

Josh Lukin

The Wiggle Room of Theory: An Interview with Samuel Delany

To many, Samuel Delany is the radical gay black New York critic who has written on the roles of race, sexual orientation, New York City, and semiotics in his life and in American society. He has appeared in documentaries about the city. In 1993 he won the William Whitehead Memorial Award for a Lifetime's Contribution to Lesbian and Gay Writing and this year won the Lambda Literary Foundation's Pioneer Award. His 1987 book *The Motion of Light in Water* is a classic of African-American autobiography, and his bestselling volume of sexual memoir and urban sociology, *Time Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), is a staple of queer theory courses. But Delany is probably best known for his novels. Styling himself a Marxist, but deeply influenced by Foucault and deconstruction, his class-conscious and poststructuralist sensibilities are reflected in his science fiction and fantasy works, such as *Dhalgren* (1975) and the four-volume *Return to Nevèrjon* (1979-87).

Born in 1942 and educated at the Bronx High School of Science, with a single term at CUNY constituting his experience as a university student, Delany published his first novel at the age of twenty and lived for over twenty years as a professional writer before becoming a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts in 1988. He has taught at Wesleyan, SUNY-Buffalo, SUNY-Albany, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Minnesota, and Cornell. His many science fiction novels include *Nova* (1970), *Trouble on Triton* (1976), and *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* (1984). His volumes of memoir are *Heavenly Breakfast* (1979) and the graphic novella *Bread and Wine* (1999). He has also published three pornographic novels—*Equinox* (1973), *The Mad Man* (1994), and *Hogg* (1995)—as well as a volume of literary fiction, *Atlantis: Three Tales* (1995). His most recent publication is the short novel *Phallos* (2004). In addition to sexuality, literary theory, and canonicity, Delany's critical essays cover topics as wide-ranging as the fiction of Stephen Crane and A.S. Byatt, the poetry of Hart Crane and Ron Silliman, and the theater of Shakespeare, Wagner, and Artaud. Now the author of forty books, Professor Delany teaches in the English and Creative Writing programs at Temple University.

This interview was conducted in writing between September 19 and October 4, 2005 by Josh Lukin, a Lecturer in English at Temple University.

Lukin Your first teaching gig occurred in 1959, when you taught remedial reading to young Puerto Rican men at your local community center in New York City; you taught your first creative writing class in 1967 at the Clarion Writers' Workshop; your first university visiting professorship was at SUNY-Buffalo in 1975; you started your first permanent teaching position, a full professorship at the University of Massachusetts, in 1988. You have only spent one year in college, and, if I'm not mistaken, never had to apply for a teaching job. How does that happen to a person?

Delany The process is simple—and probably self-evident. Someone in a university, a dean or a significant portion of the faculty of one department or another, who is in a position to hire, must think highly enough of your intellectual accomplishments to want to retain you despite your lack of formal education. In 1975 Leslie Fiedler recommended me for a term as the visiting Butler Chair Professor at SUNY-Buffalo. There I met Marc Shell and Murray Schwartz, then both junior faculty. After my term at Buffalo was up, I saw neither for a baker's dozen years; but during that time both followed at least some of my work. When, in 1987, Schwartz became Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Massachusetts and Marc was hired as chairman of the university's Comparative Literature Department, they were looking for someone with scholarly interest in some branch of popular culture, such as science fiction, as well as a familiarity with developments in literary theory. Books of mine such as *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977), *The American Shore* (1978), and *Starboard Wine* (1984) probably played a large part in their decision to recruit me. So, for the next eleven years, I was a Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

I've been lucky enough that this has happened to me three times. Six years ago this process brought me to Temple University.

Lukin You were first "known" in the science fiction field, then as an "academic," then as a notable voice in the gay world, and perhaps only recently as a writer that a young African-Americanist can study without risking stigma. In each of these milieux there have been occasions when you or your work has been dissed for your/its association with the other ones. Is there less of that now than there used to be?

Delany All writers with any sort of public get dissed from time to time. I never paid too much attention to it. Nor did I ever think there was a great deal of it—when it came along, I tended to ignore it. I'd even go so far as to say that people who like my work, in an effort to show how interestingly controversial I am, make more of the dissing than I do—to the point where, occasionally, I think they actually exaggerate the amount of dissing there: a clause about my rampant sexism in a David Foster Wallace article on something else entirely, a sentence in a John Podhoretz op-ed

piece praising the Giuliani administration's handling of the Times Square boondoggle at the end of the 90s and just after, an absurdly erroneous statement in a book on SF about my beliefs about AIDS transmission. And usually within weeks, someone writes, "What are these people on about? Have they actually *read* the piece in question?" Readers, black and white, who are put off by, say, the particular gay topics I have been handling for thirty years now, are likely to ignore Delany entirely. The same applies to those who don't take science fiction seriously. For them, the fact that I write it pretty much pollutes everything else I might do. They're not even going to *bother* to diss me.

Because, since 1975, my work has more and more dealt with gay material, another factor enters the equation. The conservative view of matters gay is still rife with the idea of contagion, so that I suspect they are afraid that if they objected, they would too quickly find themselves tarred with the same brush: You know—why are you even *talking* about stuff like that?

A cousin of mine recounted to me an incident of that sort within my own extended black family. Some years ago, her mother, my marvelous and wonderful Aunt Laura, decided to read my 1988 autobiography *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction in the East Village*. Fifty pages into it, she phoned my equally wonderful Aunt Bessie, to declare, "Bessie—do you *know* what that boy is writing about ...?" and proceeded to tell her. Five hours later, and another-hundred-fifty pages on, Aunt Laura phoned Bessie again: "Good Lord—Bessie! This is just terrible ..." and three hours after that, she phoned a third time: "Bessie! I don't *believe* what I'm *reading* ...!" To which my feisty eldest aunt *finally* announced back: "Well, if it's all *that* terrible, why have you had your nose buried in it for the last eight hours?"

So Aunt Laura phoned her eldest sister no more. But that's the way the black *community* in general has taken my work. Those that read it seem to like it; the rest avoid it, because even to decry *Equinox*, *Hogg*, *The Mad Man*, *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, or *Phallos*—not to mention *Dhalgren* and the *Return to Neverjon* series—would open them to Bessie's authoritative censure.

Lukin A theme of *About Writing* that has appeared in your earlier nonfiction but is rarely addressed in creative-writing guides is "the writer's reputation," in part as it relates to the structure of publishing. In the past five years, we've seen a renewed Delany presence in bookstores thanks to the Random House reissues of your early fiction; but notwithstanding your own work's renaissance, you advised writers at Clarion West a couple of years ago to consider self-publishing.

Delany In 1979, basically some eighty-odd independently owned publishing companies operated out of New York City. By 1989, only five remained.

Yes, there were many more than five names, but the overwhelming majority had been brought up by international monopolies—Bertelsmann, HarperCollins, Beatrice, global monopolies of that sort (Doubleday, Bantam, and Dell, and two or three others, for example, are now one company owned by Bertelsmann operating out of a single office at 666 Fifth Ave)—so that in terms of corporate ownership, there are only five. The spectacular collapse—or, better, displacement of ownership—of U.S. publishing during the 1980s is an event whose results have been repeatedly narrated. It upset the economic careers of many “mid-list” writers, such as myself. It’s one of the major reasons why, at age 47, when I was offered a professorship, I accepted. Shortly before the offer, while I was a Fellow at Cornell’s Society for the Humanities, at the Andrew D. White House, in 1986, I had watched most of my books go out of print, one every two weeks, as my major mass market paperback publisher, Bantam Books, radically revised its policy toward just the sort of writer I was.

It’s not that before this collapse I advised students against self-publication and afterwards I advised them to try it. Rather, it’s a case of what self-publishing came to mean in both situations. When there was a greater variety of commercial publishers and more economic competition between them, self-publishing was a way to avoid competition. It announced that you couldn’t take the heat. That’s why I advised against it, back then. At that point, nobody really took self-published writers seriously. Self-publishing was for books such as *Thoughts of God*, by John Francis, *Forty Years a Backwoods Doctor*, or (the title is Auden’s) *A Poultry Lover’s Jottings*.

Today, the collapse not only means that there’s no real economic competition, but the kinds of things that publishers are looking for have changed. Commercial publishers today are far more distrustful of good writing than they have ever been before, and usually won’t consider it unless it comes with some sort of ready-made reputation or gimmick. In the last half dozen years, writers have shown me rejection letters from publishers such as Harcourt Brace that actually say, under the letterhead, “We’re sorry. This book is too well written for us.” This means that competition is of an entirely different order than it was, say, thirty years ago, when such a letter simply would not have been written.

Because of computers, because of the Internet, you can self-publish at a level far higher than you once could. The product can look extremely professional. And if that’s the kind of brick wall you’ve been bloodying your head against, small publishers and self-publication are, today, reasonable things to consider.

Lukin In *Silent Interviews*, *Shorter Views*, and “Velocities of Change,” you write at length of the discovery of theory and the role it played in your thought, leaving me with the impression that it saved your thinking by

giving you a place to stand outside some constraints of the hegemonic discourse. What do you see as the place of the "theory canon" at the present time?

Delany To begin with, your impression is wrong. From Braudel's contention that "Without theory there is no history" to Derrida's assertion that "We are never outside metaphysics," one of the most important insights of the most recent leg of the collection of theoretical dialogues that go by the general name of poststructuralism is that a "place to stand outside hegemonic discourse" is an illusion. Yes, you say "outside *some* of its constraints." But as I know you know, and I suspect, given your current work on abjection, disgust, and exclusion, you concur with, I don't believe the inside/outside metaphor can provide a way to overcome them. The fact that, even accidentally, you are drawn however *en passant* to use it—just as again and again am I—is a sign of how strongly the discourse of inside/outside, us/them, our position/the opposition is in place in the hegemonic discourse we would both like to revise.

Though I am black and gay, I am as much a racist, a sexist, an anti-Semite and a homophobe as any right-wing Christian bigot: I *must* be; it's desperately *important* that I be; if I am ever to be able to talk to such people and effect some change in their beliefs and behavior, I *have* to be. To be what I would hastily call a civilized man with a civilized sense of democratic fairness is something you do on *top* of that. It's a refinement of that, if you like. It only gets to seem, with the blindness to basic processes that comes from practice, something you do in *place* of it. But the other is always there. I've always talked with such people whenever I've had a chance. Even more so I listen to them—long and carefully, about their feelings and experiences, as well as many other topics—whenever I've found myself next to them in bars and on Greyhound busses or I have one as a seatmate on some air-bus to Detroit or Denver or San José, or when they're taking out their kids in the park. But I will never be able to effect any meaningful change other than one or another form of terrorism by fooling myself into thinking I can do anything by "standing outside" some hegemony.

This is neither a matter of New Age mysticism nor some earlier form of personal acknowledgment of historical guilt. (I'm wholly with Joanna Russ in this matter, who, back in 1975 wrote that, in terms of men looking at their own sexism, "Personal guilt about such things is a complete waste of time.") Really, this is straight Nietzsche, as when he says in *The Genealogy of Morals*, which I quoted as an epigraph to the first part of *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue*, "The great epochs of our life are where we win the courage to rechristen our evil as what is best in us."

My beliefs are based on firm convictions about hegemonic discourse in general and even more on some theoretical precepts about what discourse

actually *is*: It's an associational linguistic structure that we all inhabit—specifically the one that constitutes the world. If we didn't inhabit the same discourse, we couldn't understand racist jokes when we heard them nor could we find others' use of them offensive when the contradiction with our own situation is too painful to allow us to laugh. While the part of us that we consider our "self" may each be positioned differently within it, none of us is outside it. That is *particularly* true for those of us who are black, or disabled, or overweight, or Asian, or women, or gay, or part of whatever group we have been socially assigned to, because if we didn't know that discourse down in our bones, we'd be dead.

People have noted for years how fast racism or sexism or classism reasserts itself as soon as a certain vigilance is allowed to relax. That's because they don't come in from outside. They are a *necessary* underlying factor within the egalitarian behavioral structure itself. Such a behavioral structure is not about ignoring differences. It's about noticing them, valuing them, realizing that there are certain situations, cultural and defined, when these differences are important—and realizing that they are crashingly irrelevant in others. (That's what valuing means.) If the structure of when and where they are relevant and irrelevant gets loose or generalized, you have racism, classism, and sexism all over again. If you're lucky, you can enlist habit on your side, especially with the young. But (to put it in Lacanian terms) you're still fighting the Imaginary—and history is always settling the Symbolic into the Imaginary, even as theory is always untangling the Imaginary into the Symbolic. Until the properly stabilizing Symbolic discourse is in place, you're particularly vulnerable.

Lukin I meant, in my last question, of course, precisely the tendency of so many people to reject the new or the marginal, to "be still, be quiet, obey the king," as you yourself once wrote, to appeal for validity to the Official Story, to affirm the dreams of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. How should I have characterized the, um, *opposition* to that?

Delany I believe at this point we're discussing a topic that I first wrote about in "Shadows" (particularly §§20–50), a near-book-length essay I put together before my novel *Dhalgren* (1975) was published: It dealt with how verbal forms, totally consecrated by use, can be referentially empty (or transcendent: often it's the same thing) and thus highly mystificational, like the "it" in "it is raining" in English (I once had a student who argued that the "it" in "it is raining" referred to "you know, the sky, the weather, the whole *thing*"; if that's not transcendent—and in a particularly American mode—I don't know what is), or possessives when they refer up the power scale—when a worker says "my boss," a subject says "my king," or a slave says "my master." One reason *why* the inside/outside metaphoric system is finally so powerless is because it is an extension of a whole set of metaphors

that come from armed encounters, the military "*citre et trans*" metaphors ("this territory and—over there—that territory"), the metaphors of military opposition, which are particularly useless when what is perceived to be in opposition is actually two discourses. The only thing that can affect the "conflict" of discourses is some form of education. It may, indeed, be a form of education that we have not yet discovered.

People who retain some fondness for my early science fiction occasionally point to a parable from my mock Bildungsroman, *Empire Star* (1966), in which the naïve hero, Comet Joe, learns the difference between what I called, back then, "simplex," "complex," and "multiplex." Most recently an extremely perceptive young woman, Ariel Haméon, reviewing Professor Jefferey Tucker's book from last year about my work, *A Sense of Wonder: Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference*, put it perhaps even more crisply than I did in the initial novella, forty years ago:

There's Comet Joe's simplex recognition that there are lights beneath that extra-planetary Brooklyn Bridge; the more complex view he got as he walked and saw the lights shift and change; and the mutiplex understanding he gained when he ran fast enough to suss the pattern in both the bridge's struts and the lights behind them (*New York Review of Science Fiction*, 17 [2004]).

In the course of running, Joe falls and skins his knees—there's a price for gaining the multiplex view. But, I'd also like to point out, my (written in) 1965 vision of simplex, complex, and multiplex, is very much a pre-theoretical view of its complex (I use the term on purpose) topic.

Before he fell, had Joe taken one more conceptual jump, he would have landed in the foothills of modern critical theory. If, in the transition between the three states of comprehension, he had been able to generalize along the following lines, he would have arrived at what today we might recognize as a fundamental theoretical insight:

When I first stood here, motionless, looking at the underside of the bridge, with its plates and struts and lights, hundreds of feet above my head, I saw just a random pattern of lights and darkneses. I assumed—wrongly, I now know—that what I saw was all that was there, and that such a random pattern represented the fixed and immutable truth of the bridge. That was my simplex view. Once I began to walk along, however, and saw the same structure from a succession of points of view—while, now, as I moved, a strut moved from in front of a light I hadn't seen before and another light vanished behind one of the struts that, from my new position, occluded it—I realized that the pattern of lights and struts was complex and would appear differently from different places. That was my complex view. When I ran, however, the patterns changed even faster, and suddenly I was able to see an even more complicated *overall* pattern

that, because I was moving at a greater velocity, I could make out and retain—the multiplex view ...

Here is where, of course, Joe tripped, bringing his insight to an end. Had he not tripped, however, he might have gone on a step:

Yes, I have seen a more comprehensive pattern, and I feel I am that much closer to apprehending the truth of the bridge's structure. But because I have gone through the process I have already, I'm now aware that were I to run even faster, or perhaps were I to run in a different direction or take any number of other trajectories along the ground here, or climb up higher, or observe the bridge from closer, or even from above it, or on it, or were I able to take some of it apart, the possibility always remains that I might suddenly see still *another* pattern in its organization, equally multiplex, yet totally other. Yes, I have seen a larger and more comprehensive pattern, but from what I had to do in order to see it—moving from simplex to complex to multiplex—I now induce that the greater pattern I have seen, despite whatever explanatory use I might successfully put it to, is *not* privileged—any more than the first simplex view I had, or indeed the complex view. Though I can put what I have learned to any provisional use that happens to yield to it, I must not confuse that provisional use with theoretical absolute truth—or I will be, at least theoretically, just where I was when I started.

That would have been the specifically theoretical insight. But that was the one which, in 1965, twenty-three-year-old Delany was not quite up to. Still, I hope you can see how turning loose the privileged status of the new multiplex pattern—even though one may still find that pattern highly useful—leads to a certain philosophical humility. For those who take it seriously, it means we start listening to those who come to us with different points of view in a new and far more appreciative way. The point is, this is *not* just muddle-headed relativism—the assumption that *all* points of view are equally correct or of equal interest, to you, me, or anyone else. You're still free to critique what you see and hear. But it means that you don't dismiss them out of hand just *because* they're new or different. The fact is, there's no way to exclude all possibility for the future's bringing into your or someone else's ken new contextual information with some bearing on the topic to hand.

This is the insight that works its way through the argument in Derrida's critique of John Searle and his reading of John Austin in *Limited, Inc.* (1988); by extension, Derrida's argument goes on to suggest that all the strategies we use to foreclose on an otherwise endless discussion...

—Hey, I really and absolutely understand what you/the text is saying.

—You/the author/the text has completely and totally communicated his/her/its/your intentions to me.

—My understanding of you/the text is now identical to what this or that

authority has to say on the topic, so that clearly my interpretation now cleaves to the truth.

—Indeed, *any* argument in the form, I don't expect/want/need further contextual information that might adjust my understanding.

... are just that: attempts to foreclose argument that have nothing to do with—at least theoretically—the presence (or absence) of truth.

Lukin That view, which I'll call perspectival pluralism, connects to a point you once made about the location of meaning, vis-à-vis recent arguments over Michaels and Knapp's "Against Theory." Do you remember?

Delany Yes. You had called my attention to an online discussion of the claims in "Against Theory," led by the analytic philosopher John Holbo. But in explaining his refutation of Knapp and Michaels, Holbo tacitly assumed the "communication" model of language, i.e. the model that says: I have a meaning—an (capital I) Intention, an "aboutness"—which I place into a word or a set of words, which I then toss out into the air. These words strike your ear and release their Intention into your brain—an Intention that wasn't there before and that, upon completion of the act of hearing or reading, *is* there, now: it has been communicated.

But this is far too "Imaginary" to serve as a model for language. Also, it's just wrong. Its inaccuracies spawn endless arguments of the sort that Holbo and his interlocutors were engaged in. Indeed, it has been spawning them since Cratylus argued with Socrates.

A better one is: From my learning experiences in my culture, I have many words and associated meanings in my brain. You have many words and associated meanings in your brain. Because we have lived and experienced similar discourses, many of those meanings are the same or highly similar. Because we have lived in many different discourses, and because we have experienced the discourses we have from different positions within them, many of these meanings, at all levels, are different.

Now, suddenly—because of the language that bombards me, moving around meanings in my brain, some of which I can identify as yours and some of which I feel are mine—I get a desire to produce a meaning, an "aboutness," an intention (small "i," i.e., an urge that my utterance produce a particular effect, agreement, perhaps; perhaps dominance or awe. Possibly laughter. But, first, the desire to produce a meaning is *not* the intention. And, second, "meaning," "aboutness," and "intention" are different things, even if they appear to lie in the same direction). Responding to the desire, the discourses that I inhabit and my particular position in and among them, choose some words for me, and (after a more or less critical review of them prompted by other discourses, if I'm that sort of guy) I fling them out into the air.

The words strike your ear, where, within your brain, the discourses that *you* inhabit guide them to the meanings *you* have associated with

them. These meanings are thus called up in *your* brain. But my meanings never go directly into your brain and yours never go directly into mine. Communication, on *that* level, is simply an illusion, fostered by cultural and discursive similarities and congruences. Within the discourses you inhabit, the meanings have already struck up a desire to produce another meaning. Thus dialogue continues.

Once we have a sense of the process, we have to note that slippages and mistakes can occur at any point. We can misspeak, mishear, misperceive, miscalculate, misinterpret. There are misinterpretations. And, sometimes (once we enter the world of texts, of art...), we find slips in the shape of the signifier—such as natural signs that are so close to words (the rock whose ridges and erosions happen to spell “Help!”) that a language-like response is called up in our brains. Since language is the entire discursive, reflective (*not* communicative) process, the question “Are the rock’s ridges really language or not?” is a non-problem. The answer to that question is technically “no,” not because the rock is devoid of Intention or the desire to produce a meaning (i.e., a semantic paraphrase), an intention or an “aboutness,” but because a word is not language; a meaning or an Intention or an aboutness is not language. A mistake is not language. A desire for meaning is not language. Only the whole complex process together is language (including mistakes). Articulations without discourses (which are in your brain, not in the world) are not language. And discourses without utterances are not language. All of these things are analogous to wheels and gears and gas tanks and sparkplugs and batteries and camshafts and oil baths and cooling pipes and hubcaps and carburetors and seatbelt buckles in a car.

Indeed, the kind of argumentative problems that arise between Knapp/Michaels and Holbo are analogous to the sort of problems garage mechanics might have if, back when Adam was cutting up the experience of the world with names for things, he had named the trips between New York and Philadelphia, or Camden and Trenton “cars,” and people only learned by trial and error what the machinery that facilitated those trips had to do with getting them there on time. The question about the word on the rock is rather like asking, “If the north wind comes along and suddenly blows me from the streets of New York to Elizabethtown—” the way, say, Phaedrus recounts to Socrates that Boreas, the North Wind, once carried off Oreithyia from the bank of the Ilissus—“is that *really* a car?”

Lukin Does theory have a contribution to make to creative writing pedagogy?

Delany Well, a small, but important one has to do with what the writing process *is*—the nature of the process that produces the sentence, in the sense of how the mind produces language and the relation of the production of such language *to* (here they are again) intention, reason, and logic.

The most dramatic version of this argument I've encountered recently was between the poet Hart Crane and the critic-poet Yvor Winters. They debated it in letters during the twenties. The debate is particularly involving because only Crane's side still exists: Winters' letters have been lost. Nevertheless, it's fairly easy to reconstruct his side, or at least what Crane assumed Winters' side to be.

Basically Winters felt that, starting with Whitman and Emerson, American poetry and poetics had put too much stress on the unconscious, by critically privileging the rhapsodic, the dithyrambic, the delirious currents in language. The purpose of literature (Winters felt) was to train and recomplicate our thinking, our reasoning, our intelligence. Reason, logic, and intention should be the *source* of poetry in particular and art in general. Crane had run across this argument before—in of all places, O. P. Ouspensky's mystical treatise *Tertium Organum*. (It's a paradox that, generally speaking, mystics want their religion to be mystical and their art to be inchoately logical—rather than the other way around.) At first Winters was taken by the high intelligence with which Crane explicated and defended his poetic practice. But eventually, after the publication of Crane's *The Bridge*, Winters came to the conclusion that Crane—like Pound and Eliot—was only using his intelligence as a smoke screen to allow himself to indulge these undisciplined forces from the unconscious, a kind of automatic writing, a childish and immature verbal playfulness, which hid great aggressions and hostilities, and which had not made peace with a model of the mature and complete man—responsible, heterosexual, and socially accountable—and which, because it eschewed these qualities, could lead to no good end. When, a few years later, the tale of Crane's homosexuality and his alcoholic suicide came back to him, Winters felt that his disavowal of Crane—and all other “overly-romantic” poets from Rimbaud and Whitman to Mallarmé and Crane himself—was justified. What had first struck him as beautiful and grand, now he was ready to dismiss as immature, mannered, and self-indulgent.

I believe Winters was wrong, theoretically (whether he was wrong in his assessment of Crane's poems or not is, finally, a personal matter). I think Winters was wrong in his basic assumption that intention, reason, and logic are the compelling source of language. I think the corollary that goes along with it is also wrong: That language “communicates” these in some direct manner. My theory, if you will, is a version of a theory that has been put forward by Dante Alighieri, William Butler Yeats, and Jack Spicer—to name three poets whose work you might be familiar with. This is the idea of the poem as dictated—and, by extension, the idea that the source of language resides in some faculty of mind (man's, or in Dante's case, God's) we cannot directly know. Consciousness (with its handmaids reason, intention, and logic) sits in total ignorance of its inner workings and can only request it to offer up language. Sometimes it obeys. Sometimes it

disobeys. Sometimes it offers up the kind of language “we”/consciousness ask/s for. Sometimes it offers up very different language from what “we”/consciousness ask/s of it. As that language is offered up, consciousness—with reason, intention, and logic—can oversee that language and accept this or that part of it, reject this or that part of it. Revision is always possible. We ask for rhapsody—and sometimes we get rhapsody. We ask for reasoned argument, and—if we’re lucky—what we get is what consciousness recognizes as reasoned argument.

This mysterious faculty of mind seems to be, to some extent, trainable. But we must never become so arrogant in our demands on it or too slipshod in our critique of what it offers. We have to listen carefully and make our revisionary requests humbly. Otherwise, it turns off—or produces only vacant shells of chatter and gossip.

I think this is what Crane—along with Spicer, Yeats, and Dante—understood. This is the model I try to impart to my writing students. They must not be afraid to use their critical faculties on their own work—but they must use them with care and—yes—a certain craft. But the craft has very little to do with what the commercial distributors of public narrative and public language call “a mastery of the medium.” Indeed, as I try to point out, in reality such “mastery” is almost entirely a matter of submission—submission to existing grammatical models of language, of narrative, and of dramatic effect.

Lukin It seems to me that, in the past eight years or so, you’ve registered more and more on the radar screens of major literary scholars. What do you think of the reception of your work by Hazel Carby, Ross Posnock, or Walter Benn Michaels?

Delany I enjoy them when they enjoy my work and seem to understand it. I try not to get too flustered when they don’t like it or seem not to get it. Writers like Steven Shaviro, Madhu Dubey, and Carl Freedman seem to like some of what I do—and I hope that’s not the only reason why I like them. Hazel Carby has been generous in her statements about my work, especially in *Race Men* (1998). She’s never really chosen to write about any of it at length—but certainly no onus falls on her to do so. While I have a few questions about some of Ross Posnock’s exposition of his position, in *Color and Culture* (1998), which may even account for Jeffrey Tucker’s misunderstanding of it, I can only be grateful for what Posnock has said about my novella “Atlantis: Model 1924” in the last chapter of his book. When critics have proffered practical criticism, mostly in reviews, I’ve occasionally felt I profited by their negative responses.

To the extent I understand the arguments in Michaels’ recent *The Shape of the Signifier* (2004), there’s a lot to be drawn to. The basic argument seems to be that the overvaluation of history (*my history makes me a Jew, a black, determines my culture and thus my beliefs*) as the ultimate cause

of everything, i.e., a “historicist” view, leads dialectically (he never uses the word, of course) to a subsequent undervaluation of history (it’s all in the past; you can’t change it anyway; the material support for ideological differences fell with the fall of the wall and the subsequent dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; come on, as folks who live together in the present, we’re all far more alike than we are different), i.e., a “posthistoricist” view, and this axis and any position along it he calls “historicism.” (This is different from the historicism Popper cited in *The Poverty of Historicism* [1957]—the assumption that history can become a quantitative, predictive science—though it’s interestingly related to it.) Symptoms of this historicism are everything from New Historicist Greenblatt’s desire to talk with the dead, in which Greenblatt eventually realizes much of their talk is his own voice come back to him, to various embodied metaphors such as Morrison’s bodily returned ghost in *Beloved* or Leslie Marmon Silko’s privileging of tribe over class in *Almanac of the Dead* (where the classic Marxist is executed by the Native Americans he comes to help because he keeps insisting they are a class, not a tribe, and, what’s more, in their failure to realize they’re a class, they are a dupe of capitalism).

Somehow Bret Easton Ellis and I (in Michaels’ seven-page reading of a small section of my novella, “The Game of Time and Pain”) are his “antihistoricist” novelists—clearly, within his system, we are something of his heroes. But, in the end, he remarks, ruefully, of my tale (which is about a slave who, because of some incidents in his youth, is inspired to lead a slave revolt that is ultimately successful in overturning the institution), “As a strategy for making fun of the identitarianism of writers like Morrison and Spiegelman, this is pretty effective; as a politics—or, at least, as a left politics—it isn’t: the absolute commitment to freedom of contract [which is how Michaels reads S/M practices – with-a-safe-word] can hardly function as a basis for a critique of economic inequality.” Since I do come off, in this schema, as a *small* good-guy (in a Coda, he turns tail and pulls out the Big Guns on Ellis’s *Glamorama* and DeLillo’s *Mao II*; historicism here would seem to be what allows the media, governments, and religion to take the “standpoint, people who *believe* differently” must be treated as “people who *are* different”), perhaps I should be grateful and not look a gift horse in the mouth. As a writer of light fictions of ideas, apparently I escape the major critique he levels at serious satiric realism, in the works he finds wanting here.

But some things bother me about Michaels’ argument. His earlier praise of Ellis’s *American Psycho* hinges on statements like, “the group that constitutes Bateman’s [the American psycho’s] preferred target, pretty ‘girls,’ doesn’t constitute a people: women are not a culture.” Yet, one of my major revelations when, as a young gay man, I got married in 1961, was that they damned well did and were. In his discussion of my tale,

Michaels draws the conclusion, "So Delany's masochists are...not a people (on the model of Jews or African-Americans)." But the whole later half of the *Neverÿon* series grows largely in direct dialogue with the work that the gay community, particularly those interested in S & M, were doing at that time. Ironically, I was in correspondence with a couple of the SAMOIS writers, whom Michaels sites in the accompanying discussion, when those stories were being written. Before 1969, the gay community of the U.S. tended not to think of itself *as* a community. Afterward, it did. The eleven stories and novels making up *Return to Neverÿon* are, historically, so very much post-Stonewall stories, that I wonder how comfortably I can wear Michaels' "antihistoricist" mantle. If Michaels' point is merely that a people/community/political group need not be hereditary, to me this seems self-evident. (But what's the force of his denying "peoplehood" to pretty girls or to women and to masochists? Suppose they *want* peoplehood? Would he deny it to them then? That's precisely the point of conflict that demands tolerance, so that people can learn from their histories what in their lives they want stabilized and what they want to let go of. The overvaluation Michaels decries is the—yes—historical fallout from decades of *intolerance*—not from too much wishy-washy liberal tolerance.) But why look for a politics in the section of a tale that deals with what inspires an individual, who feels himself outside a group (the young slave was not born into slavery; his masochism dates from *before* his enslavement at age fifteen), to move forward to join one? So much of the story *is* about subsequent group and communal action, why not look for it there?

It seems, at any rate, that someone as comfortable with theory as Michaels would suspect that the last place to look for a politics is at the point that the narrative constructs as the *origin* of identity, however briefly or however (as it turns out in this tale) falsely.

Also in his analysis, Michaels makes a couple of statements that I find wildly over the mark: "his [Delany's] point is that it [sodomasochism] can be a 'turn on' *only* if you do it by agreement, that the agreement is the turn on." No, that's not my point. It's not even true. If it were, you wouldn't have the fundamental need for the S/M community to establish itself as such—and in the gay community, the sub community of S/M practitioners, female and male, did, a decade post-Stonewall, the most work the fastest—in the first place. Michaels also writes, "It's not just that masochism is legitimated by freedom of contract...masochism is itself the love of that freedom." Well, as an ex-lover of mine once told me, when I was drawn to indulge similar hyperbole more than twenty years ago, "Sit down, Maudine—and eat your pie." No, masochism is not a love of freedom; masochism is taking sexual pleasure in pain, bondage, degradation, or subservience.

For Michaels, both the overvaluation of country and the overvaluation of the family are symptoms of historicism. Michaels wants beliefs to come

back into questions of value. He wants us to be able to say, I suspect, America was founded on some really extraordinary ideas—political beliefs—about freedom and truth and the pursuit of happiness and the right of all people to them and to the situations that make them possible. He wants us to be able say, my family has some social ideas about things that I think are dead wrong, and I don't share them and I don't want my kids to grow up sharing those notions either. He wants to maintain clear distinctions *between* loving and valuing; *between* feeling and believing; *between* subjectivity and subject position. But one would become downright drunk on intellectual clarity, if one could actually live in such a world as he envisions—that is, a world where more than a dozen people could agree on the definitions of those distinctions and agree further on what those distinctions *actually* entailed. (Because we don't live in such a world, that's why the notion of tolerance *is* such a great American *political* belief.)

But there's another set of overvaluations and undervaluations at work here. When we undervalue the things we have been given and did not choose for ourselves (and history tells us often they are aspects of our socio-economic privileges and the social education that those privileges netted us, which, though we have it and rely on it daily, we remain blind to), we tend to overvalue our elective communitarian discoveries—and someone has to remind Maudine that, no, sadomasochism is just an appetite, and, like the standard missionary position, it too can get out of hand. It needs to exist—and always-already has—in a *social* world, a world sometimes more conducive to its intelligent carrying out and sometimes not. It can get banal. It can get too wild. Consent is *not* built into it, any more than it is built into vanilla carryings on—which is *why* consent has to be added socially. And if it isn't, directly or indirectly, you're likely to have problems.

Though one can come to love the freedom to practice it with multiple partners, and deeply resent it when that freedom is taken away, masochism itself is no more a love of that freedom than it is a love of capitalism or socialism—or is a belief that dictatorship is the best means of government or a belief in participatory democracy. There are highly neurotic masochists—and eminently level-headed ones. (And—like standard missionary folk—some are psycho.) Some are Republicans. Some are Libertarians. Some are rich. Some are poor. And, guess what? The same goes for sadists. The uncritical assumption that correspondences between sex and some such characteristic are necessary rather than contingent (that they are identities in the logical sense rather than contingent metonymic associations that other situations and other discourses can reassign) is what produces the intellectual debacle of, say, James Miller's appalling biography *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (1993)—as it produces the somewhat *extreme* sentences Michaels writes above.

Lukin In your second interview with *Callaloo*, back in 2000, you downplayed the significance of identity markers and even ideological allegiances as signs of critical acuity. Yet I, at least, sometimes find myself discussing elements of your work in terms of the trope of marginal or subaltern status. Is there any usefulness or peril to that way of talking about work that addresses such issues as yours does?

Delany What you call “downplaying identity markers” I would call simply the fall-out from my theoretical position that identity is a contingent collection of attributes—a constructed category, i.e., held together by discourse.

I have no problem with your—or anyone else’s—discussing my fiction about subalterns in terms of subalterns. Here, at least, I think Rorty’s notion of different language games can be useful. But my preferring one language game over another can always be because I haven’t seen the abuse that particular language game lends itself to—as I have with, say, the kind of hyperbolic enthusiasm that Michaels exhibits in the sentences I pointed out. I do understand—and have experienced firsthand—the desire to use that sort of language. That’s why I’d rather ironize and joke Michaels out of his use of such hyperbole (“Sit down, Maudine...”), even though I think that kind of language can stabilize some truly *pernicious* results. But I also know that, quite apart from this, no matter how ironic your critic, when you realize someone finds inaccurate and misleading your account of something meaningful to you, it’s hard not to feel: Hey, you’re attacking my transcendent yearning directly.

All I can pose to that is an old dictum from the creative writing workshop: No, your basic feeling is not being attacked. Try to communicate your yearning (yes, I drop the transcendent) through accuracy and specificity. Use your own language. Start by realizing you are *not* unique, and look for the differences between your experience and the way that experience is usually spoken of.

“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun ...” and, well, neither is sadomasochism. I suspect that Michaels would find this argument “posthistorical” because, even in its celebration of difference, it also might be seen to be saying, “Hey, we’re all brothers and sisters under the skin. There really *are* no differences.” To which I can only reply, “Boy, are there differences! Lots of people really *don’t* want to play together. And people really do believe different things.” As I wrote many years ago, Levi-Strauss’s declaring “all men engage in the same amount of intellection” is fine when he’s talking about the similarity between a tribal shaman in South America and a nuclear physicist in Berkeley, California. But what happens when *one* of his men is a thirty-seven year old Polish construction worker, reeking of beer, and wondering if he’s going to be let go because his immigration papers are not in order, and the *other* man is a twenty-two-year-old woman

secretary, just graduated from Bryn Mawr, working in an advertising company located on Lexington, wondering if this is what she wants to be doing with her life and what advancement is possible for a woman in such a job, both of whom are pressed bodily up against one another, with a tool bag between them, hurting both their knees, in a subway car at rush hour—both of whom just then are thinking about each other, and both thinking things the other, just then, wouldn't find very pleasant.

In such a situation, the "amount" of intellection is more or less irrelevant. To get home without an incident, both need a little tolerance (i.e., a political belief), a little repression (if Freud is right and civilization always hinges on castration and repression, i.e., a little socialization), the two of them—politics and socialization—put together with whatever bit of mental *bricolage* (i.e., theory) is appropriate to the situation. But this is precisely where you *need* the wiggle room that theory gives you—just as classical Marxism tries to initiate the notion that our two rush-hour riders actually *do* have shared socio-economic interests that might at least produce a political alliance, were both educated to appreciate their socioeconomic specificities. Is my position here an oscillation between undervaluation and overvaluation, both of which obliterate subjects? Or is it, as I would hope, a non-privileged multiplex view? And is the distinction a matter of language games—or *is* it more substantive?

Right now, I'm not sure. Why? Because I would need to know more about each of the individuals as people—and their class. As well, either one or both might be queer; either one or both might be black—as, since World War II, there are black and Eurasian Germans and black and Eurasian Swiss, there are black and Eurasian Poles. And depending on what each feels about it, as well as what each believes, it might be relevant.

As people have become more mobile in the world and are willing to talk more and more about their subjectivity, identity markers have become more and more loosely joined, more and more mobile in themselves. That's why we have to turn away from Hegel's notion of getting rid of all the inessentials and letting oneself deal only with the essential, to a theory like Derrida's that reminds us of the power of the context to add more unusual or surprising factors—because greater context is even more likely today to bring in surprising information than it was in Hegel's and Hölderlin's day. On a purely theoretical level (one of Žižek's more recent points), Derrida wasn't saying anything Hegel didn't know.

Lukin I think "demystification" is a helpful way for a reader to frame the intellectual imperative that drives your writing. How would *you* characterize your intellectual project?

Delany Needless to say, I'm highly complimented. But I would frame my own project far more modestly. For thirty odd years, since I published "Shadows," I have been trying to promulgate—and develop—a more and

more sophisticated notion of discourse. Would it be overstating things to say that the world needs one desperately? I don't think so. Every time we back-slide from the Freudian notion of the "unconscious," citing its mentalistic or biologicistic clumsiness, every time we lose sight of the class war because we've once again become entranced with the relativity of superstructure and infrastructure and the impossibility of establishing an absolute boundary between them that holds up theoretically, or every time we find some other notion of the Symbolic too baroque to pursue with any seriousness, we also brutalize the concept of discourse—understanding—itsself. In essays such as "Wagner / Artaud" or "The Rhetoric of Sex / The Discourse of Desire" or "Shadow and Ash"—or even now and again throughout *Phallos*—I have tried to limn some parameters of one aspect or the other of discourse directly. But more often, as in, say, *Times Square Red*, *Times Square Blue*, what I see as my primary goal in my own intellectual overview becomes a tertiary thematic in the specific work.

I resist, as they say, the notion of "demystification" because it suggests something apocalyptic, in the sense of pulling away the *kalyptra*, the veil, of revealing the truth—that is to say, it suggests someone "who knows." And I don't know or claim to know. What I tend to find myself doing more and more is insisting on what we *don't* know—and that we would do ourselves a favor by ceasing to carry on as if we did. As a novelist, I move here and there and explore, looking largely for the fascinating pattern—for something that I might call form, or beauty, or sometimes even creation. As a non-fiction writer, I try to write about what I see and have seen *here* against what I see and have seen *there*—and what people have said about what is there, what is here, and to compare that to what I saw when *I* looked. Any demystification that, from time to time, readers can find—and that's entirely dependent on the readers' position within the greater discourse—is a happy accident.

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