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Reader's Guide

from Wendy S. Walters
 author of *Multiply/Divide*

Author Asks:

1. I wrote this book with the awareness that making a distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not always productive in discussions about race and geography. One reason for this is that race and national borders are fictions that get employed as facts. Still I struggled with trying to make what I believed to be the truth of the piece clear. How does your understanding of genre affect your reading of these works? Does reading fiction as nonfiction or vice versa change your impression of the impact of a piece?
2. I have always taken to heart what Ben Shahn says: "form is the shape of content." Describe the relationship between form and content in these pieces. Consider the forms of "Procedural" and "Post-logical Notes on Self-Election," and describe the formal conventions of each piece and explain how they serve the work's overall meaning.
3. In this book I address real and conceptual landscapes—for example, the neighborhood of Manhattanville and the idea of American West. How might one consider the relationship between tangible and imagined spaces? In what ways do they conflict or distort the other?
4. How does *Multiply/Divide* embrace the conventions of memoir or essay? Are these pieces personal and about the speaker or are they pointing in some other direction? How do you come to understand the voice of the speaker as you move from piece to piece?
5. I wrote this book with the hope that I might bring attention to the way characters or people may be devalued due to race or gender. But I also wanted to complicate the idea that race and gender are discreet categories, with no intersection. Do you think *Multiply/Divide* accomplishes this?
6. In "The Personal" I address events that reveal something important about how I understand myself, my subjectivity. The events I chose to discuss are not always the most significant events in my life, but they are ones that shaped my self-perception in a dramatic way. How do you define the personal, and what role does it play in helping to shape your understanding of the world?
7. Perhaps because of my experience with poetry, I have great affection for the fragment. It allows me to think about the moments in a piece as a series of convictions

that shift as the argument develops. Which pieces use the fragment most effectively? And how do those pieces demonstrate a kind of progression of thought?

8. The title of the book *Multiply/Divide* illustrates the absolute contradictions that are so much a part of the American experience. How do you read the title in context of these works? And do you feel these gestures of expansion and contraction seem to happen simultaneously or in progression?

9. In “When the Sea Comes for Us,” I attempt to address my fears about the effects of global warming by offering the essay as an invocation. What other feats can the essay accomplish?

10. Many of these pieces address recent events of political significance. I chose to write about them because they were moving to me. How does the incorporation of recent political events impact the author’s voice in a work?

Writing Exercises:

Directions

Walk around a couple of neighborhoods for 10 minutes noting as many details as you can about the geography. Try to keep your observations associated with the immediate perimeter. Take copious notes. You may also take photographs. Notes should include buildings of interest, the materials they are made of, the position of rows, sidewalks and other walkways, greenways and any additional markers. Spend 5 minutes making a drawing of the area you cover and try to be as detailed as possible. Try not to rely on electronic devices for orientation.

Your goal in coming back to class is to write 40 sentences of directions associated with your geography that direct a reader to a state of mind, emotion, or level of consciousness.

Place

Writing about place always requires keen attention to the details that define a physical and social geography. In addition to paying attention to flora, fauna, and types of social interaction that define the mundane experience in a place, one needs to be aware of how people in that place deal with extraordinary or unusual circumstances. Often one’s day-to-day life is not much different from one location to the other—but when a crisis or another kind of challenge comes to a community, the details of how it is dealt with are what reveals the nature of the place.



1. In a short paragraph, write a description about where you are from during a moment of extreme change or crisis. Give us enough detail to be able to see the landscape you are moving through—but you don't need a lot of lead up for the event to be described. Just be blunt and up-front with your indication and detail (showing not telling us) about what challenge came about and how it was dealt with.
2. In another short paragraph, write a description about where you live now (neighborhood or other type of community) during a moment of discomfort, crisis, change or celebration. Detail how time passed in that community during that moment while giving us clear descriptions about what used to be and what had just become.

Further Reading:

1. *People Who Led to My Plays*, Adrienne Kennedy
2. *Black Metropolis*, Horace Cayton and St. Claire Drake
3. *The Address Book*, Sophie Calle
4. *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis
5. *Y No Se Lo Tragó La Tierra*, Tomás Rivera
6. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, N. Scott Momaday
7. *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, William Maxwell
8. *Out of Sight, Out of Order*, Adrian Piper
9. *The Great Enigma*, Tomas Tranströmer
10. *Up in the Old Hotel*, Joseph Mitchell

