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The Search for Identity in American Studies: Can a White Female Scholar Speak for the Oppressed¹

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‘You Cuban?’ the man had asked my father, pointing a finger at his name tag on the Navy Uniform – even though my father had the fair skin and light brown hair of his northern Spanish family background and our name is as common in Puerto Rico as Johnson is in the U.S. ‘No,’ my father had answered looking past the finger into his adversary’s angry eyes, ‘I’m Puerto Rican.’

‘Same shit.’ And the door closed.

(Judith Ortiz Cofer – Puerto Rican Immigrant, writer, poet and university lecturer)

Reading the above passage, Orwell’s famous lines come to mind: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” (Orwell, Chapter X). They make one wonder whether anyone has the right to declare somebody is the same as or different from somebody else, or they are worth less or more. I would suggest that nobody is in the position to do so. Yet it seems some people seem to feel they form the dominant part of a society, thus, determining and establishing a culture that is centred on their experience and values. Being in such a position more often than not obstructs one’s view; lessens one’s chance of understanding the “less equal”. Enikő Bollobás in her essay “Umpires and Fabulae of Old and New: New American Studies and the Post-modern Episteme” explains when discussing Noam Chomsky’s distinction between understanding and knowledge:

True understanding, he suggests, is not simply about knowledge, but about change, often-personal change. Therefore the committed intellectual – by speaking for the voiceless and empowering the powerless – is seen as an instrument of change; in the same context, the university “in a healthy society,” Chomsky argues, should take on a *subversive* “social and intellectual role”.(8-9)

How can this personal change be achieved? How can one, not belonging to any of the minority groups, develop a sensitivity to heed the faint voices of the “less equal”?

In the following pages I would like to seek the answers through considering the ways studying American culture can broaden one’s horizons, or rather how it has broadened mine. In addition, I would also like to draw some parallels with issues that are of major concern in Hungary today. In doing so I hope to come to a conclusion regarding whether a scholar who is not affected personally by the consequences of being part of a minority culture can be an authentic voice in addressing the specific problems. I would like to suggest that a possible answer lies in the acquisition of the ability which Judith Fetterley talks about in her essay entitled “Reading about Reading: ‘A Jury of Her Peers’, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, and ‘The Yellow Wallpaper,’” as the ability to read others’ “texts”.

The question arises: Why would a Hungarian student of English in Hungary want to study American culture? What is there about America that can attract the attention of a European with

thousands of years of culture to study? In my experience the ultimate appeal of studying American culture is that it is fundamentally concerned with the question of *identity* (or identities as the case might be). Defining one's personal identity is a universal concern, moreover, it can be a lifetime enterprise, it is thus always a fascinating subject to study or think about. Studying American culture by its nature forces one to reflect on this intricate matter. Several factors including race, gender or social class could be listed regarding what constitutes and forms one's identity; however, I find it more important to emphasise one thing I consider to be paramount in connection with the nature of identity: the fact that it is *never* static or homogeneous. I would like to quote Janice Radway who in her Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, articulates the very essence of what, in my view, identity is:

“...identity must be conceptualized as a specific, always changing relationship to multiple, shifting, imagined communities, communities which, despite the fact that they are always imagined, are situated in specific places at particular moments and amidst particular geographies.”(11)

However, thinking about the United States, which is possibly the most diverse nation in the world, will inevitably lead to asking questions such as "What is it that makes a nation's uniform identity?" "Is there such a thing as 'national identity' at all?" For decades the answer would have seemed obvious and would be given promptly, as scholars, in their trying to define the 'American mind and spirit', were desperate and ready to cling to any definition that reflected one unified, strong nation. As Alice Kessler-Harris puts it: "The eyes with which we [Americans] have seen have desperately wanted to see unity" (Kessler-Harris 340) One might wonder why such a vast nation is so eager to melt its precious diversity into coined ideals and imaginary values attributed to all Americans, and label them with hollow phrases such as the American individualism, pragmatism, optimism, idealism and progress.

To answer I would like to quote Barbara Christian, who in her essay "The Race for Theory" makes the following observation in connection with literary criticism - her observation, can equally be applied to the present question as well: "Variety, multiplicity ...are difficult to control" (286). If we consider the time when Frederick Jackson Turner presented his highly influential paper "The Significance of the Frontier in the American History", by which he created a myth that was prevalent for long decades, we will see that at that time America was just in a period when it needed common ideals and myths. The end of the 19th century was a period of great industrial and intellectual fervour^[1]; the nation's old unifying forces (such as religion) were being more than questioned, so the desire to see one unified nation with a unified mind is understandable. Today, however, we must see and acknowledge the validity of various different cultures that American culture - whatever that may be – consists of. And this is what scholars of the "New Americanist" approach have been trying to do. Robert F. Berkhofer describes this change in the following way:

“The concern with myths, symbols, and images, which marked the classical period of American Studies, has given way to an overwhelming interest in class, ethnicity, race, and gender...The exemplary works have moved from stressing the basic homogeneity of the American mind and uniformity of the American character to noting the diversity of the American population and divisiveness of the American experience.”(280)

There has been a tremendous change in attitude amongst scholars of American Studies. As Enikő Bollobás puts it: "What was taken as 'nationally valid' has turned out to be restricted to a small but powerful segment of society" (2). Today, the main concern is the acknowledgment of the necessity to shift centres from the products of a dominant culture to the also existing, however, so far subordinate culture. The task is to recognise that the American experience is not

necessarily educated, white and male as the old master texts of American culture readily suggested.

The question of identity is also a political concern. Representation is essential, as being represented in society equals existence. Not being represented means being silent and silenced by the majority. Identity is often understood in terms of binary oppositions, as has been the case in American society for decades. In order to support this idea I would like to quote Philip Fisher who in his "Introduction: The New American Studies" observes that after the unifying myths of America had been torn apart, a kind of regionalism emerged resulting in the severe opposition of different minority groups as well as sub- and super ordinate groups:

In the regionalism of the past decades, identity is formed by opposition: black/white, female/male, Native American/settler, gay/heterosexual. Because of this opposition, identity is located above all in the sphere of politics... (xiv)

Fisher here primarily describes the situation in American universities but his observations apply to the whole of American society. Politics here chiefly means laws, movements, representation and the struggle for representation, not only in politics but also in education. Such binary division within a society seems dismissive and aggressive, celebrating drastic separation rather than tolerance. At this point I would like to quote Janice Radway again whose observations regarding the nature of American society and the mechanisms through which identity in the United States is constructed correspond to Fisher's comment quoted above. Radway talks about relations of dominance and oppression which basically amount to what Fisher refers to as "opposition"; as we know that the relationship between heterosexuals and homosexuals/lesbians, whites and blacks, males and females, settlers and Native Americans has not only been oppositional but has also been fundamentally characterised by super- and subordination:

The point I am trying to make here is that the American national identity is constructed in and through relations of difference. As a conceptual entity, it is intricately intertwined with certain alterities which diacritically define it as something that is supposedly normative, normal and central. As a material and social entity, it is brought into being through relations of dominance and oppression, through processes of super- and subordination.

In my experience, pursuing American Studies, one will inevitably encounter all the above issues regarding the question of identity and will certainly be forced to consider these matters in relation to oneself. This way, studying American culture encourages a self-reflexive way of thinking and requires absolute empathy, and thus the not particularly oppressed who have dealt with American Studies will be able to speak for the oppressed, as they will be sensitive enough to perceive problems and instigate solutions.

In the following I would like to briefly focus on Hungary, as I believe the situation here today is in many respects similar to that of the United States. Although Hungary is by no means as diverse in its population as is the United States, here too people suffer from identity crises, even if they do not belong to any of the minorities. The reasons are the same as in America: for ~~decades~~ the ~~unifying~~ ~~ideology~~ which aimed to wipe out all other thought, so in this sense Hungary also had its prevailing myth, namely that of a "people's republic". It is difficult to decide which has been more aggressive: the activity of the Hungarian propagandists, or that of the people who advocated the American dream; but it was equally dismissive of any other approach and it equally disregarded the fact that a nation consists of different types of people. The system deprived people of their own individual myths and tried to replace them with some false ideology (what István Lázár calls the "ideological and political-psychological baggage of the USSR" — 216), which was not theirs. Needless to say, it was all part of Hungary's desperate efforts to join the USSR in its war against the "common enemy." As

a result, Hungarians, having awoken after the collapse of the Soviet Union, all of a sudden found themselves without any governing thought and without a real tradition, which had been carefully eliminated during the previous era.^[ii] For this reason Hungarians today need to reconsider what identity is just like Americans do. I agree with Alice Kessler-Harris when, in her essay “Cultural Locations: Positioning American Studies in the Great Debate”, she suggests that in order to preserve a nation’s cultural unity whilst also doing “justice to the multiplicity of cultures” (339) we have to reconsider what we mean by identity. Unfortunately, she does not engage in possible ~~(ways of about) practice on the American Rag~~ what I would call the exact answer: identity has to be redefined in terms of ever changing and dynamic relationships to communities. And even though Hungary is not nearly as diverse as the United States and the tension between members of different communities is much less severe, Hungary is also a multicultural nation and should think of itself as one.

In the following I would like to recount the experiences I, not belonging to any of the groups that suffer from negative discrimination, had shaping my identity or in connection with the factors that formed and are forming it. I consider it important to point out here that talking about ~~(oppressed groups repeat that by being oppressed I mean having less choice)~~ I do not exclusively mean minority groups. Being a woman in Hungary can mean being oppressed even though women comprise the larger proportion of the population^[iii]. It took me a while to realise that I too live in a multicultural society where not everybody was the same, even though ~~(they best friend the gypsies being nearly on I knew who gypsies were)~~ but I did not think they were in any way different from me. Even when my gypsy classmate was “advised” to attend another school I did not think they were in any way inferior or treated ~~(nationality. Each English student and gypsy)~~ when my gypsy students sit the entrance exam for the university^[iv] tell me how they have been raised being told they would always be expected to work ten times harder to achieve the same as any student who was not of gypsy origin. For a long time I could not tell if somebody was Jewish or not. Now I more or less can and am of two minds about this acquired ability. On the one hand I believe one should not in any way differentiate between one person and the other, whilst on the other hand I suppose not recognising someone’s racial position might equal not acknowledging their culture. So in this respect I very much hold with what Gregory S. Jay in his essay “Taking Multiculturalism Personally” calls “pluralist multiculturalism” (104).

Before going on to discuss the two kinds of multiculturalism, I would like to take a brief detour to make note of the remarkable similarity of experience Gregory S. Jay and I seem to have despite him being the child of a “secular Jewish father and a lapsed Mormon mother” (113). At one point in his life he found himself asking the same questions as I still ask myself, being the daughter of white, educated parents coming from a family with generations of teachers, lawyers and engineers:^[v] “Did I have a race or ethnicity, a gender or sexual orientation a class or a nationality? Was my cultural identity singular or plural? And was it something I got by inheritance and imposition, or something I could choose and alter at my will? Who was I that I hadn’t had a cultural identity crisis?” (113) He also gives the answer to why these questions in my case arose:

... persons who see themselves as very similar to the dominant cultural imaginary do not experience themselves as having a cultural identity, since in their eyes they are not ‘different.’ (117)

However, knowing the reason does not suffice. It still does not give me an identity. I am a Gypsy in the sense that I find the search for freedom to be the governing principle of my life. I am Christian in the sense that I value human life above all. I am Jewish in the sense that I find charity to be of supreme importance and a duty everyone should perform. I am pagan in the sense that I believe one should sense the vibrations and pulsations of the universe and breathe

together with the earth. However, I cannot claim to belong fully to any of these communities. In one of my history lessons at school my class was learning about the Holocaust and why it happened. My teacher was explaining the Aryan theory and she all of a sudden pointed at me saying in a most appreciative tone: “She is a typical Aryan, look at her”. I thought her behaviour was revolting as I thought it was unacceptably discriminative, and yet for a second it gave me the comfort of belonging somewhere. As I know that not belonging to any minority group can be as much a burden as a privilege, I consider myself to be able to empathise to a great degree with people who as a result of their oppressed position suffer from identity crises. Thus, I suppose I am entitled to speak, moreover it is my duty to raise my voice for the oppressed even though I do not totally share their experience.

Let me now return to the two kinds of multiculturalism Jay talks about. He describes one that celebrates difference, what he calls the pluralist approach, and one that is more concerned with fighting oppression which “rather than accepting the borders between cultural groups, it insists on analysing how cultural divisions are constructed historically through racist politics...” (104). The latter brand of multiculturalism seems to aim at the ultimate demolition of the borders between cultural groups and regards them to be purely a make of intolerant policies of intolerant people. I am still at a loss to come to a conclusion regarding this matter – that is whether to accept borders or not – as I can see both parties’ reasons. This seems to be an irresolvable dilemma. And so does the question of whether the scholar who is not oppressed is in the position (of speaking for) the oppressed. Is it better to be an outsider and be more objective perhaps not genuinely involved? Is one able to fully understand people with whom one does not share basic experiences? Or is it absolutely necessary for one to be gay, lesbian, Gypsy, black — that is, to have first-hand experience?

I would propose that there are no rules and no straightforward answers in this question. Whilst to an outsider it may be more convincing to hear a “person of colour” (to be politically correct) on the subject of racial discrimination, there is always a chance that the person in question might not be able to distance themselves from the subject to any degree, and so they might find themselves doing more harm than good simply by being biased or too emotional. On the other hand, a “white” person (whatever that might mean) may not sound “authentic” on the subject. But the situation is further complicated by a combination of the two positions: not involved directly but ~~emotionally overreacting~~ ^{emotionally overreacting} that show how controversial a matter this is. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is a distinguished scholar of “Queer Theory”. She shows as much emotional concern as one would if directly involved in the matter. She in a large number of her works is primarily concerned with gay men. Yet, despite her obviously lacking in male gay experience, she seems rather involved emotionally in the subject. To demonstrate her concern let me refer to her “Introduction: Axiomatic” in which she talks about how ignorance “competes with knowledge in mobilizing the flows of energy” (4)

~~Department is used gives 986) example~~ ^{Department is used gives 986) example} of how the U.S. Justice ~~Employment as they clearly fired gay employees with the~~ ^{Employment as they clearly fired gay employees with the} medical fact. I do share Sedgwick’s indignation by how Americans institutionalised ignorance ~~is an excuse for firing people with Ayling~~ ^{is an excuse for firing people with Ayling} that this act is the “ostentatious declaration, for the private sector, of an organized open season on gay men” she gives the impression that it is only gay men who are threatened by this unacceptable law. It is true, however, that in a footnote she adds it is not only gay men who become victims of this ruling but I should think this remark is more significant than being just a sentence in a footnote, which the reader may or may not read. The reason for this is the mere fact that it sounds slightly biased to claim – as the main body of the text without the footnote seems to suggest – that a measure is exclusively aimed against a certain group of people when it obviously affects members of various other groups as well. I believe that one – let alone a scholar – cannot afford to be or even to sound biased as by doing so they can influence the reception and consideration

of the subject they advocate in a negative way. Another rather astonishing statement Sedgwick makes at the very beginning of her introduction is the following:

The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture *must be*, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition; (1, *italics mine*)

This statement sounds so aggressive that one begins to wonder whether the author forgot to insert “unless” or “if” somewhere in the sentence. Even if her claim happens to be true, as the case must have been, I do not think it justifiable to adopt such tone, as it is unlikely to promote the case. Based on the above Sedgwick might be considered as a witness for both the prosecution and the defence. I would also like to refer to the academic debate between Barbara Christian and Michael Awkward on literary theory. Both scholars are non-white, thus very sensitive to the subject, yet Awkward seems considerably more “sober” than Christian. I do agree with Christian on the beginning issues she tackles academic literary theory and also her reluctance to produce one almighty black feminist literary theory that would encompass everything that should be read overriding anger because it makes her sound bitter and biased. She is so much preoccupied with her emotional reaction to the subject that she declares what she considers to be facts without making an effort to support her ideas with examples, thus depriving her case from a sound base. Michael Awkward’s reasoning on the other hand sounds calm and logical, and what is more important, persuasive.

Based on the above examples, I would say that any scholar who will engage in speaking for the voiceless, regardless of whether they have or lack first-hand experience of the subject they address, has to choose their tone and volume carefully to make sure the ones in power will listen.

Finally, let me turn to women, as being female is at last something I have direct experience of. To many, feminism is a rather suspicious term, especially in Hungary, as people more often than not have vague, sometimes wild ideas about what it may be and will automatically condemn anybody who is in any way involved in it. On hearing the word “feminist” there will immediately appear a floating image in people’s minds of a wild and aggressive woman who is (Sadly, unfortunately, is not white, but brown people have this concept of the “feminist” woman.) For years I could not understand feminism at all. I could not identify with any of its issues and kept asking: “What’s wrong here, what is there to fight for?” My puzzle was obviously due to my lack of experience and my want of awareness of what feminism was rooted in. The people who will frown at feminism similarly have no experience and factual knowledge concerning this matter, and, as a consequence, cannot understand it. Thus, I consider the works of Nina Baym, Welter paramount for their informative role and believe that the roots and aims of feminism should be widely understood, just like the works of Kate Gilks and Barbara Surber Gilks. I do not but I do not but declare myself to be a feminist. I will, nevertheless, always add that in my lexis “feminism” means being sensitive to women’s problems arising from their position in society, and it does not necessarily mean being an advocate of total emancipation and by no means does it mean being anti-male. I often find myself thinking emancipation is not an altogether positive thing as its distorted execution results in women often being treated rudely, even crudely, which insults me as a woman even if I am not personally involved in the incident. Some (men and women as well) might say “that’s what women wanted, so that’s what they get: being treated as equals”.

However, I am not quite sure *this* is what women have been fighting for, and reading Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True womanhood: 1820-1860" makes me think that I too would have been utterly revolted by the ideal imposed upon me by a fundamentally patriarchal society had I lived one, two or three hundred years ago. Yet another parallel can be drawn between the situation in the U.S and in Hungary. This time the parallel involves women. Linda Kerber in her essay "Can a Woman Be an individual? The Discourse of Self-Reliance" gives a comprehensive overview of how the old American master texts eliminated the idea of women as individuals. Also, the fact that women are practically not included in the American literary canon and that women could not be the protagonists of any of the highly thought of texts shows, as Nina Baym put it, "that the matter of American experience is inherently male" (222).

Reading *The Corvina Book of Hungarian Verse* is a similarly shocking experience: there is just one woman poet amongst the thirty-seven poets it includes. [vi] On top of this, it is a bilingual anthology, which means that any foreigner who happens to be interested in Hungarian poetry will get the impression that Hungary had only one woman poet since the 1th century. This is the image we export to the world. One might still ask: why is this important at all? Why would Kosofsky Sedgwick be presented on the literary, social or political scene? Eve gives the answer when explaining how men in communicating with women, by claiming to be ignorant of women's discourse, can be dominant in defining the terms of exchange. She quotes Sally M^cConnel-Ginet:

...men, with superior extra-linguistic resources and privileged discourse positions, are often less likely to treat perspectives different from their own as mutually available for communication' their attitudes are 'thus more likely to leave a lasting imprint on the common semantic stock than women's.' (4)

Remaining silent can be a form of protest and can indeed be effective. Being silenced, however, and, as a consequence, not having an influence on the general terms of communication means being paralysed, as no problems can be tackled without effective communication. This is why it is important, what is more, essential to be verbally represented – because it can and often does mean survival.

In the above pages I ventured to consider various questions of forming ones identity mainly based on my personal experiences. I tried to consider whether scholars, who are in the position to make their voice heard but might lack first-hand experience, can speak for the oppressed whilst also reflecting on the objectivity and validity of the judgement of those personally involved. I tried to look at this from my perspective in studying American culture, and endeavoured to show how it can help one in developing sensitivity towards problems resulting from super- and subordinate positions in a society. To conclude I would like to say that it is a definite duty of any scholar to be a medium between these super- and subordinate groups. In addition to this, I also believe that by being fundamentally about the question of identity American Studies will inevitably make one reconsider one's position as an individual in relation to others, as a member of a society. This way, through developing empathy towards other individuals, one will be able to read their texts; and the more texts one is able to decipher, the more successful one will be in communication and addressing problems. I would like to finish off by quoting Janice Radway who articulates what I consider the most important idea every society should acknowledge as a first step towards becoming multicultural: "Identity is never unitarily achieved, as a result, not even by the claims of nationalism." (12).

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2001 CIA World Fact book. 2

www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/hu.html

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[i] Against a background of the new Darwinism, Marxism, Socialism — and revolutions in Europe, actual and attempted.

[ii] I will not expand here on all the tensions that had built up as a result of an imposed, false (so)city based on an alien ideology that was contrary to all Hungarian tradition were suddenly released and they culminated in an unbound race for possession and also massive crime.

[iii] There are approximately 10 Hungary (0.91 men : 1 woman) (CIA World Factbook) 2001

[iv] I did not realise the weight of this until I read an article in *The Economist* about the situation of European gipsy children. According to the article one third of them *never*(attend school. *The Economist*30)

[v] By saying this I only wish to indicate the rather fortunate and by no means racially oppressed position of my family. Although being well-mannered and coming from an educated background – let alone being a member of the aristocracy – doomed anyone *persona non grata* in the Communist era in Hungary. But I am far too young to have experienced what it meant to be a “class alien”, as such people were labelled.

[vi] Needless to say all the editors of the anthology are male.
