



Antiracist Approaches to Reading, Writing, and Teaching Fiction and Memoir

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Review of

Mura, David. *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity, and Narrative Craft in Writing*. University of Georgia Press, 2018. 262 pages.

In *A Stranger's Journey*, David Mura presents a series of linked essays that argue for a more deliberate and critical awareness of race in the process of writing and teaching creative writing. This is undoubtedly a timely and valuable book that contributes to a growing body of research in the analysis of race and its representations. It will serve any writer or teacher who seeks to deepen their awareness of craft, writing process, and pedagogy, and it will be of particular interest to those who focus on fiction, memoir, diversity, and antiracism.

Mura critiques fictional representations of race and ethnicity that omit identifying markers for whiteness, presume a character is white unless identified otherwise, and rely upon cliché and stereotype to convey non-white characters. He argues that such uncritical habits of craft, particularly in realist fiction, reveal not only an author's presumption of a white reader, a presumption that Toni Morrison eloquently critiques in her book *Playing in the Dark*, but also a racist aesthetic and political orientation that preserves the status quo of white supremacy. Fiction, he argues, should be grounded in the recognition of human diversity, an appreciation for racial and ethnic plurality, and an awareness of multiple readers with divergent worldviews. Whiteness must be named and interrogated, he suggests, just as aggressively as any other racial identity.

Citing exemplars such as James Baldwin, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shawn Wong, and ZZ Packer, Mura argues persuasively that fiction has the capacity to challenge established conceptualizations of identity, if writers deliberately read their characters, their craft, and themselves through the lens of race. Mindful engagement with such issues enhances the artistry of a story, deepens the story's value, and leads both writer and reader to a greater knowledge of the world and themselves.

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Mura holds fast to his belief that writing requires self-exploration and self-awareness. That is the nature of the writer's journey, and Mura would have us believe that such a pursuit should be encouraged by those who teach creative writing. So, it is highly problematic, he explains, when MFA faculty avoid critical discussions of race. Issues of aesthetics, craft, and race are not mutually exclusive, but intimately linked. So, if a professor has not studied writers of color, trained to recognize the complex issues surrounding literary representations of race, or prepared to confront racist habits of thought and craft apparent in the work of their students, then all students will be at a severe disadvantage and writers of color will find themselves silenced and alienated within their own MFA programs. Mura claims that this "is symptomatic and revelatory of the ways the voices and consciousness of people of color are suppressed in our society" (53).

To creative writing faculty, Mura advises that they study writers of color, learn from their students' experiences, avoid prejudice and presumption, and practice humility. He urges them to recognize the intimate bond between "the political and the aesthetic" (77).

A Stranger's Journey also includes for student writers of color "a manual for battle and survival" (53). How should a writer of color respond when a white student uses stereotypes in their work but denies it; when a professor ignores, reprimands, or alienates the writer of color for their critique; or when the MFA program itself marginalizes or avoids any study of race as it relates to aesthetics, craft, critique, or practice? Mura advises students to choose their battles.

Students of color, you are not crazy or misperceiving what is before and around you. You are in hostile territory. You are in a battle. In many MFA programs, your presence, your mind, and your creativity represent an alien presence, at odds with the powers that be. You can choose not to fight certain battles. You can wait until you are in a more secure position or a position of power. In the meantime, keep writing. Stay strong. You're not alone. (61)

Although Mura expresses great empathy and support for student writers of color, in the end, he seems to recommend moderation and a strategic disengagement from the conflicts that may arise.

A major shift occurs after the first quarter of the book; this is where Mura pivots to issues of craft. He has much to say about the choices a writer might make to present a compelling and structured story in which a fictional protagonist or an autobiographical subject overcomes obstacles and achieves a sought-after goal. For some readers, this material may seem rather fundamental. We are no doubt already familiar with the principles of dramatic conflict and narrative voice. However, what may be new here is Mura's suggestion that characters in both fiction and memoir confront themselves and move from a state of self-deception to a state of self-recognition. By analyzing the works of Sherman Alexie, Junot Díaz, Vivian Gornick, Maxine Hong Kingston, and others, Mura shows us how a sort of double-voicing exists in the best of stories. In fiction, the dialectic

may be between the hidden, true character and their image or façade. In memoir, the dialectic may be between the self that is narrating in retrospect and the self of the past. Mura is interested in the seemingly irreconcilable impulses or desires that inform such dialectics—and the potential within story to resolve this internal conflict so that in the end a protagonist or autobiographical self is no longer concealed or impeded by lies but reveals a true self.

As the protagonist pursues the goal and runs into failure and frustration and difficult choices, these blows of reality make the protagonist aware of his limitations, his foibles and faults. Each blow then chips away at the protagonist's imago, at his projected self-image. (123)

The protagonist of fiction and the subject of memoir reckon with the true self. There is an honesty about this that Mura appreciates. But what has this to do with race?

Just as the fictional protagonist or autobiographical subject confronts external and internal obstacles, engaged in a journey toward greater authenticity, truth, and self-knowledge, so too, Mura argues, the writer's creative process requires a certain level of struggle and confrontation with one's own biases, prejudices, expectations, or limitations. Such journeys require us to examine and challenge norms and assumptions about racial or ethnic identities, so that we may view our work, our worlds, and ourselves critically through the lens of race. We will have changed irrevocably in the process, and we will have achieved enlightenment and humility. Story, then, offers fictional protagonists, memoir subjects, and writers alike the opportunity to pursue knowledge and insight into issues of identity. This, Mura suggests, is a most necessary pursuit.

In a less theoretical and more practical mode, Mura provides seven writing assignments in his Appendix to help writers 1) reflect upon their creative writing process, 2) to explore their own identities and histories, 3) rewrite a scene concentrating on one aspect of the scene at a time, 4) use a timeline to recognize the key elements in narrative structure, 5) use a writer's checklist of craft elements, 6) journal about a problem that may be blocking the creative process, and 7) discern how they themselves must change in order to finish writing the fiction or memoir. The assignments are well conceived and highly adaptable, and they speak to Mura's experience as a creative writing teacher.

Mura is well qualified to offer us reflections on creative writing craft and process as well as the pedagogies of the creative writing workshop, with special insight into the experiences of writers of color. Since he took his BA at Grinnell College and his MFA in creative writing at Vermont College, he has taught creative writing at Hamline University, VONA (Voices of Our Nations Arts), and the Stonecoast MFA program. He has also established himself as an accomplished writer of fiction, memoir, poetry, drama, and literary criticism. He has received numerous awards and accolades, including a US/Japan Creative Artist Fellowship, two NEA Literature Fellowships, two Bush

Foundation Fellowships, four Loft-McKnight Awards, several Minnesota State Arts Board grants, and a Discovery/The Nation Award. His novel, *Famous Suicides of the Japanese Empire* (Coffee House Press, 2008), received critical attention, as did his four books of poetry, the first of which, *After We Lost Our Way* (Carnegie Mellon U. Press, 1989), won the National Poetry Series Contest, and the second of which *The Colors of Desire* (Anchor), won the Carl Sandburg Literary Award from the Friends of the Chicago Public Library in 1995. His memoirs, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (which was awarded the Josephine Miles Book Award from the Oakland PEN and listed in the New York Times Notable Books of Year in 1991) and *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality and Identity* (published by Anchor in 1996), explore his experience as a sansei, a third-generation Japanese American, and his book of literary criticism, *Song for Uncle Tom, Tonto & Mr. Moto: Poetry & Identity* (University of Michigan Press, Poets on Poetry series, 2002), delivers a close reading of racial representations in poetry.

A Stranger's Journey is highly readable and insightful. It brings together Mura's observations about antiracist approaches to reading, writing, and teaching fiction and memoir. Although the essays on craft seem at times disconnected from those on race, the content of the book does support his initial hypothesis about the writer's journey: "If writing is a search for language, it is also a search for identity. We write to articulate who we are, to describe our sense of the world."