

Diversity and Narrative  
or Against Autobiography

by

B. Ricardo Brown  
Assistant Professor of Cultural Studies

A Note for Listening to Diversity panel for Seeing Multiculturalism,  
an Annual Program of Lectures, Films, and Performances  
sponsored by the  
School of Liberal Arts  
Pratt Institute  
published along with other contributions from faculty and students in  
The Flying Pig  
Pratt's student directed literary journal  
May 1998

The assignment to write a personal, even literate, reflection on diversity here at Pratt is quite difficult. This difficulty stems in part from my academic training. In college the personal voice was never encouraged. The word "I" was seldom used in writing. In fact, it was actively discouraged by the faculty. And yet, some of the great commentaries on the Western Self were the first books one read: Epicurus, Plato, Freud, Marx, Buchner, Whitman, Nietzsche, Emerson, Kafka. All of these works remain on my shelves and collect very little dust. But in college these explorations of the Self existed beside *The Elements of Style*, which was a mandatory text for first year English with Natalie Harper. It was Natalie and Strunk and White who set the standard for writing. The first rule of style was simple: "to achieve style, begin by affecting none---that is, place yourself in the background".

Now this stylistic rule is interesting alongside the need to address the issue of diversity. To remain in the background might mean to deny diversity, to leave aside the personal voice, the personal narrative, which so often propels the desire for diversity. In this view, being in the background stifles one's identity and identification with a particular social group. However, this move to the background can also be thought of as a movement towards the margins. The most important critiques of social life often spring from the margins. To be marginalized is to be able to offer a critique of the everyday understanding of diversity, to show its history and to question its valuation, which is far too large a goal for this brief essay. Instead, I want to make a few preliminary comments which have their genesis in the editor's challenging request that I address the importance of diversity here at Pratt and beyond its' iron fence---which is as much a cage as it is a fence.

It is wonderful to believe in diversity as a goal, and to encourage it in any way possible is perhaps the most worthy goal at this point. We often speak not only of the diversity of New York City, but also of America itself as our greatest strength. It is even our diversity that defines us. At this very moment, the President appeals to us to wage war in Kosovo in order to reestablish and protect diversity. We act, he says, "to affirm the principle [of making] a virtue, not a blood feud, out of ethnic and religious diversity". Despite the fact that diversity remains a problem here, as the need for this issue of *The Flying Pig* itself evinces, such an appeal is quite powerful as it points towards that better part of our selves. It is no accident that the fascists referred to Americans as "mongrels" and that even in the midst of the regimes of segregation, organized fascism was defeated. Equally necessary is that we understand the importance of diversity in the historical struggles for emancipation that have animated many periods of our history. Without these struggles, the expansion of freedom, which is

always an expansion of diversity, would have been impossible. Freedom means to us today something very different from what it did in 1776, or 1865, or 1968, and the problematics and struggles around the diversity of this country have made this change possible. Bourgeois morality was never intended to be a general morality; it was forced to become the dominant morality.

A fundamental problem which we confront is that all too often diversity remains within bourgeois morality, which is indistinguishable from the everyday productions of authority and knowledge. As a result of the expansion of diversity under the regime of bourgeois morality, it now becomes necessary to free diversity from this now stifling structure of morality and instill it, as Epicurus did, in the realm of pleasure and desire. This is not because bourgeois morality is opposed to diversity, it is precisely because the expansion of tolerance for diversity comes at the cost of the continued domination of a bourgeois definition of diversity. This is the definition of diversity that becomes a norm, and ultimately it becomes naturalized and everything is measured against it. The measure of diversity has become a question of the degree to which the middle class definition might be expanded without shattering. Under such a circumstance, the appearance of diversity becomes more important than its production, and the appearance of diversity takes on a life of its own abstracted from its production under the regime of bourgeois morality. The production of diversity takes on the appearance not only of a celebration of difference, but simultaneously the denouncing of the deviant from the norm, the degenerate from the original stock, or the pathological social group.

Therefore, diversity too often means that there is an established order which fixes a norm against which all are measured. By necessity, those whose bodies produce diversity do so within a relation of power. Within this relation, the different will always be considered to lack something because they are measured against a norm which stands outside of them. It can be argued that diversity at present is more about the diversity of bodies than the diversity of ideology, which is itself a reinscription of the dialectic of enlightenment. We often accept a diversity of bodies as meaning a diversity of opinion, or a diversity of "communities", but this is certainly a distortion.

So what does it mean to be the one whose body supplies diversity in a particular social formation? If one were to adopt a notion of standpoint, one might say that from the standpoint of the body that supplies diversity, the world does not appear diverse, but only oppositional. Perhaps this is one source for the tendency towards separatism so typical in many attempts to promote diversity. From the standpoint of the normal, even one different body is enough to supply the necessary diversity: "See, we have x number of x kind of people". Obviously, standpoint is not enough, because it is merely a recapitulation of the normal definition of diversity. As a result, to avoid being subsumed into the dominate categories, many have turned towards autobiography.

The wonderful thing about autobiography is the personal voice. There is no attempt to remain in the background and no concealment of the personal narrative. This narrative is in fact accepted as an accurate description of life as it is lived. The danger is that autobiography is always generalized, the personal becomes just a type. More than this, autobiography becomes a means of confession. "I am like this because of a personal history. I am writing this so that others might understand me, and either sympathize or empathize with me. I know that what makes me of interest to you is that I am a part of that mass of people who are not understood by the existing order, in part because we have never been a part of that order. Now, because of my narrative, I achieve recognition. Through my autobiography, I have made it possible for you to understand me. The reader can now incorporate me into the dominate order. I become just like you. More than that, through my narrative, others like me can now be understood and recognized". In order to prove that diversity exists, the diverse body must confess what makes it so different. In this way others might also be identified. As a result of this recognition, the danger of the critique from the margins is brought to the center, and there the danger passes into the complacency of the dominant relation of power/knowledge. But as Melville's *Bartleby* said, "I would prefer not to".

This is why I do not write autobiographically, but often remain in the background. It has often

been my body which has supplied diversity. But, I have nothing to confess to power. When diversity becomes a matter of the construction of bodies, the deployment of classifications, and the extraction of narratives, then its integral role in the reproduction of bourgeois morality becomes clear. The notion of diversity must itself be diversified if it is to be more than simply the recognition of the subordinate other.