

# WOMAN, NATIVE, OTHER

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Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism



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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." <sup>16</sup>

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. <sup>17</sup>

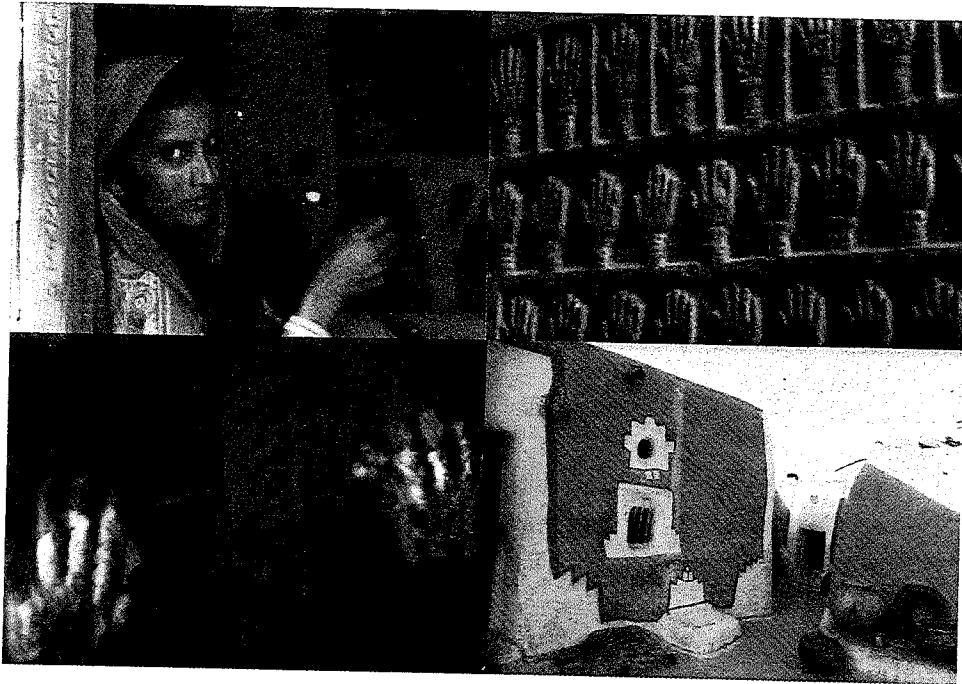
and that of Alice Walker in an essay on the importance of models in the artist's life:

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.* <sup>18</sup>

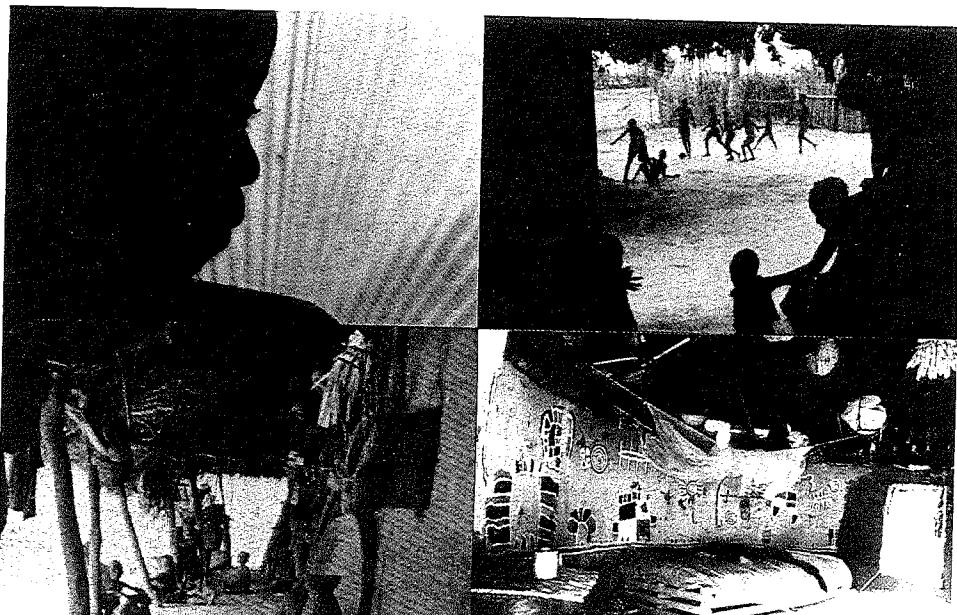
One may say of art for art's sake in general that it is itself a reaction against the bourgeois "functional" attitude of mind which sees in the acquisition of art the highest, purest form of consumption. By making explicit the gratuitousness of their works, artists show contempt for their wealthy customers, 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." <sup>19</sup> 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.

**Vertically imposed language: on clarity, craftsmanship, and She who steals language**

When commitment remains limited to the sociopolitical sphere, the claim of a "functional" writing that advocates the cause of the oppressed



"Poetry is the culture of a people. We are poets even when we don't write poems . . ." (Nikki Giovanni) (Stills: above from I-C; below from NS)



and instructs its audience indicates, in Mphahlele's terms, "a dangerous tendency." It tends "to draw a line of distinction between a function in which an author vindicates or asserts black pride or takes a sociopolitical stand and a function in which he seeks to stir humanity as a whole." For literature, which "takes in wider circles of humanity" even while it particularizes and is an appeal to the freedom in the Sartrean sense of all men and women, such a distinction is bound to be dangerous. "The functions overlap, and the bigger the rift between them the more stridently its propaganda yells out, the more life's ironies and paradoxes are overlooked, and the more the reader feels his sense of belonging assailed or unduly exploited"<sup>20</sup> (Mphahlele). What emerges here are the questions that relate to the nature of literature and writing. On the one hand, can literature be a "freedom that has taken freedom as its end" (Sartre) and still concern itself with elements like structure, form, and style—whose totality precisely allows literature to take on its meaning? On the other hand, can a writing that claims to break down rules and myths submit itself to the exclusive rules of a sociopolitical stand? Nothing could be more normative, more logical, and more authoritarian than, for example, the (politically) revolutionary poetry or prose that speaks of revolution in the form of commands or in the well-behaved, steeped-in-convention-language of "clarity." ("A wholesome, clear, and direct language" is said to be "the fulcrum to move the mass or to sanctify it.")<sup>21</sup> Clear expression, often equated with *correct* expression, has long been the criterion set forth in treatises on *rhetoric*, whose aim was to order discourse so as to *persuade*. The language of Taoism and Zen, for example, which is perfectly accessible but rife with paradox does not qualify as "clear" (paradox is "illogical" and "nonsensical" to many Westerners), for its intent lies outside the realm of persuasion. The same holds true for vernacular speech, which is not acquired through institutions—schools, churches, professions, etc.—and therefore not repressed by either grammatical rules, technical terms, or key words. Clarity as a purely rhetorical attribute serves the purpose of a classical feature in language, namely, its instrumentality. To write is to communicate, express, witness, impose, instruct, redeem, or save—at any rate to *mean* and to send out an *unambiguous message*. Writing thus reduced to a mere vehicle of thought may be *used* to orient toward a goal or to sustain an act, but it does not constitute an act in itself. This is how the division between the writer/the intellectual and the activists/the masses becomes possible. To use the language well, says the voice of literacy, cherish its classic form. Do not choose the offbeat at the cost of clarity. Obscurity is an imposition on the reader. True, but beware when you cross railroad tracks for one train may hide another train. Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of correct writ-

ing, two old mates of power: together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order. Let us not forget that writers who advocate the instrumentality of language are often those who cannot or choose not to see the suchness of things—a language as language—and therefore, continue to preach conformity to the norms of well-behaved writing: principles of composition, style, genre, correction, and improvement. To write "clearly," one must incessantly prune, eliminate, forbid, purge, purify; in other words, practice what may be called an "ablution of language" (Roland Barthes).

"Writing for me," says Toni Cade Bambara, "is still an act of language first and foremost."<sup>22</sup> Before being the noble messenger and the loyal message of her/his people, the writer is a wo/man "whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper" (Joan Didion).<sup>23</sup> S/He does not express her/his thoughts, passion, or imagination in sentences but *thinks sentences*: she is a sentence-thinker (i.e., "not altogether a thinker and not altogether a sentence parser" [Barthes])<sup>24</sup> who radically questions the world through the questioning of a how-to-write. Drawing attention to the very nature of writing, acknowledging its constraints and artificiality do not, however, necessarily imply laying emphasis on craftsmanship as a criterion for "good" (literary) writing. To substitute a work-value for a use-value is simply to shift from the norms of the clearly written (correct behavior) to those of the well written (patient apprenticeship). The image of the writer as a crafts wo/man who spends regular hours of solitary effort cutting, polishing, and setting her/his form "exactly as a jeweller extracts art from his material"<sup>25</sup> has too often been set forth as the sole determining value. Good writing is thus differentiated from bad writing through a building up of skill and vocabulary and a perfecting of techniques. Since genius cannot be acquired, sophisticated means, skills, and knowledge are dangled before one's eyes as *the* steps to take, *the* ladder to climb if one wishes to come any closer to the top of this monument known as Literature. Invoke the Name. Follow the norms. Of. The Well Written. The master-servant's creed carries on: *you must learn* through patience and discipline. And what counts most is what it costs in *labor* to engender a work, hence the parallel often abusively drawn between the act of writing and the birth process.

The poet is in labor [Denise Levertov wrote]. She has been told that it will not hurt but it has hurt so much that pain and struggle seem, just now, the only reality. . . . she hears the doctor saying, "Those are the shoulders you are feeling now"—and she knows the head is out then, and the child is pushing and sliding out of her, insistent, a poem.<sup>26</sup>