

A contribution on art and identity politics

It isn't a highway and it doesn't have lanes

By Steven Brust
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The following comment was posted February 27, 2017 by Steven Brust on his personal blog, The Dream Café. It is a response to the effort to restrict art and literature according to the dictates of racial and gender politics. Brust is a fantasy and science fiction writer, the author of 26 novels and numerous short stories. He is also a musician and singer-songwriter.

As long as there is class society in general and capitalism in particular there will be conflict between art and commercialism. How could their not be? In a society in which money is tied to fame and those two things combine into the official social measure of quality, any artist (in the broadest sense of the term) with a hint of self-awareness combined with the least shred of integrity has to, at some point, confront the issue.

While there are those who write to live, many of us live to write. Commercial success means less time doing a day job that perhaps we hate, and more time for our passion. To be sure, some of us—I include myself—have, simply because of luck, never had to face the choice between writing what satisfies us, and writing what will generate income. But for many, it can be a constant and difficult choice.

It is not my intention to judge those who have to make that choice—I don't feel entitled, as I have, so far, been lucky enough to escape it. But if you choose to chase the dollar rather than follow your passion, I do have a couple of requests: do not claim it as a virtue, and do not assume that, because wealth (and associated prestige and fame) is your primary—or only—consideration, that this must necessarily apply to all of your colleagues.

Here's what I just came across on Twitter:

I see folks not really getting what a lot of black women mean when they say "stay in your lane" when it comes to books. So, thread.

First off, it's up to you and whether or not you want to listen to WOC [women of color], specifically black women. They will live. Your career might not.

They're not saying you can't write diverse books with diverse characters. They're saying not to steal someone's story.

...It's not an attack on white authors. It's actually helpful advice.

More than likely, if you're upset or confused at the "stay in your lane" idea, it's probably because you're assuming POC [people of color] have an advantage.

whispers* We don't. White authors who write "diverse" stories get priority A LOT in publishing. *side eyes

authors of color aren't on the a level playing field with non-POC authors in publishing...yet. That's just a fact.

We're seeing more and more white authors use (and sometimes abuse) the call for diversity by taking OUR stories as POC.

Those opportunities should be given to POC directly. I mean, that's the whole point. And it's gonna take time.

So, white authors should sit back and allow POC to tell their own stories first. I mean, that's kind of what allyship is.

Right off the bat, first one: "Your career may not." A threat to the

career. Because that's what matters, right? One can only nod one's head in respect to someone who doesn't even pretend that quality of the work, that cognition of life, that even simple entertainment matters; career matters. Money and fame. That's what this all about, first, last, and in the middle. In the struggle between art and commerce, at least here we have an emphatic position.

This brings up a question: are there writers, let us say white writers, who are cynically exploiting, in pursuit of wealth and prestige, the market's wish for greater inclusion in characterization? There may be. I admit, the idea makes me throw up in my mouth a little, but it is possible; as long as there is capitalism there will be bottom-feeders. However, the above thread is not directed specifically at them; if it were, I'd have nothing to say. Or, at least, I'd have a great deal less to say. No, the thread is quite clearly directed at anyone who doesn't "own" a given story but wants to tell that story.

Which immediately takes us to our next question: whence comes this notion of "owning" a story? Well, that, at least, is easy to answer: once we have accepted the total commercialization of art, it is just a small step to take classes of people: "women of color" "trans women" "gay men" and, abstracting from these people those characteristics and ignoring every other, commodify the abstraction and then claim ownership because those aspects you've abstracted apply to you. But be clear that it makes no sense outside of the context of the marketplace, of money, of career success. So then, if you are going to claim to "own" stories, you should also be aware that you are uncritically accepting the values handed us by capitalist culture; don't do this and try to paint yourself as a rebel; it reeks of hypocrisy.

Ownership, property, is a relation among people—the right to use something, and to deny others the right to use it. In a period in which reactionaries are more and more placing property rights above human rights, and in which it is becoming more and more clear that the only way to secure human rights brings us into conflict with property rights, you want to extend property rights? To *art*? To the *subject matter* of art? Is there any possible way in which this can be considered progressive?

But even if we were to overlook that—which, to be clear, I am in no sense prepared to do—we then get to the question: just where does this ownership domain lie? The tweet speaks of women of color—a category that includes, among others, Michele Obama, an upper middle class academic at Stanford, the woman working next to a white guy at Jefferson North assembly plant in Detroit, a high school girl in West Baltimore who, for fear of her life, looks over her shoulder for the police every time she goes outside, and a homeless woman dumpster diving in Oakland. The colossal arrogance of claiming ownership of all of the stories of all of these people because of cosmetic similarity is simply beyond the pale.

Consider the high school girl I mentioned above as the protagonist of a story. What is her life experience? How much of it has been shaped by conscious choice, and how much by social situation, and, above all, how aware is she of the latter? As she leaves her house, where is she going?

What choices will she have to make, and how will she fare, and in what directions and to what degree will her thinking change, and would this change, in turn, have an effect on the broader society around her? It should be obvious that, if any hundred writers were to consider those questions, it would result in a hundred (or more!) different stories. And yet, you tell people that you “own” all of them?

But even that isn’t the most objectionable aspect of the whole thing. Have you noticed who is left out of this equation? A part of the complex publishing chain known as *the reader*.

If we do our jobs, if we confront all of the artistic challenges that face us in our efforts to tell stories, we just might, one hopes, reach someone. It can happen in a number of ways: by giving a reader a few hours of much needed distraction; by making a reader feel a connection to others like her- or himself; by making a reader feel a connection to and identity with others who are, to a greater or lesser degree, *unlike* her- or himself; by showing a reader something, perhaps even something important, about how life works, about how social forces and broad events are refracted through individual choices, and about how individual choices reflect themselves in broad social movements, thus coming to understand a little more the contradictions that surround us, but to which we are often oblivious.

This, it would seem, is unimportant to the author of the tweets above; it doesn’t deserve so much as a mention. The writer—in particular, the money, fame, prestige, and, no doubt, awards won by the writer—matters, but of the reader, nary a word.

Books are a commodity as they come off the presses, which is to say, they are interchangeable; I don’t care which copy of the same book I grab. Stories are not. No two writers will produce the same story; and for every good, honest story created with integrity (as well, certainly, as some number of poorly crafted or hacked out works) there are readers who will respond. If I choose not to write a story, there are some number of readers I could have touched who will be left without whatever I might have given them. There are, of course, many reasons why I might choose not to tell a certain story; not being excited by it is at the top of the list. But I find it appalling that some writers might choose not to tell stories that are important to them, and to their potential readers, for fear of offending someone who is interested in art for only the most base and philistine of reasons.

“Stay in your lane.” Just what does this mean? Must women write only of women? Must gay men write only of gay men? Because I am Jewish, must I only write about Jews? No, you will say, this only applies to writing about “marginalized groups” by those who aren’t in those groups. And yet, the logic here is that it can be unacceptable to write something because of aspects of one’s own personal identity. Are there those who think this can be anything but destructive to art? And, moreover, am I to judge someone else writing about Jews differently if the author is a Gentile? What a disgusting notion! How dare Shakespeare have written about a Jew! What nerve that Twain wrote about an African-American slave! How terrible that Mary Renault wrote based on Greek myths! Anyone who believes we would be living in a better world if the above-mentioned authors had refrained from such work is, let us just say, someone with whom I disagree.

There have been theories in the past, of course, that perfectly correspond to this: that see nationality or race as a fundamental determinate, and insist we cannot understand those unlike us. The only thing that makes this current version unique is that it comes from those who claim to be leftists; usually such notions form a part of racial theories that are the domain of the ultra-right. But no matter who makes this claim, it is not only profoundly untrue, it is deeply reactionary. To recognize the existence of racial and sexual oppression is to live in the real world. To surrender to categories of race and gender is to provide aid, comfort, and ammunition to the enemies of equality. As the reactionaries attempt to

force their hateful programs on us, such divisions do nothing but make their job easier. Anything that makes these categories more rigid and permanent, also makes rigid and permanent the inequality and genocidal brutality of class society.

The task of fighting against a system as deeply embedded and powerful as capitalism requires above all unity of all of the oppressed; to prostrate one’s self before cosmetic differences—even if, *especially* if, those differences carry with them two-fold and three-fold oppression—means to accept the arguments used by our oppressors to divide us. I am not judging you if you do not take as a departure point for your art the need to work for the unity of the oppressed—in point of fact, that forms no deliberate part of my agenda as a novelist. But kindly refrain from making matters worse and claiming it as a virtue. The old saying goes, “Those who can’t skin must hold a leg while someone else does.” I say, “Those who can’t skin should at least stop kicking the skinners.”

I am leery of any statement that begins, “The point of art is...” But I will say that one very important point of art, and one of the tests of how successful a work of art is, is that it strips off layers of divisions and separation of time, of nation, of religion, of gender, even of class, and reveals to us the common elements that make us human. How else am I able to appreciate and enjoy the works of a Jane Austen whose writing is more than 100 years old, or a Goethe who was German, or a Dumas who was Catholic? This is not to suggest ignoring the peculiarities of a given culture or subculture at a particular time in a particular place—on the contrary, it is only by an honest and exhaustive examination of these peculiarities that we are able to reveal and celebrate the common elements. But pray explain to me how this goal is advanced by telling writers to “stay in their lane?” How is any goal advanced, beyond, perhaps, pushing some success counters in a particular direction, and convincing people that they can’t understand one another? The first goal is one that I don’t care about; the other I vehemently oppose.

While it appears to be a contradiction, it is nevertheless true that we, in science fiction, and even more in fantasy, are very much writing about the real world, the one we live in and experience every day, because the very freedom that lets our imaginations escape from reality requires above all that we are firmly anchored in today’s sensibilities, conflicts, priorities, notions of right and wrong, and understanding of what is universal. And that these are all matters of dispute is exactly what gives us such wonderful variety, or, if I may be permitted to use the word, diversity in our stories. I beg to submit that one of our goals is, or ought to be, through imagination and speculation, to discover what is true and lay it before the reader. I further beg to submit that truth does not have a gender or racial bias, and that to say it does is to accept the arguments of the ultra-right.

“Your story” is the one you can’t help but write; it is the story that you want to read and so you have to write it because no one else has, will, or could. If it engages your passion, and you think it might also engage the passion of the reader, and perhaps even elevate or in some degree enlighten the reader, then you should write it. Telling your colleagues, “stay in your lane,” reflects disdain for other writers, scorn for the reader, and contempt for art.

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