

# The Matter of Tongues

by L. Timmel Duchamp

*Being Her GoH Speech for WisCon 32, May 25, 2008*

Earlier this month, when I was almost finished writing this speech, I dreamed a dream. In this dream, I was wandering about in an arcade, searching for a restroom. I really needed it, though not for the usual reason. As often happens in dreams, though I went to the place where I knew one to be, it was closed. I was desperate to find it, because I needed to get rid of the thick wad of tongues crowding my mouth. Not only because I had an appointment, but because the feel of them in my mouth was disgusting. But I couldn't find an open restroom. So finally I grabbed a handful of napkins from an espresso cart and tried as discreetly as possible to remove the tongues and slipped them into my pocket for later retrieval (since *obviously* I'd want them back again). I then looked around, trying to discover if anyone had seen me, when I realized I still had too many tongues in my mouth. I hated to be doing this in public; it felt indecent. But I couldn't locate the restroom, and the tongues really had to come out. So again I held a sheaf of napkins to my mouth and pulled out the excess tongues, and put them in my other pocket. And so it went, until finally I woke up.

I puzzled over the dream's meaning for a couple of days before I realized that it not only expressed my anxieties about writing and giving the speech, but also addressed its subject matter. What I'm going to talk about tonight are stories, mostly in the humble plural rather than the usual, exalted singular, stories and the politics of intelligibility. For the tongues in my dream represented types of stories. Stories are something humans enjoy an abundance of. But they're not always the stories we need, and sometimes, when they are, they're not necessarily the stories others can understand. Stories, in that sense, are similar to the tongues in the Tower of Babel. Across the breadth of their diversity, they aren't all universally intelligible.

## I.

Like—I'm sure—everyone else sitting in this room, I've always loved stories. As a young girl I loved the stories in books, and I loved the stories the adults around me told. My German-American grandfather had a trove of stories about his young adult life as a migrant worker, moving from ranch to ranch and farm to farm in Midwestern Canada and the northern US, and about his boyhood and adolescence in Bear Creek and Appleton, Wisconsin. Again and again my brother and I would ask him to tell our favorites, which I later realized we loved because they conjured up a world very different from the one we knew. His stories evoked a social setting ruled by its own particular conventions, featuring characters who were types rather than personalities. The main actors in his stories offered a recurring cast of those types, showing up in this setting or that—most notably, the Rancher or Farmer, the Rancher or Farmer's Wife, the Frenchman, the Swede, the Englishman, the schoolteacher, the traveling salesman, the doctor. Each telling constituted a performance, full of particular words—used always at the same moment—as well as sound effects like HOL-Y MOSES! inserted for dramatic effect at the exact right moment. I'm sure the other adults present must have thought, each time we begged him to perform a favorite, Not again! But Grandpa delighted in humoring us and always took care not to omit the parts of the stories we considered essential.

While many of the stories I've loved have been stories about places and people utterly unlike me, as a child I was also eager to hear, read, or discover stories that showed me particular parts of *myself*, stories that explained to me who I was and might some day be, stories that offered me a way of understanding the many experiences and feelings that filled me with confusion. The stories I encountered in print never quite fit who I was, but hungry, I lapped them up and used bits of them, the way children do, and reveled in the joys of immersion in another world than the one I lived in.

Notoriously, second wave feminists placed great emphasis on the importance of role models for young women, mostly because the 1950s removed a lot of them from common visibility. As a girl, my role models were my grandmother, who was a strong, extraordinary woman; Mildred Heidorn, who taught me music theory and directed the high school orchestra; and Beethoven. I needed Beethoven, you see, because I aspired to be a composer, an ambition Mildred Heidorn encouraged me to pursue. But when in 1968 at

age eighteen I went to university to study music, I found my aspirations under attack by the unwritten sexist rules of the composition faculty. They would not, you see, allow me the official status they were happy to grant any *male* student who wanted it. The examples of my grandmother, Mildred Heidorn, and Beethoven offered me no help. Still, for about a year I thought I would manage to work a way around those unwritten rules. Each term I petitioned to study with a composer on the faculty, and I independently found musicians who were undergraduate and graduate students to perform my pieces; and although the senior faculty men did not take me seriously, many younger musicians did. It was a psychologically precarious situation, but I thought my strategy was working brilliantly when in May 1970 I was invited to have a piece performed off-campus with several other composers who were mostly graduate students and post-docs, in three performances at an art gallery. My piece was so well-received that it was put on the department's annual program, presenting work from young faculty and a few undergraduates, held a couple of weeks later. I was ecstatic. I vividly remember walking to my lesson the day after the concert, bursting with confidence, armed with the score of my piece as my teacher had requested. Now, I thought, he will take me seriously and convince his colleagues to give me the same status as the male undergraduate composers. But my lesson went differently than I had imagined. Doodling cartoons on the score, my teacher informed me that although my piece had been well-received by the audience, its success had been a fluke. Gently he asked me why the post-docs who'd put my piece on the program at the art gallery had done so and why the musicians, all notable new music performers, had chosen to play it. Bravely I replied that they said they thought it was good. His smile as he shook his head looked kind, and his tone when he spoke in his light, tenor voice was mild. But his words put a knife in my heart. They all want to go to bed with you, he said. The expression on his face was avuncular: he was telling me this for my own good, to drag me out of my state of denial. And then he sighed, clipped his pen back into his pocket, and handed me the defaced score. It's too nice a day to have a lesson, don't you think? Let's go to Treno's for a beer.

I was devastated. I needed more in a role model than Beethoven, someone to show me how to persevere and build on my success and talent despite the opposition I faced. Beethoven had never had to worry about whether people pretended to like his music just because they wanted to touch his breasts. (The desire of all the men around me to touch my breasts was something my teacher

mentioned as we were having that beer.) I know that this sort of experience was commonplace, but at the time, I knew no stories like it. Of course, just ten years later, everything would have been different. But in 1970, the stories I needed weren't there for me. You see, I had no trouble believing him when he let me know that he'd agreed to teach me because he wanted to fuck me. And because there were no other women composing music on that campus, and the expression "sexual harassment" hadn't yet been invented, and there were no stories to give me another perspective, I believed that he must be right, that the musicians and other composers were only playing me. In hindsight, I can see that I was wrong. They did take me seriously. And though I didn't know it, things had already begun to change. But Beethoven's story couldn't help me see anything but that my experience was nothing like his had been. I lost faith in my own talent. I never again finished another composition.

## II.

For most of my twenties, I especially sought out stories that could show me who I was and might some day be. But gradually I became more interested in the stories that offered me a way of understanding my experiences and feelings. I had always sought such stories, but these became more important as my need for role models diminished. It was around that time that, as I began to figure out aspects of my childhood experiences that puzzled me, I noticed how limited and narrow the range of available stories actually is. Very little of any of the experiences of my family were well-represented in fiction, for instance. Eventually I realized that I had been rendered silent about most of my own history because any attempt to convey it to others inevitably resulted in their understanding it in a very partial, distorted way: my father, the uneducated anti-union factory foreman who worked the night shift, cooked all our meals, and considered physical violence an appropriate form for disciplining children; my mother, the failed housewife but brilliant bookkeeper elevated to comptroller who successively saved two businessmen from bankruptcy and made them millionaires while ending up working long past retirement age because she didn't want to retire into poverty; our strange family life as nonconformists and fundamentalist Lutherans—each discrete fragment able to fit into existing stereotypes and tropes while evoking absolutely nothing

of the emotional and social experience of growing up working class in 1950s America, much less of who my parents were as human beings. Most of the stories I'd ever read about working class lives were written through the lens of middle-class narratives—leaving out all the impossible to articulate bits, the parts that made it impossible for me to talk intelligibly about my childhood. I thought—I assumed—I would be able to find a way to make the invisible intelligible.

Well, I suppose it's necessary to be naïve about writing when you're first beginning. What I didn't understand was that the novel, as a form, is stamped with and shaped by middle class values. Violating those values tends to result in boring or implausible or polemical narratives. Occasionally a writer is able to break out of the constraints, but usually by building a context of exceptionality that allows readers to ignore what they don't get. Carol Maso's novel, *Defiance*, offers a brilliant example of that. Her protagonist, a Harvard professor of physics straight out of the working class, murders two of her privileged male students. But I have to wonder if the bits that struck me as brilliant evocations are even intelligible to a reader without a working-class background. My suspicion is that most readers focus on the sensational aspects of a woman murdering young men she has had sex with and ignore everything else.

*Intelligibility*. I keep using that word. It's an important concept for a writer, *intelligibility*. Another way to think of it is in terms of *translatability*. Can all concepts be translated from one language to another? Some people claim that they can, but certain ways of looking at the world, embedded in culture, are in practice incommensurable. And concepts always partake of assumptions about the world and how it operates. Eric Cheyfitz, a scholar of Native American Studies, notes that much of the conquest of North America was accomplished by utilizing European concepts and terms that had no equivalents in Native American languages while assuming, at the same time, a conceptual universality that, when not understood by the Native Americans, was taken as proof of their not being fully human. Cheyfitz writes,

We need to ask ourselves . . . what words or phrases in the Algonquian languages . . . could translate “the right of possession,” “the right of property,” and “actual possession,” explaining the always potential disjunction between the three phrases, such that the three have to be united *in one person* for a fully legal “title” to exist.

And so, Cheyfitz wonders,

How does one translate ideas of place grounded in conceptions of communal or social labor into ideas of place grounded in the notion of *identity*? The problem is not . . . how does one translate radically different systems of *property* into one another. But can one translate the idea of places as *property* into an idea of place the terms of which the West has never granted legitimacy?

Let's go back to my story about my being barred from entering a program open to any male student who wished to enter it. Although it's a story unlikely to ever happen now, partly because such discrimination is illegal and partly because gender norms have altered, it is still at least partially intelligible to almost anyone I might tell it. Not everyone would understand why official exclusion and sexual harassment blocked me from ever writing music again, but most people hearing the story will think that sex discrimination is wrong and harmful. Some people may find me culpable for having been paralyzed with helplessness and not having figured out a way to challenge the institutional structure I was up against—perhaps because they have no idea how nearly impossible that would have been for any nineteen-year-old with a working-class upbringing to do, or perhaps because they have no clue about the totalizing effects of constant, unrelenting institutionalized sexism for women living in the 1950s and 1960s. But even if their understanding of the story is only partial, they will *get* that there is a story there. But a story about class-, race-, or gender-based institutional exclusion, arbitrary or otherwise, would be incomprehensible to an early eighteenth-century European, for instance. What narrative worth telling *is* there? Some people—all women and all but a few elite men—are naturally excluded from an academic course of study. That some fool of a young girl who ought to be laboring in the fields or toiling in the kitchen has her pretensions poked by exclusion offers no narrative tension or interest.

The intelligibility of any given story is clearly situational. I would argue that often it is also political, in the sense that lack of comprehension of certain stories is an artifact of privilege of one sort or another and often serves to protect that privilege. The unintelligibility of the Alonquians' idea of place to the seventeenth-century Europeans, for instance, meant that as far as the Europeans were concerned, the land they coveted was unowned and thus there to be seized. A less obvious case, closer to home, can be seen in the reception

of Karen Joy Fowler's feminist sf story, "What I Didn't See." The story is fully intelligible only to readers who have read a lot of feminist science fiction. Those who haven't tend to assert that it's a mainstream literary story. While it's possible to read it that way, such a reading is partial and distorted and misses the actual subject-matter of the story altogether. The problem of the story's intelligibility generated an uproar of Internet discussion for more than a month after it was first posted on SciFiction.com. Over the years, several people have told me that it is not reasonable for an author to expect readers to have read such a specialized area of the genre as feminist sf. I've long argued that it will be necessary to have something called feminist sf for as long as the major works of feminist sf aren't absorbed into the genre's canon. And so I would also argue that the insistence that it ought not to be necessary to have read the most famous story James Tiptree Jr wrote, simply in order to understand another story—a story that happens to have been awarded a Nebula—is political. I mean, really. Would any sf fan or critic claim that it was unreasonable to expect readers to be familiar with, say, "I, Robot?" Or with "By His Bootstraps?" Or with "The Nine Billion Names of God"? The attitude that considers a precursor text like "The Women Men Don't See" obscure and outside the common sf reading vocabulary is saying, we aren't interested in a whole set of stories that have been developed in the area of the genre dominated by women, and we shouldn't be expected to be familiar with them.

In the case of the sex discrimination and sexual harassment I experienced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the story I tell now would have been unintelligible to my composition teacher. From his perspective, I was a nubile girl who was exhibiting herself in a public space that was traditionally reserved for men, someone whose attempt to write music was the equivalent of a dog walking on its hind legs, wearing eyeglasses, and smoking a pipe. Someone who was breaking the rules. Someone who was just asking for it. Perhaps he believed what he told me, that the younger men just wanted an opportunity to hit on me; perhaps he didn't and was angry at the younger men for breaking ranks. The point of his lesson was to make me see that the cost of my venture into a male-only public space carried a steep price. And since I did not understand that he and I were involved in a political contest, his tactic worked.

Stories are, of course, both entertainment and art. And story—in the singular, in the sense of narrative—is a key conceptual tool for historians and social scientists. But story can also be a form of political expression that has its

own virtues apart from other forms of political activism and can do things that other kinds of activism can't; most of the national literature of many countries evinces a deep consciousness of this aspect of story.

I see three distinct political aspects to the issue of story and stories for feminists. First, it is tremendously important that we expand the range of stories we tell and re-tell. It is not good enough that people—especially children—who do not see themselves in the stories they read and hear and see must make do with bits and pieces of stories that don't quite fit their identities or experiences. Second, the problem of intelligibility reflects the usually imperceptible influence of privilege that allows those who are “normal” and unmarked by difference to assume that whenever they don't get a story or understand the other's anger that there's nothing there *to* get. Third, the intelligibility of stories depends on community. Community—both imagined and material—provides the basis for shared stories, shared narrative conventions and tropes, shared meaning. “A community,” writes poet Lyn Hejinian, “consists of any or all of those persons who have the capacity to acknowledge what others among them are doing.” Take the example of Karen Joy Fowler's story, “What I Didn't See.” In Karen's words, she wrote that story after “swimming in the sea of feminist sf for thirty years.” Those who have the capacity to acknowledge what Karen is doing in this story are the community who swim in that sea. This notion of community explains also why it is that at WisCon we don't need to restrict ourselves to discussing “Women in SF” or try to explain our ideas in terms of Feminism IOI. *Who* is included in a community determines which stories can become intelligible within that community, for communities, of course, are made, not born. Feminists who read feminist science fiction often feel as though they have become part of a community, engaged in a spatially expansive, temporally extended conversation, even when they have not become part of the material feminist sf community that does exist. This is because feminist thought and practice is inherently collective, and because “getting it”—another way of talking about intelligibility—is all tied up with an alternative set of shared perceptions and ideas to that of male-dominated, mainstream culture.

### III.

When I'm out in the “real world” and people ask me why I started Aqueduct, I talk about Aqueduct's serving a small audience and sometimes



cop to being a “niche publisher.” But I have another, more productive way of looking at this that more accurately envisions my feminist desire to contribute to the making of our world. An important part of the answer hinges on the politics of intelligibility. Many stories that feminists write—or *would* write if there were a market for them—are stories that are penalized in the mainstream for being unintelligible to readers who haven’t gotten past Feminism IOI. Such stories are often unintelligible because their assumptions about race or class or sexual or gender identity depart from those of the mainstream, so that even the editors who “get” the stories consider them not right for the venue’s readership. And some stories can also be unintelligible because they haven’t been simplified and dumbed-down for the lowest-common denominator. The point of *Aqueduct* is to expand the range of stories being told and to extend the range of such stories’ intelligibility.

For me, the summer of 2003 was a momentous turning point. As you may recall, the US was in the throes of post-9/11 paranoia and nationalism, and the changed atmosphere seemed to be having a chilling effect on some of the fiction markets I had previously sold to. For years I’d been worrying that in my fiction I was, as some of my fellow writers had been telling me, setting the bar too high. The question haunted me: ought I not to make my stories less challenging, less complicated, and more conventional? And later, beginning in 2002, I began asking myself: ought I to try to make my stories more ideologically comfortable in these post-9/11 times? Although I had been wrestling with the problem for years, I always came back to the thought that my passion for writing flows from my intense interest in relationships and situations and characters that don’t fit the usual narratives.

That summer of 2003 I attended my first writing workshop and learned a great deal about which stories are easily understood and which aren’t and ended up thinking hard about what made certain stories unintelligible to some of its readers. I realized that stories based on the most common narratives, usually about white heterosexual males, were the ones that were least likely to be misread. My thoughts resonated powerfully with the questions about my writing that had been haunting me, and my sense of crisis about my own writing career intensified. About a month after the workshop, I attended Samuel R. Delany’s *Clarion West* reading. During the Q&A, he named my stories as among his current favorites (without having any idea I was in the audience). We then met for the first time, and it was an awesome experience.

Every doubt I'd had about my work vanished. I absolutely must, he said, get my novels into print. And he lit a fire under me.

About a month after that, in an email Karen Joy Fowler mentioned having read a novel manuscript by Gwyneth Jones that Gwyneth said was "unpublishable." Karen had no idea when she praised the ms to me that I was thinking of starting Aqueduct. That ms, though, was the novel that Aqueduct published a year later under the title *Life*. It is clear to me from some of the comments I've heard about *Life* and also from many of the reviews of it that it's a story that's not intelligible to everyone. And yet, I saw on my first reading that it is a story that needs to be told and one of the stories we all need to know and understand. Add to all that my consciousness of Kelly Link and Gavin Grant's daring experiment with Small Beer Press, which made me see that I could invent my own alternative as well, and somehow the pieces all came together to create the imperative of starting Aqueduct, which I then did.

The strength of feminist science fiction, the strength of WisCon, which has become the living, beating heart of feminist science fiction must always lie in its capacity to allow us to frame and tell and share the stories we need and desire that aren't necessarily easily heard or understood outside our community. The continued frustration expressed by women writers over the exclusionary policies of certain publishing venues most surely has to do with intelligibility rather than the gendered statistics of submission. Obviously we must keep insisting that our work become a recognized, intelligible part of mainstream sf. But for me, it is equally obvious that we must also continue the process of telling our own stories and learning to recognize and understand the stories of one another that we don't yet know or understand.

Community isn't simply togetherness: it's above all an active process of making the world collectively. For the grand conversation that is feminist sf, telling and learning new stories is key. The stories our community tells and understands show us who we are; the stories we tell show us who we can be.

