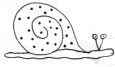




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December 17, 2020 -

As told to Thora Siemsen, 2016 words.

Tags: Writing, Focus, Inspiration, Education, Identity.

On writing good criticism

Writer Doreen St. Félix discusses the ways in which extreme thoughtfulness, clarity of vision, and the ability to peer into the future are all necessary ingredients for writing good criticism.

You once wrote, "Engaging in criticism can feel like engaging in essentially pointless elective surgery." How often do you still feel that way when writing criticism?

I feel that way all the time. I don't identify with thinking that the things that I write have an effect necessarily. Obviously that's the ideal scenario, but I think every writer should have that moment when you're in the middle of constructing an analysis or an argument where you're like, "Why am I doing this? Does this matter? Is it important?" It's those questions that force you outside of your own preciousness, and force you to be a little bit daring in terms of giving your criticism a valence that makes it relevant to whatever is happening currently.

Being a writer who has to write very much to the news cycle, I have so much anxiety about it. Who am I to play the authority? It's a matter of both experiencing and honoring that insecurity, but also having to write through it and to know that no piece is the last piece. I'm very obsessed with getting better. I feel like I only just recently learned how to write a sentence. Now I understand the mechanics of sentences, and I'll try to master paragraphs. I feel green. I like feeling that way, because it allows me the space to be tricky, and do things that maybe I would feel like were outside of my voice if I had a conception of my voice as being super-established.

Lately, do you feel yourself working against generalism or tending to it?

When I first started writing I thought of myself as a music critic. I was very much invested in pop music, and also the way pop music inflects our buried ideas about performing race. Now, a lot of the times I'm writing about things that don't have anything to do with music at all, but I do have almost like a compass inside of me that draws me to always investigate the racial performances that are framing whatever is happening in culture or in politics. In that sense, it makes me feel like I have a grip on being a generalist who might have to write about music, might have to write about a special election in Alabama. If I see myself as someone who's attending to that particular filter, I'm going to be able to find evidence of its ramifications no matter what the subject is.

Is there a topic you will not write about?

I don't think so. I'm down to write about anything. I think I've said this in the few times that I've been interviewed, but when I first started writing in school I thought of myself as a science writer. I was someone with a deep interest in science. That's something that for one reason or another I'm not doing right now, but that was my initial attraction. Now, I'm writing about Eminem.

I think it's useless to feel intimidated by certain subjects, because the books are there. The literature is there. You can learn. I'm very excited to be able to write about subjects that are maybe outside of what people think a writer like me would be interested in or would be called upon to expand on.

Which career do you most often fantasize leaving writing for?

I fantasize about other careers as if there are boundaries between whatever the work is and whatever the life is. Often, I get worried that I'm letting my identity as a writer consume other parts of my life, but that's the way that it is.

I've often thought about what it would be like to be someone who worked in medicine. I've always been surrounded by scientists and nurses or people who care for other bodies. There's such a delicate line between a sense of altruism but also a sense of extreme authority that I've always thought was very alluring. It takes a lot of audacity to cut into a person or to assert that you know what that person's health would look like in an ideal situation. If I wasn't a writer, who knows? Maybe I will end up going to some medical school or something like that in 10 years. You never know what's going to happen.

When I interviewed writer Durga Chew-Bose for TCI, she said of your writing: "I'm always blown away by how quickly she can get her thoughts out, but they don't feel rushed." From your perspective, how often do you feel rushed?

I remember when Durga said that, because I remember feeling very seen by it. I often feel like I'm in a fugue as a writer. On my phone or on my computer I have thousands of pages of scrawls of notes. Sometimes it feels like I'm creating a calculus in my head. I think of essays often as math problems. I've been given the result, which is whatever cultural problem it is that I have to analyze, and I'm always trying to find the oblique way to demonstrate why we've gotten to this little moment in culture.

I think the best editors have really impressed on me that it's important to just say one thing and to say it over and over again and find different ways of saying the same thing. I'm an overthinker which also makes it very difficult for me to write quickly. It's a muscle and it's not often that I feel like I really exerted this muscle properly and that I really got to something, but whenever you do get that feeling it's so exhilarating. Then you're just brought down again by knowing how difficult it was to get there.

Which living writer scares you most?

Scares me? Can I change the verb? If I were to change the verb from "scare" to "awe"—awe in the original sense did have an element of fear in it, like awesome fear—it probably would be Sarah Nicole Prickett, who's also my friend. There's something about her writing. Whenever I read a sentence by her, which always has this very assertive rhythm, I'm like, "How did she find that?" I know that we all have the same set of words and the same set of sentence diagrams, but she just seems to create her own. Sentence after sentence in her pieces. She's a writer who I am constantly just agape by, and she's living. Very much alive.

It all depends on how you interpret that question obviously. I feel like I am the product of other writers. Their influence on me is scary to think about. It's an honor, but also it interrupts your sense of self to know how much of you is Alice Walker. How much of you is June Jordan, who's dead. You feel like she's alive in you. How much of me is Durga? I didn't really know much about film before I started reading Durga on Cassavetes. How much of my instruments of observation have been influenced by her?

I like thinking that every writer is just an amalgamation of other writers, because it is a little scary and disorienting. What is writing if not grotesque?

Where do you see your work in conversations about Black cultural product pioneered by critics like Hilton Als, Greg Tate, and Margo Jefferson?

I remember when I first discovered *The Village Voice*, and we're talking about alt-weeklies so much lately, all of these scavenging billionaires who are trying to destroy these institutions that effectively changed criticism in America. Als also wrote for *The Village Voice*. He also was an editor at *Vibe*. Those were the outlets that were coming through my home. I didn't even know that you could talk about Black culture in that way. I didn't know that you could bore to the heart of things. My orientation to Black culture had always been as a consumer, which I think is the prevailing orientation of most Americans to it. At the simplest level, those critics taught me that the role of the Black critic was justified.

When you interviewed Kimberly Drew for Lenny Letter, you said, "In Haitian storytelling, our method of call-and-response is called krik krak, krik being the call, krak the response. That's the importance of public dialogue across the Black diaspora." What are some ways you see your work as calling and responding to public dialogue?

I started thinking about krik krak a lot because of Edwidge Danticat. You always want criticism to feel close to the thing. You don't want there to feel like there was a huge gap. A vertical gap or even a horizontal gap. There might be things that distance you from whatever it is you're writing, like class, race, region, language. You want to be able to minimize that gap as much as possible. I always know to mind myself in my writing, where I'm employing language that feels a little bit too generalized. As somebody who talks about or writes about Black culture often, there are certain choruses that repeat. Whether or not something is unapologetically Black. Whether or not something is radical. I have to really force myself to confront those instances of laziness the more it is that I produce.

There's a way to describe whatever it is that you're talking about that is much nearer to the facts of the thing. I feel like that's my duty as someone who is writing about the work of artists, it's that I owe it to them. This isn't in a positive or negative sense, but neutrally. To be as precise and accurate as possible. In the call and response, precision is everything. It has to be communicated to the audience or to the listener that they're being asked to give something of themselves, and you only really know that if the question is clearly said. I feel like I'm always trying to get rid of adverbs and get rid of adjectives and just try and get as much clarity as I possibly can.

What does clairvoyance mean to you?

I allegedly was a little bit touched as a child. I come from a sprawling family. People who aren't your cousins are your cousins. People who aren't your aunts are your aunts. There was just this period where I kept having weird visions about deaths or having weird premonitions. I remember I would talk to my mom about it, and she was like, "Oh, you're probably a little bit over-connected to the world." I think it's that hypersensitivity that is what probably drove me to be a critic, because it was a way of ridding myself of those constant premonitions I felt like I was having.

I always think about Toni Morrison talking about sitting on a bench by the water and just seeing Beloved. I remember that having such a foundational effect on me. As a critic we are transcribers and we are having to work with pre-given texts, but there is absolutely an element of conjuring, of having to anticipate the various meanings that something could have years later. Whenever I reread June Jordan's collections, I'm always like, "How did she write about 2017 in 1992?" I think it's about having to situate yourself in the future as a writer and obviously speaking to the current moment, but having the audacity to configure it into your notion of what our world history will ultimately look like.

Doreen St. Félix recommends:

C-Span

Okra and other mucilaginous foods. It is unfortunate that they have a bad reputation.

Paa Joe's coffin art, in Accra, Ghana. He has made fantasy caskets in the shape of fish.

Bembeya Jazz National

Sleeping early.

The Song of Songs

Listening to children.

Name

Doreen St. Félix

Vocation

Writer

Fact



Photo by Kathy Ryan

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