Cultural Daily

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The Vanessa Place Affair: Race, Poetry, Politics

Robert Wood · Wednesday, June 3rd, 2015

Like the invention of 'the homosexual' in the nineteenth century that Michel Foucault, David Halperin and others write about, the discursive production of an individual ('racist') shifts the focus from the act to the identity of the author. It is not so much a question of what one has done but an essence, an immutable characteristic that indicates a deeper layer. This strikes me as symptomatic of our time. People, particularly in an American context, are more likely to say 'I am a poet, drummer, lawyer' than to say 'I write poetry', 'I play drums', 'I practice law'. We want to en-noun ourselves, to make ourselves objects, things.

Such liberal identity politics is at play in the current Vanessa Place discourse. Vanessa Place is a poet whose work embraces conceptual art, and criminal defense attorney; her interest in law, and intellectual property in particular, mixes with her word work. Vanessa Place recently was removed from her role on a selection committee for the 2016 Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) conference due to a petition started by the Mongrel Coalition. The petition argued that:

> She furthers her career on the backs of Black ancestors—the hands that filled the master's pockets now fill hers… We ask that you remove her from her position of authority over writers of color.

This is because Vanessa Place has been tweeting *Gone with the Wind* hoping to draw a copyright infringement case from Margaret Mitchell's estate. Place's use of offensive imagery and her appropriation of black characters is intentional, and this is what has raised the ire of Mongrel Coalition. The Place controversy has garnered some coverage including in *The Stranger* and on Ron Silliman's blog.

The AWP issued this statement:

> AWP has removed Vanessa Place from the AWP Los Angeles 2016 Subcommittee. We did so after taking into consideration the controversy her Twitter feed has generated. Place has been tweeting the text of Gone with the Wind and using a photograph of Hattie McDaniel as the profile picture. The context of this and similar work is explained by a few literary theorists and advocates of conceptual poetry, such as Jacob Edmond and Brian M. Reed. AWP believes in freedom of expression. We also understand that many readers find Vanessa Place's unmediated quotes of

> Margaret Mitchell's novel to be unacceptable provocations, along with the images on her Twitter page.

The focus has been on the politics not the poetry. Declamatory statements of what side one is on have not been counterbalanced with a formalist close reading. We have jumped straight to judgement without a thorough thinking through of the text and certain social frames that give us context: how indicative is this work of Place's oeuvre (i.e. is the work 'racist' or is she a 'racist')? What do we mean when we say 'white supremacist' – what is its etymology, genealogy, function today? And how might the text fit with that category? What of indigeneity here – the original sin of American and other settler societies – and what too of roots – of 'Africa', negritude, decolonisation? Why should the Mongrel Coalition situate themselves as the spark for a moral fire?

To me this final question is worth dwelling on. Mongrel Coalition is an anonymous group, yet paradoxically they focus their attacks on the identity of the author. They rely on a critique of what 'white' authors do and write, even as whiteness is an unspecific, shifting, sneaky category. If we were all Mongrel Coalitions no one could critique in this way. Moreover, there is no way to know if Mongrel Coalition are not simply self-loathing white people strategically occupying a moral position of speaking for poets of colour as a whole. As Eugene Oshtashevsky implied their hegemonising tendency is worth reflecting on. What do they dis-place?

Mongrel Coalition does not speak for me as a poet of colour. That they are anonymous seems to only add to speculation that they refuse to heed their own words; that they might not in fact be in such a righteous position if their particular biographical histories were public. I assume none of them are Michael Brown's family, none of them Hattie McDonald's forebears. This is not to discount their position, but to ask how close is close enough. History is complex and their legitimacy is grounded in an unknown position that simply relativises itself from experience to call out people they assume are in positions of power. Yet how can they speak as authorities on a text from the 1930s? How might they enact #blacklivesmatter when they rely on some strain of essentialism, albeit strategic?

Vanessa Place in her YouTube video, Poetry Pays

I am pleased that Place's work has been questioned and that this conversation is happening. However, I do not want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. I heart conceptualism. I am happy to be a reader of a varied, exciting, generative field of aesthetics and think about the frames of poetry and use of techniques that cohere around conceptualism. I am also equally happy to heart post-conceptualism, Alt-Lit, flarf and a whole host of other fluid and dynamic poetry categories. I heart it and I would not put Vanessa Place in the same place as Kenneth Goldsmith; just as I would not put Erin Morrill, Craig Santos Perez, Myung Mi Kim, Dawn Lundy Martin, Douglas Kearney, Jeremiah Rush Bowen, Joey Yearous-Algozin in the same place as Kenneth Goldsmith. It is just like I can say 'I heart modernism' and not support Ezra Pound's later politics.

Critique is necessary, but without mapping the poetry that is, in Raymond Geuss's words, 'to come', we only have half the equation. What happens next, besides, after Place and Goldsmith? How are white people meant to write now? As sympathetic as I am to Dotty Lassky's claim that poetry is not a project, poetry is also not not a project. That is to say the historian will impute a project onto the poet in the process of archivisation, that in our own self-analysis and reflection we can frame our work to be a project. This is most commonly seen in the retroactive descriptions of

what voice is and the search for cohesion after the fact. We may also want to project it beyond ourselves.

My project is about creating a social poetry. Social poetry is conceptual, to a degree, in its method of composition but for that we may cite earlier conceptualists like Reznikoff, Mac Low and others rather than recent incarnations. But it is abstract in its textuality – metaphors still matter for it unlike say the language in a daily newspaper, which relies on the metonymic. Social poetry can and should be read as a political intervention – that legislation is the unacknowledged poetry of history and ought to be re-worked.

Social poetry must be part of a wider suburbanism, which is as Ben Etherington writes 'the determinate negation of the suburbanite, ornamental sprawl… Suburbanism is the infrastructural realignment of suburbia to become collective and decentralised.' This is a new dialogue between the country and the city. This is a new place after Place.

Top image: A scene from the 1939 film version of Gone with the Wind