*Do you have to be one to write about one? Writing about Other Cultures*

In the era of what is sometimes called the “Age of Multiculturalism,” controversy often swirls around writers who choose to write about characters who in some way or ways hail from a so-called “culture” significantly different to their own. If a white, homosexual, elderly, Christian man, for instance, has characters in his writing who are female, heterosexual, black, and Muslim or who might be young Chinese bisexuals given to atheism or witchcraft, then critics will almost certainly come forward assailing the author for the error of his ways. What business does he have trying to speak for or represent “others”? How can he possibly know enough about what it’s actually like to be like them, to know their experiences and how they have shaped them, formed their world views? For many a Critical Theorist, what the white man is doing in these instances is nothing short of a new form of colonialism or imperialism: appropriating, if not stealing or commercially exploiting, others’ identities and voices—their autonomy and authenticity, in short, their *right* to speak for *themselves*.

In February, 2016, Ron Charles, the editor of the *Washington Post’s* “Book World,” penned an article entitled: “Why write a novel about a race that’s not your own? The case of ‘Ginny Gall.’” He might well have said the *case against* Charlie Smith, the 67-year-old white Southerner who wrote the said novel, “Ginny Gall,” in which essentially all the central characters are black and are located in the Jim Crow South, such has been the virulence of the criticism of Smith’s bravado from some quarters. As Charles summarizes: “Even as we try to encourage more diverse books [a presumed goal of multiculturalism], our eagerness—and capacity—to *rain down hellfire* [emphasis added] on authorial missteps and insensitivities, conscious or unconscious, has radically increased,” in effect scaring writers away from the attempt to broaden their horizons in the first place. Charles also quotes Gene Luen Yang, the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, on this point: “I have noticed an undercurrent of fear in many of our discussions. We’re afraid of writing characters different from ourselves because *we’re afraid of getting it wrong. We’re afraid of what the Internet might say* [emphasis added].” But getting *what* wrong exactly? The main crime or sin here is a white man just cannot effectively or legitimately represent what an oppressed black man experiences, such that, as Jabari Asim might put it (as reported by Charles), Smith’s novel has “black characters” in it, but not “black people.” I will say more on this issue later.

For now, notice the vehemence of the blowback, and also, as a paradoxically unintended consequence, the *segregation* that it imposes at the heart of multiculturalism’s presumed quest for the celebration of diversity and the promotion of mutual recognition, respect, and understanding. For, if different cultures are to bridge any of their differences they have to be able to talk to each other, to understand each other, and that requires to a substantial degree the formation of a common language and discourse created by all of us reaching over supposed cultural divides. Otherwise, the segregation will persist, maybe even get worse, as I am not allowed to talk about your world, and you not about mine. As Smith puts it: “To decide only certain persons can write about certain things, that’s a kind of moral censorship, the most dangerous censorship—by the will of the collective—a way of looking at things that limits rather than opens. To hold myself back and say, ‘I can’t write about these matters because I don’t have any experience of them’ is to admit that the imagination itself must be limited, must be curtailed.” If true, what kind of literature would that state of affairs leave us with, a literature with severe limits on its imaginative free expression? Would we want that? Would the end result be a *literature* at all? I think not.

At the heart of the “multiculturalism project,” then, lies a critical paradox, or antagonism, or outright contradiction. Multiculturalism wants us to get along with each other, understand each other, and to value what each of us and the groups we belong to bring to the table of cultural and intellectual human flowering. But then it wants to censor us, prevent us from appraising, evaluating, interpreting, and commenting on each other’s cultural identities and world views. The bottom line, though, is that we can’t have this multicultural aspiration both ways, even if we wanted to. In the first place, trying to embrace others but not comment in some manner as to who they are (or at least appear to be) in the process is fundamentally intellectually inconsistent, impossible in fact. Any “other” we seek to understand (whether they be Muslims, rabbits, or atoms) can only be done so in significant *part* in our own evaluative terms, even after we’ve made a concerted effort to get to know the perspective (to the degree that they have one, like the atom) of the other. Otherwise, we won’t be able to say anything about the other, let alone empathize with it; and we will be cut off from the multiculturalism project before we even start by this identity politics’ *absolutism* that argues “that men have no right to speak about feminism or whites about slavery.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Even more importantly, “the idea that any group’s experience is inaccessible to others is not just pessimistic but anti-intellectual; history, anthropology, *literature* and many other fields of inquiry are premised on the faith that different sorts of people can, *in fact*, understand each other [emphases added].”[[2]](#footnote-2) Again, the idea that we cannot write about others is, without engaging in any hyperbole, at least the very thin end of the pernicious wedge of censorship. No form of human inquiry can flourish under this condition, especially literature.

If humans do have a distinguishing characteristic that renders them *especially* human, I suggest it is the power of *empathy*. I don’t doubt that other species do too (dolphins and bonobos readily come to mind, among a continually growing list of other species of similar capacity), but empathy is a key facet that affords us the opportunity to understand each other, to “put ourselves in other’s shoes.” There’s a survival benefit to this gift: cooperation and mutual support, as well as the huge benefits (spiritual, psychological, emotional, and material) of living in groups and being a *social* animal par excellence. Empathy, then, lies at the center of our cognitive abilities; it’s *natural* to us, instinctive (unless we have a genetic or developmental malfunction [autism, for example] that robs us of this gift). Thus, if we want to pursue the multiculturalism project, to get to know, appreciate, and value other cultures, then we’ll be only able to do it *empathetically*, although spruced up, no doubt, with a good dose of empirical research and analytical reasoning. But empathy, while powerful, can never be *entirely* objective, capture the other’s experience in its totality (if that really means anything anyway.) Therefore, even if we want to pursue the multiculturalism project, we have *no choice* but to do it to some significant degree in our own terms. And as imperfect as this state of affairs might be, would we really want to do away with it? Can we, in fact? As Timothy Garton Ash says, “If everyone is entitled to talk only about his or her experience, or that of their group, any wider conversation [including the multiculturalism project, I would add] becomes impossible.”[[3]](#footnote-3) And as Martha Nussbaum says, “the ‘inner eye’ of imaginative sympathy [‘to see oneself as another’—*soi-même comme une autre* {Paul Ricoeur}] allows us to get inside the skin of other human beings who live in utterly different circumstances from our own, and to discover *common humanity beneath the alien garb* [emphasis added].”[[4]](#footnote-4) In many important respects, fiction writers do write about our common humanity even when they are writing about others and their specific stories; in fact, they *have* to write about others in this way if they are going to tap into our common brother- and sisterhood.

Cultural anthropologists, however, *may* have a slightly different position to defend when it comes to writing about others, although I will contest this point below. Even though many cultural anthropologists, especially of a so-called *qualitative* or *ethnographic* bent, may well eschew any scientific pretensions concerning their work, they do at least strive for some sort of “objectivity” in the way they portray the persons and the communities they study. After all, they are claiming to represent those communities to us—as they actually are, and not as some figment of the imagination. For sure, there may well be a (limited) space for “creative” thinking in their research—it’s most likely unavoidable—but the use of imagination in the literary or fictional sense, at least according to disciplinary standards, *ought* to be as entirely absent from their so-called social scientific research as possible.

This means that cultural anthropologists *have* to do whatever they can to replicate the *lived experiences* of their subjects, and that’s why indeed they engage in years of the immersive field work that is known as “participant observation” or “deep immersion” (almost “going native” if they are not too careful). They can’t afford to make too many mistakes *in that representational way*; it would besmirch their claims to academic integrity and social scientific rigor. For novelists, on the other hand, the intrusion of creative imagination into the representation of others is just as central as this presumed elimination. As Smith says (although I think he may be overstating the case a bit): a novel is “a pure act of imagination.” But this doesn’t mean that a novelist can abrogate *all* responsibility to be representationally faithful to those about whom he writes (readers still demand a certain amount of “plausibility” in the tales they read, although what’s plausible or not is often in the eye of the beholder). Smith even admits that he had to do some research into social reality like hobo train riding; after all, if literal hobo train riding is in the novel, it has to be rendered as authentically as possible, no matter what other imaginative elements might also be present. But, as Smith continues, he made “no claims to historical fidelity”; nor did he feel he was “trespassing on anyone else’s material”—it was *his novel*, not theirs.

Still, can Smith, and every other novelist, still “get it wrong” enough to warrant the criticism that they shouldn’t have embarked on the representation of others not like themselves in the first place? This issue is a very complex one, and entire books could be written on the subject. All that can be done in the extremely limited space I have here is to begin to lay out some of the main arguments and propositions for further consideration.

One major assumption I think that those who believe we shouldn’t write (at least very much) about others different from ourselves make is that others know themselves fundamentally better than we ever can. In other words, those who live in very different worlds have lives, thoughts, and experiences that those who live outside those universes can never really understand. This is an argument that philosophers call “insider epistemology,” a form of (if only relatively “weak”) solipsism. It is understandable that many people subscribe to this point of view, but it is nevertheless fundamentally mistaken, both epistemologically and biologically.

The first error of insider epistemology is that we don’t necessarily know ourselves any better or, indeed, worse than anyone else might. In fact, in a deep neurological sense we don’t even know ourselves *at all*; we know what is *on* our minds, but not so much as to what exactly is *in* it. (I am struck by the fact that every now and then I am able to recall a piece of information that I was not aware that I knew it until that inexplicable moment of recall. For example, I was teaching a class on Afghanistan one day when all of a sudden I remembered the date of something that had happened there. It surprised me, for I had no idea that I knew it. There’s a Library of Congress in the brain, but most of the time we don’t know it’s there or what’s in it.) What passes for self-knowledge is more precisely only that which the *conscious* self thinks it knows, and we do in fact have some reliable (although certainly not infallible) access to that knowledge.

As recent developments in neuroscience have demonstrated (see David Eagleman’s “The Brain”), the conscious self (that dimension of self of which we are aware) is only a rather thin sliver of our total cognitive selves, and it is almost entirely dependent upon the unknown (and maybe unknowable) workings of the human brain which is composed of, at best guess estimate, 50 to 200 billion neurons, each of which interfaces with 1,000 to 100,000 other neurons through 100 trillion to 10 quadrillion synaptic junctions. In short, our consciousness is still very much the mysterious emergent property of the most complex known entity by far in the entire universe! By this neurological fact alone the case for internal or insider epistemology is all but destroyed.

Even in writing an autobiography we are not necessarily on much safer ground than if total strangers—cultural others—write about us; indeed, on some dimensions of our existence we are perhaps even less safely so. On this note, it is interesting to see what Susan Faludi has reported recently in her new biography of her father. Shortly before he died, he read a draft of the book, and said: “I’m glad. You know more about my life *than I do* [emphasis added].” Moreover, a fair bit of what we think we know about ourselves and the groups we belong to is arguably (and sometimes demonstrably) delusional, or at least inconsistent (at least over time) or self-promotional spin. Some of us are more prone to this phenomenon than others, no doubt, but I suspect we are all guilty of self-delusion at one time or another, to one degree or another. This conclusion also lays bare a false assumption about “objectivity” in the solipsistic account of multiculturalism; for to claim that we can’t write about others reliably or faithfully is to (indirectly or subconsciously perhaps) make the assumption that those others are *necessarily* more objective than we are, and that, I’m afraid, just ain’t necessarily so.

Contemporary neuroscience has demonstrated that even our, especially long-term, memories are very unreliable repositories of who we are and what we have done and how we have felt about and feel about all this now. Some short-term memories and the recollection of factual data are often reliable enough (they do help us navigate reality quite well, if not perfectly), but long-term memory is a *constant* work-in-progress, subject to radical change over time as we age and acquire different psychological needs. Long-term memories, key to our sense of self, are even capable of being completely manipulated (by the self and others) to such a degree that David Eagleman suggests that some of what we take to be our solid sense of self is pure *myth*. Accordingly, if we don’t even know ourselves very well, why should it be so objectionable if others write about us, especially if they may be able to do better than we can? Consider the case of Alexis de Toqueville and his great sociological study, *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840).

It has been argued many times, and quite convincingly so, that de Toqueville’s observations of nineteenth century America and Americans were far more prescient than those of nineteenth century Americans themselves. But de Toqueville was at least significantly culturally “other,” an alien in many respects: “he was an aristocratic Frenchman who thought of himself as quite different from Americans and who was out of sympathy with many of the characteristics he observed in them and thought essential to their *identity as Americans* (Fay 1996:21; emphasis added).” We can make a very similar claim about Max Weber’s understanding (in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905) of the inner lives of sixteenth century Protestants, that they were modern capitalists in the making but barely had any cognizance themselves that they were so predisposed. De Toqueville and Weber, among many others, were outsiders of the communities and cultures they wrote about and analyzed, but they managed nonetheless to represent those communities more accurately, it can be forcefully argued, than the insiders themselves. How did they pull off this trick (to the degree that they did; after all, they’re human too in the neuroscientific sense referred to above)?

One clear answer is that their outsider status afforded them the very cognitive and experiential *distance* that is arguably necessary for a fuller understanding of what others and selves are all about. In other words, “otherness” *can* be a prerequisite for knowing someone, and insider-ness *can* be a significant handicap—we’re too (emotionally) close to ourselves to know ourselves! As Fay says with reference to Alan Bullock’s *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952):

The claim to know Hitler is *not* a claim to have experienced what Hitler experienced, but rather to be able to make sense of his experiences. The question is not who has more empathetically experienced the world like Hitler, but who can more adequately describe, identify, and explain Hitler’s feelings, thoughts, actions, and relations…To know someone else or even ourselves requires not the ability to psychologically unite with them or ourselves at an earlier time but the ability to *interpret the meaning* of the various states, relations, and processes which comprise their or our lives…[I]nterpretation is not psychological identification but exegetical translation in which an entity’s or event’s meaning is uncovered and rendered comprehensible [1996:24-25].

The argument against insider epistemology is quite compelling, but there is at least an important caveat to consider. We are talking here primarily about writing fiction as opposed to social anthropology. Fay, a philosopher of social science, may well not be all that interested in being empathetic to others’ psychological states (he wants to *explain* them, not so much share them), but a novelist, especially one of an existentialist bent heavily into writing about his characters’ psycho-emotional states at great length, will surely be so consumed. For the existentialist, knowing others’ psychological states and being able to portray them accurately and convincingly will take precedence over explaining the broader meaning of them. So, the degree to which a writer has to be one in order to be able to write about an other may well depend on the *type* of fiction that he is composing. Perhaps we are talking about a spectrum of knowing here as opposed to a binary response of either “yes, you must be one” or “no, you don’t have to be so.” If you are writing at the existentialist end of the spectrum, not being one becomes more problematic, or at least more challenging, requiring more in-depth research as to the nature of specific psychological states of being.

Still, this argument, if applicable, does not do all that much to boost the validity of the insider epistemology position. After all, even if the writer is a member of a particular group he has no more chance of getting a comrade’s psychological state correct than an outsider does, if contemporary neuroscience has it right. Moreover, the issue about knowing an other’s psychological state is arguably less one about sharing particular cultural markers, like race, gender, or ethnicity, and more about being able to empathize with a fellow human being. We can all do this to one degree or another, but our ability to be able to empathize may have little or nothing to do with race, gender, or ethnicity. And even then, even the most empathetic of us may still get others’ psychological states wrong in significant measure. We even get it wrong about ourselves, or at least we change our minds about how we felt at any given time when we recall it later. We are constantly writing and rewriting our own narratives about ourselves and our identities, layering falsehood upon falsehood, parsing and spinning our life stories to suit our contemporary psychological needs as they inevitably change over time.

So far, I have been using the terms “self” and “other” as if they were entirely separate entities. But this binary categorization, like many others, is ultimately a false dichotomy. If we have to worry that others may not be able to know us, we have to worry just as much that without others we wouldn’t have much of a concept of self to worry about at all in the first place! The self and other enjoy a profoundly *dialectical* relationship; they are embraced in a *relational* (as opposed to an *atomistic*) ontology. The concepts of self and self-identity are relational phenomena; they need the supposed other in order to know, to define, themselves. As Fay says:

That self and other are dynamically interrelated even in opposition should not be surprising. Every determination involves negation in which elements essential to an entity are separated from those which are not. To be a certain kind presupposes you are different from other kinds. *As a result identity formation in persons is in part a process of self-differentiation which requires an other against which they distinguish themselves. There can be no self without the difference provided by others. In this ironic way selves need others even in their insistence on their difference from them* [1996:46. Emphasis added].

In the words of Critical Theory or the concept of “concealed otherness” in Deconstructionism, “national liberation movements [for instance] need the [colonial] oppressor in order to form themselves and to keep themselves in existence [46].” Indeed, when the former colonial oppressor fades into the background, usually sometime after “liberation” or “independence” has been achieved, then liberation movements often fall foul of internecine strife wherein rival factions come to hate each other as much as, if not more, than they did the colonial master. From a relational ontology perspective, then, the antagonistic other has just as much of a handle on the understanding of self as the insider might, although neither will have the whole story.

But otherness is not just about being dialectical antithesis to thesis. Otherness is in large part an oxymoron because there is arguably a much larger sphere of commonality that transcends and encompasses the category; that is, there is our *common humanity* that unites us, whether we are Muslim or Jew, Caucasian or Chinese, gendered or transgendered. For many, though, we may nonetheless have a tendency (quite prevalent in our time) to prioritize our membership of specific groups at the expense of our membership of the human race with whom we share 99% of our genetic inheritance as well as so much of our lived, common, and universal experiences (both emotional and material), regardless of social class, race, religion, or sexual orientation, among many other “demarcations.” Perhaps this is because our sense of identity finds much more emotional resonance in smaller, more readily identifiable associations rather than universal and perhaps somewhat amorphous groupings, like “humanity.” Whatever might be the case, however, it has been demonstrated numerous times that differences *within* a group can often be bigger and more resonant than those between alleged mutually exclusive groupings. Likeness and unlikeness are constantly moving targets, and as to whether I am like or unlike an African-American female depends upon on what dimension or characteristic one is looking at any given moment. In a moment of personal loss, for example, *on that score*, we are arguably interchangeable and we know each other as well as we know ourselves.

Certainly, “it is simplistic to think that groups are comprised of homogenous units which are all alike in ways that radically distinguishes them from members of all other groups… Cultures are neither coherent nor homogenous nor univocal nor peaceful. They are inherently polyglot, conflictual, changeable, and open [to syncretism (borrowing from others)] [Fay 1996:54, 61].” Fay’s “truth” here clearly exposes the lie at the heart of Samuel Huntington’s immensely popular and influential 1996 work, *Clash of Civilizations*, in which, as Garton Ash says, “his idea…that one can simply identify ‘the Islamic’ or ‘the Christian’ position on an[y] issue…is dangerous nonsense,”[[5]](#footnote-5) both literally, as in inciting and giving credence to sectarian strife, and in terms of destroying literature (as well as any hope of pursuing the multiculturalism project of peacefully getting to know one another and learning to live and let live). And as Kwame Anthony Appiah adds on this note: “Cultural purity is an oxymoron. Cultures have forever grown through mingling, and creativity thrives on the *irritation of difference*, the surprise of the new [emphasis added].”[[6]](#footnote-6) What’s especially noteworthy about Appiah’s comment here, I think, is the claim that we in fact *benefit* in significant ways from at least a degree of cross-cultural misunderstanding. The cross-purposes, like the mixing of genetic material in sexual reproduction perhaps, lead to novel life forms that advantage both sides of the former divide: in the long run they both enrich themselves through “cultural genetic mutation” (the mixing of “memes” in Dawkins’ formulation[[7]](#footnote-7)—syncretism, in other words), and the broader human family and its civilization (hopefully) continues to make important progress. In this sense, many writers *have* to write about others: it’s good for literature, and it’s good for the world.

Culture is a conversation, not a settled text. So as to the question “When other cultures are being represented in fiction (or anywhere else for that matter), who will speak for them?” there is no one authoritative voice that can be judged to be the sole arbiter of such a task, and the voices of others not only *can* be appealed to, they *have* to be.

This latter argument also implies another truth. That is, just because people live in and identify with different cultures, that fact does *not* mean that they inhabit totally different or mutually exclusive worlds, that they can’t talk to or understand each other. All languages and discourses are *translatable*; they have to be in fact, even if the resultant translations are sometimes imperfect and fraught with misunderstandings. Again, dialectically, difference ontologically *requires* at least a background conversation of deep similarity—despite cultural differences, we are all still human beings experiencing life as humans do and using language in order to make sense of and to interpret what our lived experience means. Accordingly, if cultures were largely incomprehensible to each other, then Caucasians wouldn’t be able to engage in dialog with Chinese on very much *meaningful* stuff at all; the former wouldn’t be able to understand what they mean by, for example, Taoism. But, of course, many Caucasians do understand Taoism to some significant degree, even if they never totally “get it.” And that means they are able to be empathetic enough with “Chinese culture” in order for them to write effectively about it. As Fay puts it, “In order to be in competition paradigms [or cultures] must refer to the same object, and must be sufficiently inter-translatable to be offering divergent explanations of the same phenomena [1996:83].” So, even if many Darwinian-inspired ecologists are not persuaded by the more “mystical” or “spiritual” aspects of Taoism, they can still nonetheless make sense of those aspects (“divination”—intuiting the *Way*— for example) and translate them into modern scientific language (ecological engineering or design with a view to achieving ecological integrity). In this sense, Western scientific ecologists even speak *for* Taoists themselves in some meaningful way by explicating a *scientific* understanding of the philosophy that many Taoists may well be ignorant of, but which is arguably nonetheless a legitimate part of the fuller philosophical picture that both groups share, at least in some overarching manner.

A final point to remember, perhaps, in this brief treatment of a most complex and contentious topic: ultimately, fiction requires some suspension of belief—it is primarily a work of art, imagination, even if it has sociological relevance, either explicitly or implicitly. As Stuart Spencer puts it in his *The Playwright’s Guidebook* (2002):

“I don’t believe it” is the enemy of art. If one is going to have an artistic experience, one better start by deciding that, no matter what, one is going to believe it… if we don’t we’ve locked ourselves outside the room where the art is happening. … ”The play’s not about ‘people’…It’s about this particular man. Who’s to say *this man* [my emphasis] wouldn’t do such a thing? I say he would do it, might do it. In fact, he did do it [238-239].”

A tad too easy perhaps, but it’s a point well worth considering. As Fay might add here, “Acts [and thoughts] belong not to a single narrative but to a contested narrative field [1996:193],”meaning, again, that the acts of others are not theirs alone, neither motivationally nor meaningfully. We others are always a part of *their* conversation.

Moreover, I believe there is a profound inconsistency within the critical stance that says “we don’t *buy* (read believe) that character X [in a novel or story] would ‘do such a thing Y,’” that the act isn’t *plausible* for *such a character as that*.[[8]](#footnote-8) The last five words of the last sentence are critical. They refer to a “general category” of person, perhaps even to a stereotype, not to a specific individual. These same critics would most likely also say that we should avoid stereotypes in our literature, create characters that are at times unpredictable, go against the grain of their own personalities such that they can grow, change, undergo life-transforming epiphanies—shatter, that is, any category we might have been strongly tempted to place them in. Of course, our disbelieving critic may well claim that their skepticism is based on direct knowledge of people *just like* the character in question, but again generalization is at work here, and such generalization as the rather casual one mentioned here is usually based on a very small *N* indeed, thereby in the end not making the claim much of a reliable generalization at all! Ultimately, we‘re plagued by a pervasive dilemma here: it’s probably a part of our natural cognitive structure to create categories[[9]](#footnote-9) but our categories are sweeping generalizations *meant* to smooth out individual differences. In the end, therefore, an argument that says a particular individual “wouldn’t do any such a thing,” is largely fatuous, and far from being provable. How can anyone know whether X would do Y, *someday*? They can’t. Still, some onus remains with the author to make as convincing a case as possible for whatever his characters get up to, but, even then, there will still be some Joe or Jane in the third row of the theatre who’ll insist he’s got it wrong!

Still, even if the case I have put forward in this essay that I can write about others even if I am not one of them is convincing enough, that does not mean that we can go about that task with gay abandon. Writing about others is a tricky, sometimes dangerous, enterprise, and it should be approached with humility and responsibility and on the back of adequate research and prodigious sensibility. Writing about others in these ways is essential; for consider how the body of literature would be so much the poorer if we didn’t, or were afraid to do so. In the end, most writers, if not all, will have to write about others at some point (most readily I suppose about members of the opposite sex), otherwise their stories will be narrowly-conceived indeed, and the poorer for it. So, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, not in the banning of cooking it in the first place. That is, critique an author if you think and you can demonstrate that he does a poor job of representing others (notwithstanding Spencer’s admonition above), but do not critique his decision to write about others as a *matter of a priori principle*, because it isn’t much of a principle to be so slavishly dedicated to, especially in our world of multiplying division. “Balkanization *is* a genuine danger of multiculturalism…therefore it is good to engage the other (Fay 1996:240).”

Moreover, banning writing about others is tantamount to *censorship* in my view, perhaps the greatest enemy art has ever faced. Surely it is axiomatic that art *must* enjoy unfettered free speech if it is to be an art worth having at all; the history of art’s struggle against censorship should put to rest any counterclaim to that proposition. Any votes for calling “Socialist Realism” art? Insensibility or the ruffling of feathers shouldn’t be engaged in lightly or with malice aforethought, but such things can’t be cured via censorship, and in some measure they may be *necessary* to our ability to grow as mature human beings. Too much swaddling doesn’t augur well for producing intellectually and emotionally robust boys and girls. The free speech essential for the production of art is just *too* much of a prize for us—both as artists and free persons—to be too easily given up, or even just to be meddled with. Ironically, that goes for those, too, who from a multiculturalist perspective, wish to claim their right, their freedom, to *speak for themselves*; for without guaranteed, unfettered freedom of speech they may very well not be able to![[10]](#footnote-10)

At worst, indeed the very worst, writing about others is a necessary evil, something inescapable. At best, it is absolutely necessary and unavoidable, and when done well it enriches our literature, almost beyond imaginative measure. Our task is to write responsibly, with understanding and truth-telling at its heart, not to retreat into the cocoon of only the so-called familiar.

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1. “Under Attack,” editorial, *The Economist* June 4-10, 2016, p.9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “The Colliding of the American Mind,” *The Economist* June 4-10, 2016, p.59 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Garton Ash 2016, p.91 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in ibid., p.244 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Garton Ash 2016, p.97 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cited in ibid., p.97 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (OUP, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I’ll leave aside the issue as to what is plausible in this essay—who the hell knows? Because Joe or Jane says something isn’t plausible *to them* doesn’t make it so—after all, who can claim to be the ultimate arbiter of such things? It seems to me almost anything is plausible, given the right circumstances. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. There are many reasons why we *have* to categorize--far too many to enumerate here. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It may be the case that what really irks such folks is the fact that the publishing industry doesn’t see fit to publish their works anywhere near enough. One participant at the Brisbane Writers’ Festival (the one at which Lionel Shriver caused such a ruckus) said this, for instance: “The reality is that those from marginalized groups, even today, do not get the luxury of defining their own place in a norm that is profoundly white, straight, and, often, patriarchal.” This state of affairs is very likely true, but it is a problem of the publishing industry, the gatekeepers to the literary world as such, and their prejudices and their decisions as to what they think will sell, not so much at all, it seems to me, because white, straight, patriarchs try to write about “others than themselves.” This complaint does nothing in my estimation to weaken the case I have made above that writers can (and must) write about others. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)