Remembered Rapture: Dancing with Words

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Writing is my passion. It is a way to experience the ecstatic. The root understanding of the word *ecstasy*—"to stand outside"—comes to me in those moments when I am immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh, falls away. The metaphysics of writing has always enchanted me. Experiencing language as a transformative force was not an awareness that I arrived at through writing. I discovered it through performance—dramatically reciting poems or scenes from plays. At our all-black southern segregated schools the art of oration was deemed important. We were taught to perform. At school and at home we entertained one another with talent shows—singing, dancing, acting, reciting poetry. Most recently, I was reminded of these times looking at the faces of audiences watching that moment in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral* when the grieving lover recites W.H. Auden’s poem “Funeral Blues.” My favorite verse proclaims: “He was my North, my South, my East and West, / My working week and my Sunday rest, / My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song, / I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.” Those words on paper are powerful. Yet spoken with passion, they are pure magic. They enable the listener to be moved, touched, taken to a place beyond words—transported.

Seduced by the magic of written and spoken words in childhood, I am still transported, carried away by writing and reading. Writing longhand the first drafts of all my work, I read aloud to myself. Performing the words to both hear and feel them, I want to be certain I am grappling with language in a manner where my words live and breathe, where they surface from a passionate place inside me. Had I entered my writing life as a critic, working in this way might not have mattered. Instead, I began writing poems. Standing in our living room, during dark southern nights when the earth was shaken by fierce thunderstorms and all electrical power was down, I performed, reciting poems, either those I had written or the works of favorite poets. During those strange and unpredictable nights I practiced the art of making words matter. In the stark daylight, I
learned by heart the words that would be spoken in the shadows of candlelight, words that enchant, seduce—move. Long before criticism had any place in my mind and imagination, I had been taught in the segregated institutions of my childhood church and school that writing and performing should deepen the meaning of words, should illuminate, transfix, and transform.

Back then, I would have grieved deeply had any prophetic eye looked into the future and shared that I would one day become most well known as a critic, not as a writer of poetry or fiction. All the years I spent in college classes studying and reading literary criticism did nothing to convince me that writing criticism could be an act of passion. The criticism we were encouraged to write as students, that received affirmation and approval, sounded dead. However, it was likely to be held in higher esteem if it conveyed a lack of passionate engagement with words. This dispassionate stance was most often heralded as more objective. We were wrongly taught that it was an expression of neutrality. In actuality, it was an assertion of the hierarchical divide separating critic and writer. The critic, we learned, was superior to the writer. We also learned that this position of superiority sanctioned dominance, that it was accorded by virtue of location, by the critical act of looking over and down on the writer. It was the perfect metaphysical dualistic match of mind and body, with there being no doubt which was superior. In the university then, and often now, clear distinctions were made between writer and critic. There was no safe crossing of the boundaries separating the two. Reflecting on this artificial separation in Voice Lessons: On Becoming a (Woman) Writer, Nancy Mairs declares: "I believe in the reality of work. Period. I do not distinguish between creative and critical writing because all writing is creative. . . . And all writing is critical, requiring the same shifting, selection, scrutiny and judgement of the material at hand. The distinctions are not useful except to people who want to engage an other with whom they can struggle and over whom they can gain power. And because they are useful in that way, they are dangerous. . . ." Refusing to accept these distinctions was and remains a rebellious act, one that can challenge and disrupt hierarchical structures rooted in a politics of domination both within the academy and in the world outside.

That refusal demarcates. It separates those of us who choose to write as a vocation rather than as an academic practice. All academics write but not all see themselves as writers. Writing to fulfill professional career expectations is not the same as writing that emerges as the fulfillment of a yearning to work with words when there is no clear benefit or reward,
when it is the experience of writing that matters. When writing is a desired and accepted calling, the writer is devoted, constant, and committed in a manner that is akin to monastic spiritual practice. I am driven to write, compelled by a constant longing to choreograph, to bring words together in patterns and configurations that move the spirit. As a writer, I seek that moment of ecstasy when I am dancing with words, moving in a circle of love so complete that like the mystical dervish who dances to be one with the Divine, I move toward the infinite. That fulfillment can be realized whether I write poetry, a play, fiction, or critical essays.

My fifteen published books are all works of nonfiction, most of them collections of critical essays. Turning to the short essay form was part of a revolt against the graduate-school tradition of writing the long-winded padded paper. To me the critical essay is the most useful form for the expression of a dialectical engagement with ideas that begins in my head, in my talking back to the books I am reading. It is also a way to extend the conversations I have with other critical thinkers. When I begin writing a critical essay, it is never the starting point for any discussion; it emerges as the site of culmination or a location for prolonged engagement, an invitation to work in a sustained manner with ideas. Since the critical essay can be read in a shorter amount of time than a book, and read again and again, it can offer a body of ideas that the critic and reader can grapple with, come back to. Nancy Mairs's assertion that she chooses the essay "for its power to both focus and disrupt" resonates with me. The critical essay demands the articulation of an agenda. It is a space where one writes to take a stand, to express and reveal points of view that are particular, specific, and directed—a great place to "throw down," to confront, interrogate, provoke.

At the heart of the critical essay is an engagement with ideas, with a contemplative realm of thought that is not passive but active. Michel Foucault evokes that active stance in the epigraph to *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* with the insistence that this active engagement with ideas emerges first in critical thinking: "Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave. Even before prescribing, suggesting a future, saying what must be done, even before exhorting or merely sounding an alarm, thought, at the level of its existence, in its very dawning, is in itself an action—a perilous act." When such thought evolves into a body of ideas in a critical essay that sense of provocation and peril is intensified. A seductive atmosphere of pleasure and danger surrounds the writing process. As a writer, intellec-
tual, and critical thinker, I feel swept away by the process of thinking through certain ideas as well as by their potential to incite and arouse the reader.

Since many of the critical essays I write are used in classroom settings, I often receive tremendous critical feedback about the work, both positive and negative. It was this feedback that intensified my awareness of the power of the essay. A short piece of critical writing can be easily shared (faxed or photocopied). This accessibility makes it a marvelous catalyst for critical exchange that is different from the collective reading of a book. Initially, professors were usually the individuals who shared that a group of students who might not have spoken much about assigned work in a class would be intensely provoked to talk among themselves about an essay I had written. Then I began to hear from other readers. Students shared their pleasure at reading theoretical work that is clear and succinct. Sometimes parents tell me about reading an essay with their children. Women who have been battered, who live for a time or work in shelters, talk and write to me about discussing my work in their groups. One of my favorite critical responses came from an incarcerated black man who shared that the essays I write on sexism were the catalyst for much critical discussion among his peers, so much so that he declared, “Your name has become a household word around this prison.” I write with the intent to share ideas in a manner that makes them accessible to the widest possible audience. This means that I often engage in a thinking and writing process where I am pushing myself to work with ideas in a way that strips them down, that cuts to the chase and does not seek to hide or use language to obscure meaning. The longing to pattern the words and ideas so that they are “in your face”—so that they have an immediacy, a clarity that need not be searched for, that is present right now—allows me to transfer to the act of writing vernacular modes of verbal exchange that surface in the expressive culture of the southern black working class.

In my own imagination, this process of thinking and writing is affirmed by the Buddhist vision of interior arrangement, where one strives to create a particular atmosphere with aesthetic minimalism, with an eye for simplicity. The point is not to render ideas less complex—the point is to make the complex clear. The outcome should be that the difficult terrain of thought traversed that has enabled one to arrive at certain standpoints or conclusions is not evident. Like too much clutter, it has been cleared away to make that which is most significant more apparent. In her discussion of “Theory’s Contemplative Relation to the World,” Joan Cocks speaks of critical theorizing and writing as a process that reveals
"an intrinsic passion for the perverse revelation." We write "to find secrets in experience that are obscured from ordinary sight: to uncover hidden coherences in what seems to be a mere jumble of unrelated events and details, and incoherences in what appears to be strictly ordered; to make transparent what is opaque, and to expose opacity in what seems transparent."

Deconstruction is a useful critical tool to use in this process because it makes essential understanding the multilayered structures that underlie particular discursive formations. Gayatri Spivak has spoken and written quite eloquently about the usefulness of deconstructive awareness as a standpoint that compels critical vigilance: "Deconstruction points out that in constructing any kind of an argument we must move from implied premises, that must necessarily obliterate or finesse certain possibilities that question the availability of these premises in an absolutely justifiable way. Deconstruction teaches us to look at these limits and questions." When deconstruction is seen as a tool and not an end in itself, it constructively imposes an incredibly rigorous will to examine, critique, and analyze that moves the insurgent critical thinker away from attachment to a particular rhetoric or set of critical paradigms that it is easy to be seduced into stating again and again. One of the primary challenges of critical theorizing is the inherent demand that ideas make as they act upon the critical mind, internally challenging the critic to be continually moving from fixed positions. To me that means that we are not just writing but changing the way we are writing given what we are saying and whom we hope to speak with and to. Spivak makes me laugh with recognition when she warns against intellectuals trying to "save the masses," speak for and describe them, urging us instead "to learn to speak in such a way that the masses will not regard as bullshit." When critics write to engage wider diverse audiences, we confront the limitations of discourse, of the languages we use. It becomes ruthlessly apparent that unless we are able to speak and write in many different voices, using a variety of styles and forms, allowing the work to change and be changed by specific settings, there is no way to converse across borders, to speak to and with diverse communities.

Contemporary cultural critics, particularly those of us who write about popular culture, must be ever vigilant in our work because it is all too easy to end up writing in an ethnographic self-serving manner about topics that do not engage us in a sustained dialogue with the cultural producers and audiences providing us with the "texts" we discuss. This diminishes the power of our work to make meaningful critical interven-
tions in theory and practice for anyone. As Joan Cocks reminds us in *The Oppositional Imagination*: “There can be a faddishness to theory, so that it pursues not the answers to difficult questions but the latest fashionable thinker or thought. It can lose connection altogether with the world and feed like a narcissist off its own concepts and principles.” This is especially true of critical writing on popular culture because it has the appearance of immediacy, of direct contact and engagement. Often merely choosing to write about popular culture can carry with it the assumption that one is “down”—completely divested of attachment to notions of coercive hierarchy and politics of domination. Yet when privileged class groups write about the marginalized and disenfranchised this act alone is not a gesture of political solidarity. It can be as much an act of colonizing appropriation as the more apparent conventional modes of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal dominance.

Writing cultural criticism to be hip and cool, especially when the subject is popular culture, allows critics to indulge in acts of appropriation without risk. Fascinating, titillating cultural criticism that looks at the popular without engaging a radical or revolutionary political agenda really does not disrupt and challenge traditional uses of theory; it helps maintain the existing barriers and cultural hierarchies of domination. Critical writing counts for very little when critics speak about ending domination, eradicating racism, sexism (which includes the structure of heterosexism), class elitism in our work without changing individual habits of being, without allowing those ideas to work in our lives and on our souls in a manner that transforms. To engage a politics of transformation we surrender the need to occupy a space of hedonistic intellectual “cool” that covertly embraces old notions of objectivity and neutrality. Certainly, I and my work are often seen as not cool enough precisely because there is always an insistence on framing ideas politically and calling for active resistance. A lot of new fashionable cultural criticism, whether it is postcolonial, multicultural, queer theory, or some combination of categories, gains a hearing precisely because of the dissenting voices of intellectuals who were not and/or are not afraid to take political stands in our work even though we risk being dismissed as not being theoretical “enough,” intellectual “enough.” And it should not surprise anyone that it is often the “cool” cultural critics who both labor in the academy and depend on its structures of valuation for regard and reward who most invest in the production of new hierarchies that still keep in place patterns of coercive competition and domination. A really good example of this tendency is a lot of the critical writing that intellectual
elites of all races do that focuses on underclass and poor black experience. It is as though black popular culture has become the latest frontier to be colonized, occupied, and made over in the interests of the colonizer. Being "down" does not mean that any of us have surrendered our will to colonize.

As a cultural worker on the left, I labor to critically think and write in a manner that clearly names the concrete strategies for radical and/or revolutionary interventions I use in everyday life to resist politics of domination. As a conscious strategic choice, this practice makes it possible for my life and work to embody a politics of transformation that addresses the concerns of individuals and communities in resistance. This means that the work of critical thinking and theorizing is itself an expression of political praxis that constructs a foundation wherein individual action can be united with collective struggle. The mutual interplay between critic and reader is a site for contestation and confrontation. It calls us to be critically aware, to not become lazy or sloppy in our thinking.

Dissenting critical voices are easily co-opted by the longing to be both heard and admired, our words longed for and affirmed. Subculture stardom can be as seductive a distraction as speaking in the interests of mainstream cultural politics of domination. Critical writing that remains on the edge, able to shift paradigms, to move in new directions, subverts this tendency. It demands of critics fundamental intellectual allegiance to radical openness, to free thinking. In *Technical Difficulties*, June Jordan declares, "If you are free, you are not predictable and you are not controllable." I was reminded of this recently when I was not invited to a conference celebrating and critically engaging the work of my close comrade Cornel West. When I asked an "insider" why I was excluded I was told, "You insist on being an independent thinker. You're a 'wild card.' No one knows what you will say. You're too unpredictable." My presence would have threatened presumably because it was feared that I might be critical of West's work and thought. Exclusion and isolation, whether they occur through overt or covert acts, have always been useful tactics of terrorism, a powerful way to coerce individuals to conform, to change. No insurgent intellectual, no dissenting critical voice in this society escapes the pressure to conform. This is especially true of any dissenting voice that remains within a hierarchical institution founded on structures of domination where rewards and benefits are awarded in relation to service rendered. However, irrespective of our locations, we are all vulnerable. We can all be had, co-opted, bought. There is no special grace that rescues any of us. There is only a constant struggle to keep the
faith, to relentlessly rejoice in an engagement with critical ideas that is itself liberatory, a practice of freedom.

That moment when I whirl with words, when I dance in that ecstatic circle of love surrounded by ideas, is a space of transgression. There are no binding limitations; everything can be both held and left behind—race, gender, class. It is this intensely intimate moment of passionate transcendence that is the experiential reality that deepens my commitment to a progressive politics of transformation. Writing these words, I look down at passages from the work of the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi taped to my desk. They challenge me: “Do you want the words or will you live what you know? Which is real, is it the theoretical knowledge? . . . Do you want the words or will you live what you know?” I write to live.¹

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Notes