaped in the context of history and social reality. And the overarching purpose of the social order should be to bring that Self out of you, to honor it, and to use it as human capital to be spent in the interest of the human being. The world is full of ancient wisdom about the human desire for balance between the inner life and the outer life. 3. A truly democratic society promotes and supports this balance.

And here is the key point in this: you cannot put into place “authorizations” that honor and protect the individual Self without “authorizations” honoring and protecting the Other Self. For me, that is the necessary self-interest of Democracy. One depends on the other. *Democracy: You can't keep it unless you give it away.* But you cannot have it, let alone practice it, without a willing and robust imagination because it is through the imagination that we can begin to “empty our cups” and see the world through eyes other than our own.

Scarry describes a useful way to approach “picturing others” this way: *When we seek equality through generous imaginings, we start with our own weight, then attempt to acquire knowledge about the weight and complexity of others. The alternative strategy is to achieve equality between the self and other not by trying to make one's*

knowledge of others as weighty as one's self-knowledge, but by making one ignorant about oneself and, therefore, as weightless as all others. 4.

In the absence of a willing and robust imagination, we find ourselves caught up in this superfluous cycle of revisiting diversity after we visited it and revisited it before. I call it superfluous because unless we find some new ways of thinking, it will be a distraction, something extra and beside the point. To paraphrase Malcolm X, if you think those old ways will produce new results you've been had, you've been took, and you've been misled!

When we start talking about Democracy and the Imagination, this is where you and I enter the picture with the particular work that we do in the world. The Imagination is our field of operation. Just to be clear: when I say Imagination, I am thinking of both the private realm of the individual mind and the social realm of public life: how one shapes the other and vice versa. I think of the imagination as a necessary and sacred space, a space in which "if not probable, all is possible". And although it exists within material borders and is shaped, to a large degree, by the material world, it can transcend those borders and conjure infinite possibilities of being.

Here is Albert Einstein on the subject: *I am enough of an artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.*

I don't want to give the impression that I am talking about this as some kind of benevolent "place" from which nothing but good will flow. We know that that is not true. If the 20th century has shown us nothing else, it has demonstrated the capacity of the human imagination to design inscrutable and nearly insurmountable horrors. Yet, at the same time, I believe it is only through the imagination that a creative life can be brought into full, humane conscience.

When I was in grade school, my class went on a field trip to the United Nations. I saw a plaque inscribed with a quote from the Preamble to the Constitution for UNESCO. For reasons I never fully understood, the words stayed with me all these years: *since wars begin the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.* At that age, I understood War to be like a schoolyard fight: it actually begins when someone strikes the first blow. So, I was troubled by this idea of war beginning in the mind. As I began to come into consciousness years later, I started to understand how hurt and destruction directed towards another begins with the failure to fully imagine the Other as a human being. The violence that comes out of that failure can be widespread and far-reaching, but it comes from a narrow, restricted place in the mind. A writer once put it this way: *Fantasies are more than substitutes for unpleasant reality: they are also dress rehearsals and plans. All acts performed in the world begin in the imagination.*

I know we have all heard this next point before, but it bears repeating in present context. As artists, the products of our imagination add new value to the culture and to society. That value may be a commodity, entertainment, inspiration, insight or understanding. At the same time, the creative work of our imagination also creates the value of new knowledge. Each work of art, at its best, presents us with a new way of seeing and knowing. It adds to the great storehouse of knowledge or understanding about what it means to be human. It sheds light on the enduring, utterly mysterious human drama. So if we insist on diversity in the arts we are saying that people of color bring new value and new knowledge to the democratic enterprise AND that what we bring is absolutely essential to national security in a democratic society AND that openness to new value and new knowledge is essential to global peace, justice and well-being.

So, as we come around to another conversation about diversity in the arts, I am aware that this worn out cycle is being repeated for many reasons, and that one of

the main reasons is a failure of the imagination. And I think this cycle has been worn out all on sides, People of Color as well as People of Whiteness.

The issue with Whiteness is twofold: one, the failure to imagine anything other than itself as the defining reality. (see addendum) ; two, its willingness to see the Other in terms that erases the humanity of the Other.

What would it take to overcome this kind of failure of the imagination? As I said earlier, language is on starting point, beginning with the words “democracy” and “diversity” and “people of color”. One of the signs of a society in trouble is the degradation and devaluation of language leading to a kind of cognitive dissonance that so many of us experience nowadays, wherein it becomes increasingly difficult to trust the language we encounter on a day-to-day basis. It’s pickpocket language. It doesn’t say what it means. It claims, “the children come first because they are the future”, but it’s really trying to sell you something or get your vote. This is why our writers and other language artists are so important. They struggle for honest language that means what it says whether it is fashionable or not. And this leads to the next point about what it takes to overcome this failure of the imagination: it takes Art. Consider the following:

The way we act towards "Others" is shaped by the way we imagine them. Both philosophic and literary descriptions of such imagining show the difficulty of picturing other people in their "full weight and solidity". This is true even when the person is a friend or acquaintance; the problem is further magnified when the person is a stranger or "foreigner". It is therefore, important to come face to face with the limits of imagining other people.⁵

The key phrase here is *the difficulty of picturing other people in their “full weight and solidity”*. This points to how hard it is for anyone to imagine other people as fully

human as themselves. I think this is a particular challenge to Whiteness, with its long history of power and privilege. But this is the great advantage of Art in a democratic context. It can facilitate and compel the imagination in irresistible ways. We know that Imagination alone cannot solve real world problems, but real world problems cannot be solved without it.

It is worth it to think about how Art is able to do this great thing, how it is that “anything can make us look, but Art can make us see”. Chinua Achebe, the great Nigerian writer wrote about the ways in which fiction uncovers something true about the human condition. 6. Although he is talking about fiction, what he has to say is really about all Art. In the essay, he introduces a term that he calls “imaginative identification” to describe the way fiction (Art) addresses imagining the Other. *Things are not merely happening before us; they are happening, by the power and force of the imagination, to us. We not only see; we suffer alongside the hero...*

And I might add: *when the hero loses, we lose; when the hero triumphs, we triumph.*

I said earlier that People of Color are also abused by this frustrating return to diversity conversations due to a failure of the imagination. The issue with “People of Color” is the belief that we are the People of Color. Trusting “People of Color” to say something useful about the fullness of our humanity, when what it really speaks to is our relationship to Whiteness supports this belief. And then there is the troubling, rarely spoken failure to imagine each other. In the Elaine Scarry essay, she points out that part of the difficulty of picturing others also has to do with the fact that most people have a low tolerance for features that are different from their own. People can take the racial, ethnic and gender grounding in various works of art to be an occasion for self-reflection and affirmation rather than a reflection and affirmation of people different from oneself.

What is the consequence of this? One of the most notable consequences, to my mind, is an absence of collaborations between People of Color. I'm not talking about a few integrated companies or casts. I mean real collaborations in which peers deeply engaged in critical and creative conversations create new value and new knowledge. I have a feeling that the new form and new vocabulary and syntax and mythic images that society needs so desperately is waiting to be uncovered in the mix and clash and improbabilities of those collaborations because they will come from people most likely to push for democracy, for freedom, for a rupture with the past. The passion and urgency of that push has to the potential to create Art that is irresistible, to make diversity (Democracy) irresistible. But where do we go to find such work? Work that carries audiences (sometimes against their will) into the thing they may believe is so unlike them only to discover more than they bargained for about themselves?

I often look at the state of American society and wonder if it is possible to pull back. Not to retreat to some fabled past that reactionaries romanticize about, but to pull back from this unsustainable level of fear and violence and distrust. I would be turning my back on the history of struggle and sacrifice if I did not believe the society could be redeemed. But it cannot pull back and cannot be redeemed without a fierce and radically imagined democracy.

For the most part, I told you what I was going to tell you, and then I told you. Let me quickly tell you what I told you:

1. We find ourselves (as "people of color") revisiting diversity because of "historical patterns of exclusion and invisibility". This is an old, tired story that requires new ways of thinking.

2. A possible new way of thinking begins with a critique of what People of Color represents, and with the idea that the aim of diversity is not more “colored faces in high places”, but the humane practice of democracy
3. A willing and robust imagination is absolutely essential to democracy because it depends on the capacity to imagine others in their “full weight and solidity”.
4. The cycle of never ending diversity discussions is due, in large part, to a failure of the imagination. The failure of Whiteness to imagine people of Color, and the failure of people of Color to imagine each other.
5. Art works on our consciousness in special ways that compels us and enables us to imagine the Other.
6. When we talk about Art we are talking about Culture and Ideas. And the point is not to diversify the culture, but to change it.

I think it would be irresponsible of me to present a critique without suggesting some possible ways of addressing some of the issues I raised. Back in the day, in the movement, we were fond of telling the backseat drivers and weekend critics of our movement: *no participation, no right to observation*. Although speech is a form of participation, I can add some actual ideas.

1. Collaborations and critical conversations between People of Color: artists, presenters, etc. If I had to choose in order of importance, the critical conversations would come first. There is an advocacy and convening role here for organizations, institutions and funders... to create the time and space for artists, scholars and others to talk about ideas without the pressure of an expected outcome.

2. Form real partnerships with universities. Universities are the largest funders of art in America. Yes, universities have resources to support the production and distribution of art, but their greatest value is the role they play in educating the next generation of citizens. And that regard...

* Re-think residency activities are often “add and stir”, or they are tied to selling tickets, or they are narrowly conceived: master dance classes by for dance students; composition workshops for music students, writing workshops for writing students, and so on. But, if we want to change the culture, the Art needs to engage at the level of the curriculum to promote collaborations between faculty and across disciplines. This would be a sea change.

* What about curriculum development specialists-In-residence with dance companies? What about a non-profit curriculum development organization that creative teams and university partners can go to with project designs that can be customized to each learning community?

I'd like to return, for a moment, to Chinua Achebe and his concept of “imaginative identification”: These are words that I like to hold in my mind as I work and think about what it means to be an artist and a citizen in the world.

*Imaginative literature (Art) does not enslave; it liberates the mind... Its truth is not like the canons of orthodoxy or the irrationality of prejudice and superstition. It begins as an adventure in self-discovery and ends in wisdom and humane conscience.*⁷

Finally: Get out and Vote! And on that subject, here are some words by Amiri Baraka that I also like to keep in mind. Baraka told me that he was inventing a new African

American form of poetry that is inspired by the Japanese Haiku. It's called the Lowku. Here's one of my favorites:

The President
Introduces himself:
AM BUSH!

References

1. New York Times. Sunday Magazine. "The Burden". Michael Ignatieff. January 5, 2003.
2. "The Difficulty of Imagining Other People". Elaine Scarry.

This essay was given to me by Fluney Hutchinson, the Dean of Students at Lafayette College. It is one of the assigned readings for the 2004 incoming Freshman Class. The essay is part of the intellectual territory to be covered in a year long freshman experience devoted to the theme of "Human Security: American Identity. My new music theater work will be in development at Lafayette College during this time, as part of this exciting initiative.

3.American Soul. "One: Our America"; "Seven: Slavery and the Story of America". Jacob Needleman

My comments about interior life and outer world are a crude interpretation of Needleman's ideas on the subject of what he calls "the inner meaning of democracy". I was surprised to find so much useful thinking in his book because it is so steeped in metaphysical ideas and reverence for the wisdom of the "Founding Fathers".

4. Scarry.

5. Scarry.

6. Hope and Impediments. "The Truth of Fiction". Chinua Achebe.

I am grateful to my friend and colleague Jane Lazarre. She is a great writer and a master teacher who is responsible for introducing this essay to me. Her book, Beyond the Whiteness of Whiteness, will be of great interest to anyone thinking seriously about diversity and democracy and race in America.

7. Achebe.

Addendum

I omitted the following anecdote from the speech due to time considerations. I also had second thoughts about using it because it seemed to reduce race matters to a simple, useless black/white dichotomy, and to create an imbalance between what I

wanted to say about the failure of the imagination on the part of People of Whiteness and People of Color. It seemed to dwell on whiteness at the expense of a critique of “coloredness”. I mean for the story to be read as a critique of Whiteness as it relates to People of Color. Maybe it will form the basis of an essay or another work at a later time. I include it here because it speaks to the subtle ways that even well meaning people can be blinded by whiteness (the “whiteness of whiteness”). It also speaks to the need to tease apart white supremacy from racism. I favor the term “white supremacy” because it accurately addresses notions of essential superior/inferior dynamics between whiteness and the rest of us. In fact, I wonder if white people are white people when people of color are not around. Are they, in those moments, just Americans or whatever applicable European hyphen seems accurate? Obviously, I have more questions than answers.

Last month, I was one of the featured poets at the Skagit River Poetry Festival in La Conner, Washington, located roughly between Seattle and Vancouver. It is a very beautiful, mostly rural area: mountains, rivers, eagles, and so on. The festival is modeled on the Dodge Poetry Festival in that it involves hundreds of high school students from surrounding towns and counties, as well as the general public. The invited poets come from different parts of the country: one Chicano poet, three black poets, and the rest were white poets. The headliner was former US Poet Laureate/ superstar poet, Billy Collins.

It felt strange being the only black face in many of the events, in restaurants, and on the street. People were friendly. Some people even recognized me and knew my work. Others slowed down in their cars to get a good look as I walked down the street: *Stranger in town. Black stranger in town. Strange black poet in town.* While I never get used to this, I have come to view it as the American way. Which is to say, I ain't trippin'.

Then, one morning, I was having lunch with a woman poet who now lives and teaches in Alaska. She was telling me about her son, a musician who lives in New York. He is also a recovering drug addict. She was talking about how he went about getting off drugs and she says, "if you don't mind me bringing up race, he had a black mentor that saved his life". As benign as that sounded, I wondered what in her mind was the significance of the mentor's race to the story. And, second to that, why would she think I would mind? After my reading at the closing ceremony a couple of days later, a woman came over to me, very excited and effusive, and said: "I'm just a white woman who loves what you're doing".

Then another woman came over and said: "It must be hard to be around this many white people all this time".

This is how Whiteness gets People of Color to scratch their heads. What was going? A black man could go nuts in America trying to figure out people's motives, but I think it was the disturbing presence of the black body in the white mind. I think all of these people meant well, but what they said amounted to the smiling erasure of my individuality, of what it is that makes me a singular, irreplaceable human being. It turned me into a racial figure, a type, and a representative. Now, I know how to represent when it's time to represent, but here I was representing without even trying. The great danger of these kinds of well-meaning speech acts is that their effect and meaning is *unintended*, which means that they are difficult to address.

The other thing that struck me about the festival was the way in which the white poets introduced their poems or their talks. Most of them quoted or made references to composers, writers, thinkers, musicians and others who shaped their thinking in one way or another. They made these references with great ease. Not one of them quoted a "people of color". I heard Brahms and Philip Glass and Laurie Anderson and Bob Dylan, but not one Eddie Palmieri or Mario Bauza or Thelonius Monk or Cornell West. Julia Alvarez, Derek

Walcott, Arundahti Roy. When it comes to referencing powerful ideas that shape the intellectual and aesthetic life of these poets, the issue was not the disturbing presence of the black (or colored, if you will) body, but the disturbing absence of the black (or colored) mind. While you could argue that it is not necessary for these poets to be informed by artists and thinkers of color, it difficult to find an artist or thinker of color who is not informed by white influences. Artists and thinkers of color have to be informed by white influences because that is how we are trained, and because our survival depends on knowing what they have written and composed and painted and choreographed, because, at the end of it all, they are the defining reality against which all others are judged. But what is the democratic imperative for these poets to know what artists and thinkers of color have written and composed and painted and choreographed? And if there is no such democratic imperative, where is the democracy? Or, what we have been calling “diversity”?

To get a good appreciation for what all of this implies it is important to understand what such a festival signifies. People who organize festivals like this believe they are bringing together some of America's best contemporary poets. Not only are the poets invited to read their work, but also they are asked to talk about such high-minded things as Craft, and Identify, and Grief, and Violence, and Politics. The idea is that poets speak to our life and times, to the state and soul of the nation and the world in special ways. These are conceived and designed to reach the next generation though linkages with high schools because they believe that literate, well educated young people need poetry, that poetry tutors the heart and the mind, and that (in the words of William Carlos Williams):

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

Yet, in its own quiet and insidious way, the festival perpetuated the failed imagination. And these are well-intentioned people!

