CHAPTER 16

“If You Can *Read*, You Can *Write*, or Can You, *Really?*”

Jim Collins

INTRODUCTION

Giving advice about which books should be read, and how they should be read has been central to a humanist education, but until recently it was not referred to as “advice.” Advice was something you got from a friend or a relative about what happened in life, outside of a classroom, where a genuine literary education took place. Within the classroom, what you acquired was knowledge and analytical skills, not advice, although it could be said to function that way, in the sense that someone who knew more about a particular topic than you did was telling what you how you should spend your time. BuzzFeed issues lists of books on a regular basis, framing their recommendations unabashedly as advice: “What New Book Should You Read This Winter,” “43 Books That Actually Changed People’s Lives,” etc. Within the past two decades, advice about what to read has become practically inescapable, offered by endless array of sources both inside and outside of traditional literary culture, all insisting on the unassailable validity of their expertise.

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Recently, the nature of that advice has become more action-oriented, as advice about *what to read* has given way to *how to become a writer*. The advice given in each case is fueled by the same assumption. If finding the right titles as a passionate reader has become a matter of knowing how to search and filter, then finding the requisite advice for becoming a writer is also a matter of knowing where to look in digital literary culture, and learning how to implement it. Or, to put it another way, if you can read, you can write, *right*? But can you *really*, or, even more fundamentally, should you even try to make the transition from passionate reader to accomplished writer?

In this chapter, I will focus on the advice about writing dispensed, in no uncertain terms, by three contemporary prize-winning novels, Tommy's Orange's *There There* (2018), Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* (2018) and Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). Taken together, they form a kind of referendum on what Sigrid Nunez has called "our graphomaniac age" (Nunez 2018a, p. 60). These novels offer a range of advice about writing, specifically who is entitled to write *their story*, and what *craft* may or not have to do with it. Just as fundamentally, the advice given in each novel posits imagined communities, founded on the curation of relevant literary voices. In each case, the advice dispensed is not just a matter of "how to write" but how to construct an architecture of participation in contemporary literary cultures for both readers and writer, in which reading can still matter in the twenty-first century.

THE "ADVICIZATION" OF CONTEMPORARY READING/WRITING CULTURE

Let me begin with a few of personal anecdotes that have shaped my thinking about literary advice and how we can recognize it when we see it. I started thinking about the status of advice about reading and writing, and how it related to the practice of cultural criticism when my book, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (2010) was read by some readers in a way that I had never anticipated. I thought I had written a brilliant cultural studies-style analysis of how popular literary culture had emerged between 1990 and 2010. Then I learned that the *Chicago Tribune*, in an article entitled, "Books for the Writer's Bookshelf," had named it as one of five titles that every writer should read. Imagine my surprise when I realized I had written an advice book for writers without realizing it. I took this in stride and got back

to work doing cultural analysis and then I had a second encounter that made me reflect again on the relationship between critique and advice.

I was in Belgium giving a lecture at the University of Leuven, and while there, I was asked to give a talk for a literary organization in Brussels, Passa porta. My audience was composed not of cultural studies scholars, but educators and bookstore operators who were committed to literacy initiatives and who had read my book as a set of strategies. I learned afterward in conversations after the talk that many of them had, in effect, instrumentalized what I had thought of as cultural critique and used it in their grant proposals for their literacy projects, which I found surprising, but deeply gratifying.

And then I began to think about how much of my teaching and writing could be thought of as advice, and the first course that came to mind was a film analysis course that I had taught when I was in graduate school at the University of Iowa, the heartland of creative writing. I was in the Comparative Literature and Film studies, it was the halcyon days of French theory, and my department was one of the chief importers. I was just back from taking courses in Paris, all coked up on "High Theory," and I was teaching a course in the Saturday and Evening program to make extra money. On the first night the class met, I was surprised to learn that better than half of the students were from the legendary Writers' Workshop that was headquartered just down the hall from my office in Comp. Lit. As way of getting to know each other the first night, I asked everyone in the class why they were taking the course. I was told by the Workshop students that they wanted to learn how to write screenplays, and this was the only course offered that seemed useful for that purpose. I was, of course, disdainful of this at the time because I was offering them brilliant close analyses, shaped by what I had learned about film semiotics in seminars with Christian Metz and company, and they just wanted to instrumentalize it as a "How-to" course. It turned out well enough in the long run, because at the end of the semester they assured me that they had learned tons of useful stuff for their craft. Reflecting back, I had to come to terms with an uncomfortable question—were the Workshop students wrong to be treating my course as literary *advice*?

I offer these anecdotes because rethinking the relationship between advice and education is essential, if we hope to take the full measure of the explosion of literary advice giving that continues to expand outward, both on- and offline, throughout contemporary literary culture. Relentless, omnipresent advice-giving has become one of the distinguishing features

of day-to-day in digital cultures, but it is also one of the least appreciated in critical terms. There is an increasing body of research devoted to how recommendations for book buying and television watching have become so central to Amazon and Netflix's mobilization of algorithm-based data analytics, that it has become a standard feature of digital capitalism (Schiller 1999; Striphas 2015; Zuboff 2019). As important as this work is, it needs to be complemented by a broader understanding of advice-mania that can take into account more than the digital sales pitches and the forms of surveillance they entail. While advertising appeals framed in terms of what *you might also like* have obviously become the new normal for on-line advertising, advice-giving and list-making have also become robust forms of popular culture in the twenty-first century. Enjoyed by a massive global audience, the public performance of advice giving as taste-making has become a form of entertainment unto itself, subsuming formerly distinct pleasures such as reading, watching, and listening into the sheer delight of curating, just for you and your imagined communities.

What needs to be taken into account is how advice-giving has become as the very stuff of literary fiction, as the acts of curation and creation become ever more interdependent. Perhaps the most concise way for me to explain what I mean by "curation" here is in terms of what museologists refer to as "the hang" of a museum exhibition, namely, the arrangement of individual pieces on display and the logic that determines the way they are deployed in reference to each other. Allusions have been a standard feature of literary texts for centuries and the ubiquity of intertextual frames was a distinguishing feature of classical postmodern textuality. What distinguishes the overtly curatorial dimension of the novels by Orange, Nunez and Vuong in the foregrounding, not of the individual intertext, but rather the attempt to depict "the hang" of contemporary literary writing, and in the process, to make it the site for extended reflections on what it means to be a writer that *matters*.

CURATING ADVICE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

The popular literary culture that emerged in the late 1990s depended on a number of interdependent factors that formed a unique media ecology, book clubs (actual, online, and televisual), literary bestsellers, Amazon.com, high-concept adaptation films, "superstore" bookstore chains, etc. The reading cultures generated by that media ecology were

unified by certain overarching values, none more significant than the empowerment of amateur readers, who were driven by the conviction that *passionate* reading was equal, if not superior to the bloodless *close* reading of professionalized readers. While the latter required a long apprenticeship, the former was guided by a self-imaging process that was fueled by a reading advice industry that provided confidence-building measures to validate that reading. The empowerment of readers depended on *knowing where to look* for both expertise and validation. Or, to put it another way, quality reading depended less on native intelligence or a university education, and more on the ability to search and filter in pursuit of the information needed to maximize the pleasures of passionate reading.

Many of the factors that led to a fundamental recalibration of the relationship between amateur and professionalized reading have also destabilized the relationship between amateur and professional writing. One of the other central features of the popular literary was the blurring of the line between self-help books and literary fiction especially in novels such as Melissa Banks’s *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999), Karen Joy Fowler’s *The Jane Austen Book Club* (2004) and Jennifer Kaufman and Karen Mack’s *Literacy and Longing in LA* (2006). Books advocating the therapeutic values of reading have continued to appear on a regular basis, including Alberto Manguel’s *Packing My Library: An Elegy and Ten Digressions* (2018); Burkhard Spinnen’s *The Book: An Homage* (2018); Jo Steffens and Matthias Neuman’s collection *Unpacking My Library* (2017); *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (2017) by Deidre Shauna Lynch; *The Book Lovers’ Anthology: A Compendium of Writing about Books* (2017), and *The Palace of Books* by Roger Grenier. In his review of Grenier’s book, the critic for the Wall Street Journal summarizes the situation quite succinctly: “Books on reading have become as common as new diets” (Mattix 2014). The genre, which in its aspirational impetus could be regarded as a subgenre of advice (much like the contemporary literary-advice novels discussed by Kovach in this book) also includes novels that offer reasons why literary reading should be the very center of any life experience, because of their therapeutic power, as exemplified by international bestsellers such as Nina George’s *The Little Paris Bookshop: A Novel* (2016), Robin Sloane’s, *Mr. Penumbra’s 24 Hour Bookstore* (2013) and Jenny Colgan’s *The Bookshop on the Corner* (2016). The blurb for Colgan’s book at Amazon is particularly revealing. “Nina is a literary matchmaker. Pairing a reader with that perfect book is her passion [...] and also her job.”

The advice offered in recent literary bestsellers involves more than finding the appropriate significant other and/or one's true self, it now means offering advice about transforming oneself from a passionate reader to a writer. Traditionally, literary advice revolved around two questions: how to get published, and how to refine one's craft. Dozens of TED Talks and YouTube videos continue to offer this type of advice. But a comparative analysis of *There There*, *The Friend*, and *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous* reveals that within prize-winning literary novels, reflections on the act of writing now seem to be almost obligatory as a way of proving that literary writing and reading still matter. The advice offered here revolves around another set of tensions, namely what constitutes the basis of literary authority, more specifically what would serve as its justification, and who should and should not attempt to take on that role if it is to retain any value.

TELLING YOUR STORY, OR LET'S BUILD A HOME

As I began my research for this article, I checked out the "Favorite Reads of 2018" issue of *O. The Oprah Magazine*, which is revelatory in terms of what it includes and excludes. The "Favorite Reads" list featured many of the celebrated novels and memoirs of the year, that appeared on all of the best books of the year lists, e.g., Lisa Holiday's *Asymmetry* (2018), Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage* (2018), and Tara Westover's *Educated* (2018). It also featured another title that epitomizes advice-mania culture and the lists it generates so relentlessly, James Mustich's *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die* (2018) which is described in the following terms: "If there's a heaven just for readers, this is it" (p. 76).

The same *O. The Oprah Magazine* issue included a feature article, "Writing Wrongs: A Poet Advocates Self-expression to Those Who Sorely Need It," which is essential for understanding the sort of literary advice endorsed the magazine. This feature details the writing advice given by the poet, Pamela Hart. When her son was deployed in Afghanistan, she decided to do what she could to connect with his experience and decided to conduct an online writing course for women in Afghanistan, who could not attend a traditional school without risking imprisonment or execution (the AWWP-Afghan Women's Writing Project). "The AWWP cautiously recruits participants through word of mouth. Many of the writers, particularly those in Taliban-held areas, must hide their work from their family and neighbors. Some walk for hours to use a computer at an internet café"

(Choi 2018, p. 146). Here, literary advice becomes a life-saving means of empowerment in a regime that treats women as subhuman. The value of the writing experience, if only for yourself and your community, is never questioned, and neither publishing, nor craft enter the picture.

Tommy Orange's novel *There There* also focuses directly on the value of *telling your story* within the Native American community in Oakland, California. In terms of literary prestige, the novel was a fixture on the Best Books of the Year list (*The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, *O The Oprah Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *BuzzFeed*, *Entertainment Weekly*). One of the central characters, Dene Oxedene, is a young documentary filmmaker who obtains a grant from a local arts council to support his attempt to create a collection of urban Native American stories. The participants in the project tell their stories in their own words for \$200 in a story-booth he constructs, in a setting resembling the StoryCore project, which is a regular feature on National Public Radio. The impetus for this particular project is the need to fill a profound gap. When interviewed about his grant proposal, Dene tells the judges:

I'll transcribe it while they talk, if they want, I want them to be able to say what they want, let them write, every kind of story I can collect, let them tell their stories with no one else there, with no direction or manipulation or agenda. I want them to be able to say what they want, let the content direct the vision. There are so many stories here. I know that means a lot of editing, a lot of watching, and a lot of listening but that's just what our community needs considering how long it's been ignored, how long it's been invisible. [...] And this is not just qualitative data collection. I want to bring something new to the vision of the Native experience as it's seen on the screen. We haven't seen the Urban Indian story. What we've seen is all kinds of stereotypes that are the reason no one is interested in the Native story in general, it's too sad, so sad it can't even be entertaining. But more importantly because of the way it's been portrayed it looks pathetic and we perpetuate that, but no, fuck that, excuse my language, because it makes me mad because the whole picture is not pathetic, and the individual people and stories that you come across are not pathetic or weak or in need of pity and there is real passion there, and rage, and that's part of what I'm bringing to the project, because I feel that way too. (Orange 2018a, p. 40)

I have quoted this passage at considerable length for a number of reasons. First, because it establishes the stakes of this storytelling project and why

the stories will acquire a use value in aggregate. Because those stories have not been told yet, they *must be told* so the lived experiences of those Native Americans will acquire a reality that they never had before. Telling that story means using anything, but well-polished literary prose, which explains the frantic, rambling quality of the sentence structure in this passage. Orange appropriates Gertrude Stein's infamous description of Oakland "(t)here's no there there," and applies it to the Urban Native experience: there's no *there there* for them, because not only did these Native Americans lose their homeland generations ago, but also they have no stories to give their current experience some kind of *there*, which must be conjured into being through the act of telling their individual stories. No single master counter-narrative will suffice because that counter-narrative has to be gathered and curated as a collection of stories.

As Dene later tells one of the participants in his project, "That's what I'm trying to get out of this whole thing. *All put together, all of our stories*. Because all we got right now are reservation stories, and shitty versions from outdated history textbooks. A lot of us live in cities now. This is just supposed to be like a way to start telling this other story" (ibid., p. 149, emphasis added). Those voices need to be juxtaposed in order to convey the echoes and dissonances of their lived experiences, and Orange accomplishes this through an elaborate listing project in which no one voice can encompass the whole, unless the list itself is presented. This is what he does with his "Cast of Characters" list of twelve characters to begin the novel, the use of endlessly variable first-person, second-person and third-person point of view structures, and in the emphasis he places on *listing* sentences throughout the novel.

We are Indians and Native Americans, American Indians and Native American Indians, North American Indians, NDNs and Ind'ins, Status Indians and Non-Status Indians, First Nations Indians and Indians so Indian we think about that fact every single day or we never think about it all. We are Urban Indians and Indigenous Indians, Rez Indians and Indians from Mexico and Central and South America. We are Alaskan Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and European expatriate Indians, Indians from eight different tribes with quarter-blood quantum requirements and so not federally recognized Indian kinds of Indians. We are enrolled members of tribes and disenrolled members, ineligible members and tribal council leaders. We are full-blooded, half-breed, quadroon, eighths, sixteenths, thirty seconds. Undoable math. Insignificant remainders. (ibid., p. 136)

The “undoability” of the math necessitates the list, and curation becomes a basic structuring device, justified by the storytelling imperative.

The most important lesson in terms of literary advice is that no two voices can be the same, so the stories must be told in their own words. Authority in this case is grounded in polyphonic choral terms. Where the narrator’s voice resides within the list, and how it functions, is one of the most intriguing aspects of *There There*. Like Dene, that narrator assembles his storytellers, and gives voice to the cacophony of their accounts. The narrator’s voice speaks directly to the reader only in the “Prologue” and the “Interlude.” In the latter, he offers what its perhaps the most succinct description of his project:

The wound that was made when white people came and took all they took has never healed. An unattended wound gets infected. Becomes a new kind of wound like the history of what actually happened became a new kind of history. All of these stories that we haven’t been telling all this time, that we haven’t been listening to, are just part of what we need to heal. (ibid., p. 137)

Orange created a Spotify playlist for *There There*, but the novel itself is perhaps best understood as a playlist of voices, and it is in the creation/curation of those stories that have not been told before that Orange makes such a compelling case for his literary project.

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK, OR NO, YOU REALLY SHOULDN’T TELL YOUR STORY, AND THE EVILS OF GRAPHOMANIA

One notable title not included in *O the Oprah Magazine’s* Best Books of the Year is Sigrid Nunez’s *The Friend*, which is not so surprising since Nunez’s novel is a unilateral rejection of book clubs, e-literary culture, and the popular literary. The inside desk jacket for Nunez’s National Book Award winning novel describes it as: “A moving story of love, friendship, grief, healing, and the magical bond between a woman and her dog.” However, since the main character/narrator is a writing teacher who has spent most in her life in writer’s workshops of some sort or other, and the friendship referred to in the dust jacket is that between the narrator and an author, who was her first writing teacher and beloved life-long friend, and their conversations are primarily about writing, one could just

as accurately say that *The Friend* is a book about the current state of writing. Like the genre of the writing memoir, it contains extensive advice about writing inside and outside the realm of the writers' workshop in the twenty-first century.

The narrator is a self-professed product of a traditional MFA in Creative Writing education, and even as she attacks the current state of writing instruction, she remains defiantly proud to embody the values of that earlier period in the history of such programs. One of the central conundrums that the narrator returns to again and again throughout the novel is why everyone wants to be writer and thinks it is entirely possible to become one, even though most writers she knows, herself included, are miserably unhappy. The crux of the matter is the collision between the *need to tell your story* and something that called *craft*. The narrator frames this in apocalyptic terms.

But in our graphomaniac age, the reality has gotten lost. Now everyone writes like everyone poops, and at the word *gift* many want to reach for a gun. The rise of self-publishing was a catastrophe, you said. It was the death of literature. Which means the death of culture. And Garrison Keillor was right, you said: When everyone's a writer, no one is. (Nunez 2018a, p. 61)

Culture is in its death throes, not because people no longer see the value of writing, but because *everyone* thinks they can write, and their desire to tell their story has become the chief form of empowerment, rendering craft irrelevant. Nunez historicizes the act of writing in terms of two distinct periods, one in which writer's suffered endlessly *à la recherché du mot juste perdu* (in search of the word at the tip of your tongue), and the contemporary period in which identity politics have become a taste ideology which trumps anything which smacks of art for art's sake.

When the narrator moves into the first extended discussion of writing in the novel she begins with a list of literary advice. Under the heading "Lecture Notes," she cites a series of quotations by her favorite authors about the act of writing. Here again, curation is presented as the foundation of literary advice, but Nunez's list includes only canonical authors, ranging from Henry de Montherlant, to Joan Didion, Janet Malcolm, W. G. Sebald, John Updike, Natalia Ginzburg, Isak Dinesen, Virginia Woolf, etc. The quotation from Rebecca West in the list reveals just how fundamentally at odds Nunez is with the celebration of amateur reading that

has been a hallmark of popular literary culture: "Any writer worth his salt knows that only a small proportion of literature does more than partly compensate people for the damage they have suffered in learning to read" (ibid., p. 55). Damaged by reading? One of the first things she tells the reader about writing is: "If reading really does increase empathy, *as we are constantly being told that it does*, it appears that writing takes some away" (ibid., p. 8, emphasis added).

This is a remarkable statement of purpose for the novel, because here Nunez questions the value of reading, a position that has long been the core of a humanist education project as well as the very arc of the covenant for the popularization of amateur passionate reading as it has been by cultivated and expanded exponentially by celebrity book clubs run by Oprah Winfrey, Reese Witherspoon, Sarah Jessica Parker, Emma Watson, Andrew Luck, as well as *Goodreads*, *BuzzFeed Books* and an endless list of literary blogs. The *BuzzFeed* message I received this morning in my inbox sums up that unalloyed celebration of reading: "19 Tweets You're Gonna Love if You're Hopelessly Addicted to Books." The language of addiction is used throughout this feature (Mmm@Merman_Melville: "I've spent my whole adult life chasing the high of a scholastic book fair"), but the effects of this addiction only make you an infinitely better person. Even the phrasing of Nunez's sentence, "as we're constantly being told," is an outright rejection of the literary advice industry, because it has made the idea that reading increases empathy both ubiquitous and unequivocal.

Later in the novel, we learn why the narrator questions the value of this pandemic of addictive reading—it's not careful, critical reading. She recalls how her writer-mentor-friend was horrified by online consumer reviews and the ability that readers now had to speak directly to authors.

Some would say that, after all, one sure way for an artist to know if his work had failed was if everyone "got" it. But the truth was you had become so dismayed by the *ubiquity of careless reading* that something had happened that you had never thought could happen: you started not to care whether people read you or not. And though you know your publisher would spit in your eye for saying so, you were inclined to agree with whoever said that no truly good book would find more than three thousand readers. (ibid., p. 118, emphasis added)

The narrator here contends that the increase of careless reading is due directly to the vast expansion of addicted readers, fed by an advice industry that is tied directly to the publishing industry. The advice Nunez dispenses in the form of a remembered, or perhaps imaginary, dialogue stems in part from the new online literary culture, wherein authors have to deal directly with readers' reviews of their work when she suggests that writers always had to deal with less than informed readers, her friend responds:

"No doubt. But in the past the writer didn't have to know, the problem wasn't right there in your face."

But what about, "Trust the tale, not the teller," and how the critic's job is to save the work from the writer?"

By "critic" you know Lawrence did not mean *self-appointed*. I would love to see the consumer review that saved a book from its author. (*ibid.*, p. 117, emphasis added)

The key point here is the term "self-appointed," which suggests that what is ultimately at stake in this new literary culture, is a new set of power relations which springs from the notion that expertise is a matter of finding the "right" source for advice, and then performing your own expertise in digital public venues. It also depends on rejecting the "wrong" sort of advice, and refusing to acknowledge traditional forms of literary expertise that might challenge careless reading that is ultimately careless because it has no appreciation of literary craft.

This becomes most explicit in Nunez's novel when the narrator explains why she has given up offering advice to her would-be writers in her workshop classes. She says that for literary advice she still turns to Rainer Maria Rilke, a staple of high-end literary advice.

From the stack of books on the coffee table, I pick the Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, an assigned book for one of my courses. [...] I have read Rilke's advice so often I know it by heart. When I read the letters for the first time – at around the same age as Rilke when he wrote them – I felt that they had been written as much for me as to their addressee, that all of this wonderful advice was meant for any person who wished to become a writer. But now though the writing might strike me as more beautiful than ever, I cannot read it without uneasiness. I cannot forget my students, who do not feel at all what the Young Poet must have felt when he received them in the first decade of the last century. [...] They

say it's a lie that writing is a religion requiring the devotion of a priest. They say it's ridiculous. (ibid., p. 134)

Prioritizing literary craft is itself deemed antiquated by the narrator's students,

I once had an entire class agree that it didn't matter how great a writer Nabokov was, a man like that – a snob and a pervert, as they saw him – shouldn't be on anyone's reading list. A novelist like any good citizen has to conform, and the idea that person could write exactly what they wanted regardless of anyone else's opinion was unthinkable to them. Of course literature can't do its job in a culture like that. [...] if you try talking to them about, say, art for art's sake they cover their ears, they accuse you of profsplaining. That's why I decided not to go back to teaching. Not to be self-pitying but when you're so at odds with the culture and its themes of the moment, what's the point? (ibid., p. 194)

The use of "profsplaining" is especially significant here because it reveals one of the founding assumptions of "graphomaniac culture," i.e., that genuinely useful advice does not come from professors, because it does not necessarily help you tell your story, and might even stand in the way of that goal. That the author's moral/political stance should cancel out their professional expertise and any aesthetic qualities their work might offer may be interpreted, as Nunez does, in terms of excessive political correctness, but it can also be seen in terms of the prioritizing of therapeutic reading which has been at the very center of popular literary culture since the advent of the television book club. The collision of values that Nunez's narrator cites as the reason she has given up teaching, throws into sharp relief what is really at stake in the debates about who gets to be a writer. For Nunez, what causes this disconnect with her students is a conflict between what she perceives to be incommensurate regimes of values, each conceiving of the ultimate values of reading, writing, of the entire enterprise of literary culture in such diametrically opposed ways that there simply no way that everyone involved can ever be on the same page again.

SANCTIFYING SOLITUDE AND THE DANGERS OF THE SINGLE STORY ABOUT WRITING

One of the key distinguishers between the golden age of agonized writing as religion, and the graphomaniac present according to Nunez, is the appreciation of solitude, the transcendent value for Rilke: “Seek solitude, above all seek solitude” (Rilke in Nunez 2018b, p. 133). The narrator says that she also writes poetry, but admits, “(i)t isn’t very good poetry, I know that, and I have no desire to share it. For me, writing poetry is like prayer, and prayer isn’t something you want to share with other people” (ibid., p. 71). Here Nunez’s narrator sounds remarkably like the main character in Rabih Alameddine’s novel *Unnecessary Woman* (2014), whose translations of literary masterpieces take years to produce, but are never intended to be shared with anyone else. In each case, the private conversation between author and reader that Harold Bloom and countless educators have considered to be the bedrock of reading experience, becomes the conversation between author and ever-appreciative reader who functions as a kind of authorial echo chamber. Nunez stresses this point in her National Book Award acceptance speech: “I became a writer not because I was seeking community but rather because I thought it was something I could do alone and hidden in the privacy of my own room” (Nunez 2018b).

As disdainful as Nunez’s narrator is toward the idea that anyone can become a writer, she does express admiration for one group of amateur writers she encounters. A friend of the narrator, who had been a writing student when they met in college, but then became a psychologist asks her if she will teach a writing workshop at a treatment center for victims of human trafficking. She says she agreed to do the workshop as a form of community service. The narrator expresses sincere admiration for the autofiction written by one of the women she meets in her workshop because of the lack of self-pity and the sense of humor in her writing.

Like many people I’ve met, she thinks writing saved her life. About writing as self-help you were always skeptical. You liked quoting Flannery O’Connor: Only those who with a gift should be writing for public consumption. But how rare to meet a person who thinks that they’re writing is meant to stay private. And how common to meet one who thinks their writing entitles them to not just to public consumption but fame. (Nunez 2018a, p. 60)

As in the case therapeutic writing (see Van Goidsenhoven and Masschelein in this volume), the privacy of this writing—the fact that it will *not* be shared—is precisely what sets it apart from the standard graphomania, and gives it transformative potential according to the narrator. Even though the circumstances for the act of writing would seem to be a world apart from the advice Rilke gave to the young poet he addressed almost a century ago, they are connected by this celebration of the solitary nature of writing in world gone with the socialization of reading pleasure.

While the ghost of O'Connor's belief that genuine writers are marked by a god-given gift still lingers, the narrator is willing to make an exception to that rule, but only by disconnecting writing from publishing. The alternative—writing only for publication—is incarnated for the narrator by literary advice author James Patterson whom she refers to as the best-selling author in the world.

Who, apparently of a modesty as vast as his success, believes equal success to be within easy reach of, well, anyone. Or at least anyone possessing ninety dollars for the twenty-two video lessons plus exercises he's offering, thirty day money-back guarantee. James Patterson. Always popping up, urging, coaxing, promising the world. Like the devil. (ibid., p. 144)

The choice between Rilke and Patterson as literary advice-givers throws the historical arc of teaching writing into sharp relief. The differences between the two in terms of their relationship to the publishing industry are obvious. What is more interesting here, is the way the former incarnates writing and reading for oneself as a private solitary pleasure the art of which can be discussed in a traditional workshop class, as opposed to a public, participatory spectacle of contemporary online writing and reading communities, which she demonizes in the form of Patterson's YouTube videos, his course at Masterclass.com (which he says has been taken by 60,000 students), and his online reading recommendation sites, *tobereadbooks.com* and *readkiddoreadread.com*, which feature reading lists intended for parents to help their children to discover the joys of reading together.

Nunez's insistence that the act of writing gives itself value when it is not intended to be published is diametrically opposed to advice offered in *There There*, where every Native American has a story that *must* be shared in order to assemble a body of narratives that provides a *there* for people without a narrative tradition they can call their own. The cornerstone

of Nunez's literary advice is the solitary genius blessed and cursed by her gift. The foundation for any kind of authority worthy of the name remains the solitary, singular voice, ideally in communion with itself, while the literary advice Orange offers is an alternative to the Eurocentric notion of the literary authority. Writing acquires authority as it works toward a choral effect in which all of the previously unheard voices resonate in aggregate, acquiring value as they give consolidate that community.

In her conclusion to her TEDGlobal talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that she had acquired a taste for books by reading classic children's books written by British and American authors, but they "had an unintended consequence. That I did not know that people like me could exist in literature" (Adichie 2009). When she discovered the work of African authors, Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, "(i)t saved me from having a single story of what books are" (ibid.). She summarizes quite elegantly what is at stake in that the pursuit of that choral effect, "I would like to end with this thought: That when we reject the single story, when we realize there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise" (ibid.). Adichie's notion of "a single story" has important ramifications for understanding what is at stake in literary advice on offer in Nunez and Orange's novels.

The authors Nunez cites as her literary models are all famously solitary, and the uniqueness of artistic visions has been attested to by armies of literary scholars whose critical discourse valorizes that singularity. But one could also argue that the canonical authors she assembles and curates so deftly form "a single story" in which writers can be a *real* writers only if they have a gift, that they suffer endlessly in pursuit of the refinement of craft, and they regard their cursed calling with religious fervor—no other would-be writers need apply. Adichie makes a powerful argument about the dangers of a single story about a place, but the dangers inherent in any single story about an occupation called writing have become central to understanding the conflicting forms of advice being offered in contemporary literary fiction.

"I WANTED TO START WITH TRUTH AND END WITH ART"

Ocean Vuong's novel, *On Earth We Are Briefly Gorgeous*, became the literary sensation of the Summer of 2019. In the opening pages, the narrator explains that he conceives of his narrative as a letter intended for his Vietnamese-American mother, in which he will explain why

he has become a writer, or more specifically, a queer yellow body from opioid-poisoned, working-class Hartford Connecticut, who has committed himself to literary life. Since he acknowledges that his mother is illiterate, one could argue, following Nunez, that the writing is intended for himself. But as a writer who wants to give voice to those who have had no voice in American letters, his project is also remarkably similar to the one Orange takes on in *There There*: self-expression is self-preservation, and by extension, the consolidation of a community imagined into literary existence.

At the same time, Vuong's writing style is archly literary, in the sense that it is structured around recurring poetic tropes which are the main source of cohesion for his reflections on his immigrant experience and the act of writing. Review after review comments on the sheer gorgeousness of the "poetic" prose style. In other words, in this novel craft is inseparable from "telling your story," a point summed up neatly by Vuong, when he was a guest on the talk show *Late Night with Seth Meyers*: "I wanted to start with truth and end with art" (Vuong 2019). Vuong's response to Meyers is entirely consistent with his unapologetic celebration of aesthetics throughout his interviews and throughout the novel. In his interview in *Poets and Writers*, he frames his emphasis on art and beauty in terms of breaking away of the strictures of immigrant literature

As a person of color, when it comes to memoir, we are seen as anthropological conduits, a vehicle of exotic information, I wanted to insist on agency as an artist, with the freedom to embellish and then claim it as my own rendition. (Gonzalez 2019)

His conception of agency depends on invention which complicates the traditional notions of community:

Writers of color are not supposed to have the musculature of an imagination. When we use it, we're being bold, and that's what I want to do –be bold, make things up. I'm not here to give people juicy bits of my community. I'm not a journalist; I'm an artist. (ibid.)

How Vuong constructs the architecture of participation in the literary community he imagines into being, is inevitably a complicated, sometimes even contradictory project. He acknowledges this when he addresses his mother explicitly as eventual reader of his text.

You asked what it was like to be a writer and I'm giving you a mess, I know. But it's a mess, Ma – I'm not making this up. I made it all down. That's what writing is, after all the nonsense, getting down so low the world offers you a merciful new angle, a larger vision made of small things, the lint suddenly a huge sheet of fog exactly the size of your eyeball [...] I'm not telling you a story as much as a shipwreck – the pieces floating, finally legible. (Vuong 2019, pp. 189–190)

Developing that “angle” is something only an artist can achieve, and it is the use of poetic tropes that allow him to achieve that singular angle and thereby distance his writing from journalist report. The model he invokes for his aesthetics reveals just how far his writing is from an anthropological conduit.

I'm thinking now of Duchamp, his famous “sculpture.” How by turning a urinal, an object of stable and permanent utility, upside down, he radicalized its reception. By further naming it *Fountain*, he divested the object of its intended identity, rendering it with an unrecognizable new form. I hate him for it for this. I hate how he proved that the entire existence of a thing could be changed simply by flipping it over, revealing a new angle to its name, an act completed by nothing else but gravity, the very force that traps us on this earth. Mostly, I hate him because he was right. (ibid., p. 199)

While Vuong invokes the great surrealist as the master of the aesthetic angle, he is also suspicious of craft, if it positioned as that which transcends politics,

They will tell you that great writing “breaks free” from the political, thereby “transcending” the barriers of difference, uniting people toward universal truths. They'll say this is achieved through *craft* above all. Let's see how it is made, they'll say– as if how something is assembled is alien to the impulse that created it. As if the first chair was hammered into existence without considering the human form. (ibid., p. 187)

This passage reveals the knotty aesthetics that serves as the basis for Vuong's advice about writing. Nothing is more *crafted* than his intensely poetic prose style that, by his own admission, is a mess of disparate reflections that he draws together in a final crescendo of recurring tropes of buffalos running over cliffs, monarch butterflies, and monkeys that

have functioned as consistent *leitmotifs* throughout the novel. His insistence on being able to set his imagination free to achieve his artistry, and his invocation of Duchamp's aesthetics to redefine the function of words and things makes his advice about writing sound remarkably close to what Nunez insists is the true vocation of the writer. But his determination to depict, and thereby give voice to the invisible figures, like his mother and all the other nameless immigrant women, who work in manicure salons, he affiliates more closely with Pamela Hart's Afghan Women Writers Project and the urban Native Americans in *There There*, the writing becoming, like it or not, a desperately needed anthropological conduit. At certain points in the novel Vuong makes extensive use of *we* and *our* to conjure that invisible community into words.

Because there are no salaries, health care, or contracts, the body being the only material to work with and from. Having nothing, it becomes its own contract, a testimony of presence. *We* will do this for decades—until *our* lungs can no longer breathe without swelling, *our* livers hardening with chemicals—*our* joints brittle and inflamed from arthritis—stringing together a kind of life. A new immigrant, within two years, will come to know that the salon is, in the end, a place where dreams become the calcified knowledge of what it means to be awake in American bones— with or without citizenship—aching, toxic and underpaid. (ibid., p. 81)

Vuong does not insist on solitude. His narration of those lives and his own struggles as writer must be shared in flamboyantly crafted visions of community and personal artistry.

CONCLUSION: HOW TO MAKE LITERARY FICTION MATTER IN DIGITAL CULTURE?

In conclusion, I want to return to Vuong's comment about starting with truth and ending with art. He said this in response to a question from a popular talk-show host, Seth Meyers, who now invites literary authors on a regular basis, something that would have been unthinkable on a network program until the past year. In an article entitled, "Please Welcome [...] Literature" in *The New York Times* (2019), books by authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Rebecca Makkai, Tayari Jones, and Viet Thanh Nguyen all benefited from a spike in sales after being featured on *Late Night with Seth Meyers* and Trevor Noah's *Daily Show*. While the

literary advice offered by Orange and Vuong does include advice about the publishing industry, their books are still aggressively circulated by Penguin Random House. The issue of *Poets and Writers* which includes the story/interview with Vuong also features articles “How to Get Paid: Jobs in Publishing,” “Inside Publishing: What I Learned at Lunch with Five Hungry Agents,” along with “Writing Prompts” for writers just getting started, and numerous advertisements for MFA writing programs at a wide variety of American universities. In other words, the traditional forms of literary advice industry.

Prize-winning literary novels such as *There There*, *The Friend* and *On Earth We are Briefly Gorgeous* now need to be included in the literary advice industry, because they present a form of advice not otherwise included in the guidebooks, interviews, and How-to videos. Fiction about fiction, as such, is obviously not a new phenomenon since meta-fiction was a major literary movement in the 1960s, and novels that celebrate the joys of books and bookstores have become international bestsellers on a regular basis since the 1990s. The reflections on writing offered by Orange, Nunez and Vuong address one central question not covered by the other forms of literary advice industry, but nevertheless subtends all of the recommendations about publishing and craft: how to make literary fiction *matter* in digital culture? In an author’s reading available on YouTube, Orange says: “In the age of fake news and the age of information both happening at the same time, fiction and art in general play a really important role – to make the truth compelling enough. It’s not about information anymore. It’s about how do you make something real and the truth without having to have the interface of fact. How do you cut through all of the nonsense that is now?” (Orange 2018b).

How to make telling your story compelling enough to become something other than information inevitably involves notions of craft, but advice about the sort of craft needed to make literary writing matter involves more than tips on prose style. It means learning how to assemble and curate a chorus of voices, whether those voices be Native Americans or immigrants who have never been heard before, or the voices of literary masters invoked in order to defend a literary tradition that privileges the solitary nature of writing and reading thought to be under assault by digital culture. Tracing the conflicted nature of that advice is essential for understanding the profound tensions between *telling your story* and *craft*, as well as the tensions between the social and solitary dimensions of literary writing and reading. Ultimately, it can also bring

into sharper focus the tensions between the forces of convergence and de-convergence that define the architectures of participation in contemporary literary cultures, as they strive to offer compelling alternatives to the nonsense of the now.

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