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As told to Loré Yessuff, 1364 words.

Tags: Writing, Publishing, Identity, Politics, Money.



On questioning the structure of your creative industry

Book editor and organizer Danny Vasquez discusses the lack of diversity in publishing and how to build true solidarity.

What has your experience with diversity in publishing workspaces been like?

It's very low. There's not a lot of racial diversity. I don't generally subordinate race to class, but in this instance, in workplaces, I think it's important to have that class analysis. There are middle-class values that I come up against more than anything. That took some time to get used to. There were diversity initiatives early on, like Latinx in publishing. I was there at the beginning because I wanted to be there. But eventually, I started to realize, that is not a good organizing principle.

Can you give an example of a certain idea that you didn't agree with?

It wasn't so much of ideas that I was opposed to, more of a lack of the ideas that I wanted more exposure to. If diversity is your concern in the workplace, your analysis has to include labor, you know what I mean? It has to include exploitation. You have to make sure that you're not replicating the type of exploitation that already exists. You have to make sure that you're not supporting the system that you're combating.

It makes me think of what has been written about mutual aid. If you don't have an analysis that ends in revolution, that is anti-capitalist, then what you're doing when you build a mutual aid effort is abdicating the State of its responsibility to people. If you build this sort of Band-Aid for this problem, the State will never provide you that. It's almost like how non-profits become like charities.

This is how I came to feel about diversity initiatives in publishing. We're creating these things, where you look at Latinx publishing, POC publishing, but it's basically just book promotion. And I'm all for supporting POC authors, but within those structures, the same sort of power hierarchies start to map themselves. Again, without a good labor analysis, you replicate the things you're trying to fight. All of the passive-aggressive white woman managerial shit finds its way into these orgs, one way or the other.

Oftentimes, diversity in writing, or any space, is talked about as just bringing more Black or brown or trans or queer people to the center. But representation isn't necessarily going to lead to anything. If anything, it'll just create Black and brown and trans and queer capitalists, which it's not actually going to heal anyone or solve the issues that we're all dealing with.

Including the diversity thing. It's not going to solve the diversity part. In publishing, middle and upper-middle-class white women occupy almost 90% of the editorial positions. These are numbers from a year or two ago. I'm not going to remember exactly, but it's something near that big. You see it, you feel it. And I have to build solidarity with a lot of middle and upper-middle-class white women because I encounter them every day. Because of patriarchy, the labor of women is already devalued. So these white women's labor is devalued as well, but because they're middle class they can sustain it. It's not just the fact that maybe their parents are helping pay. It's that some people can afford to sustain exploitation.

For example, when I was an intern at 26 years old at a publishing company, I couldn't explain why I was doing that to anybody in my community. One of the internships was unpaid because I got college credit. The second one was \$10 an hour. It was meaningless. But I had an advantage. I was laid off and then got a severance package and unemployment, so I was able to spend that first year doing an unpaid internship. I know people who had to work several jobs at the same time. It's not enough to seek racial diversity, because racial diversity often produces the same mechanisms. When you start to demand diversity, you get people then whose class dynamics don't allow for that.

Again, I was lucky that I could. But a lot of Black and brown people can't. It's not like it's just racists holding people back. It's structural. I think people miss what "structural" means. It's not really an interpersonal thing. I haven't experienced a lot of overt racism in this industry. I've experienced less racism in this industry than I did at TSA or Starbucks.

A lot of artists and creative people move to New York City or other big cities with the intention of being a part of the creative community. But in some situations, their actions here end up causing more harm than

good. Since you grew up in Queens, I'm wondering about your perspective on gentrification and the creative/professional class.

When you think about the history of New York, it's a place of churn. People have always come here, and people have always been leaving. My family came here in the '60s/'70s from the Dominican Republic. They're from Puerto Rico, and they migrated eastwards. They arrived in Williamsburg and then migrated to Queens and Brooklyn, then eventually, Long Island and upstate New York. For Latinos, it's the process of white adjacency, right? It's the way that you sort of move away from identifying as Black to identifying as white.

I think that the term, gentrification, is a bit of a misnomer. The process of gentrification is displacement, right? When I think about the term "gentrifier," I'm thinking about a real estate developer, a politician. The person who enacts the systems that make it difficult for working-class people to live in a neighborhood. That's a gentrifier. The person that's moving is just an outsider.

Then there's the other person who we identify as a gentrifier, a person who moves to another place and tries to adapt the neighborhood around their needs. "Oh, this neighborhood's too loud. It's too dirty. It's too this, it's too that." Then the policy starts to get shaped around the needs of people who move to look for professions, people who increasingly, even if they come working-class or poor, are here to move up. But you choose your class concerns. I know people who make a lot more money than me, who are still communists. That's just not how that works. It's not about how much money you make. It's about your class concerns. And I know a lot of people from here who advocate for policies that enact violence upon their own community. A lot of people in the community want cops here. They don't care what sort of stats I give them. They're like, "Yeah, I want someone to protect property. I don't care what it costs." My thing is, I don't want to build solidarity with a person from here who is supporting policy that enacts violence upon people from here.

I want to build solidarity with anybody who supports policy that lends more power to the working class. Not just to the working class, but to Black and brown people, right? It's all sorts of people from in our communities. I'm not talking about the explicitly anti-Black shit. I'm not talking about the explicitly misogynistic or even the machismo. I'm not talking about any of that. I'm talking about people, liberals, who believe that they have the best interests of the community in mind, but really they have the best interests of the community that they want to see it become.

The most basic thing you can do to be in solidarity with a community that you're not from is to maintain a meaningful analysis of material conditions. It's hard to grasp that when there are all these distracting initiatives, like diversity, or keep the gentrifiers out, distractions from building the solidarity that we need to actually reclaim the power to combat those very things. To combat gentrification, to combat the lack of diversity, we need worker solidarity. How do we start to build that without a meaningful class analysis? It's just impossible.

Daniel Vazquez Recommends:

Mushrooms on pizza

Mach-Hommy's Pray for Haiti

Adidas sweatpants

Cedric Robinson

Mario Kart for IOS, for the iPhone

Name

Daniel Vazquez

Vocation

book editor and organizer

Fact

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