

Expanding Identities: The Importance of Wow! Experiences

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Faced with the contingent nature of our social identities, one can, according to Natasha Levinson, choose resignation, resistance, celebration, or reconfiguration. In “Unsettling Identities: Conceptualizing Contingency,” Levinson herself focuses on choosing reconfiguration. And she lays out a richly textured, generative case in favor of “teaching identity as a contingent social formation” so as to make available the conceptual tools and the classroom spaces students need to do their own self-identified identity reconfigurations.

The framework within which Levinson makes her case for reconfiguration and for teaching “identity as a contingent social formation” follows the lines laid out by Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and William Connolly. In her brief lucid summary of Foucault’s work, Levinson reminds us how he demonstrated that our seemingly fixed “natural” identities are no more than historical and cultural creations. We discover that what have been demarked as fixed identifiable attributes turn out to be recently crystallized social formations that have been imposed upon certain sets of behaviors as if these activities constituted defining characteristics, naturally attached to distinct groups of people. Once these new categories become culturally entrenched they acquire political salience and are not easily uprooted or circumvented.

Thus, as Levinson suggests, a number of educational challenges emerge as we work to expose these “identities” as unnatural pretenders, knowing that most of us still must confront their pervasive everyday effects and find ways to offset and combat their harmful impact on our lives. Levinson states her avowed educational aim to be that of enabling students to “think through the micropractices of everyday life in order to find ways to reconfigure themselves in relation to this social positioning.”

If we follow Levinson and take up her educational challenge to aid and abet our students in their own identity reconfigurations, as I am persuaded to do, some questions arise for me: (1) What ultimate educational aim, or vision, do we hold, if any, for the direction of our students’ reconfigurations? (2) If, as educators, we leave it up to each student to reconfigure themselves in relation to her or his own social positionings as they may see fit, do we run too great a risk of their solidifying around narrow contractive, perhaps defensive and belligerent, identity formations? As I read her, Levinson, in agreement with Connolly, wants us to counteract the tendencies to consolidate around what Connolly terms “dogmatic identities.”¹ And yet she is quite aware of how such consolidations can easily occur, can almost be forced upon those who continually encounter what Cornel West so vividly describes as Boom! experiences.² Citing Leslie Bow’s account of her Boom! experience as a “Chinese girl” reading Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Levinson observes that Bow was

able to arrest her impetus toward solidifying a dogmatic identity, when “Bow retains her sense of the fundamental disjuncture between self-understanding and social positioning.” Bow’s ability to do this reveals the ever-present potential for “the cracks and fissures within identity formation [to] become apparent.”

Because I share Levinson’s, and Connolly’s, concern about our all-too-human tendencies to “develop a dogmatic identity,” I want to explore the possibility of some additional counter measures here — ones that might help us in our efforts to retain our “sense of “fundamental disjuncture” and to widen “the cracks and fissures” alluded to by Levinson. As a way to undertake this exploration I want to introduce a counterpart to West’s “Boom! experiences.” I like to call these “Wow! experiences.” To give a sense of what this might mean let me relate one of my own Wow! experiences.

A number of springtimes ago, in my final month of pregnancy with my second son, I was taking advantage of the late afternoon sunshine by lounging lazily on my balcony. Sitting there, doing nothing in particular, I found my attention drawn to the labors of a female paper wasp, genus *Polistes*, engaged in constructing her nest of small paper cells. I was already accustomed to the presence of these paper wasps whose ancestors had taken up residence on this old New Hampshire farm a century or more ago. These wasps had, for generations, been assisting with insect control. We generally practiced a form of co-existence, maintaining a respectful distance from each other. Yet on this particular afternoon, without any conscious effort or thought on my part, I discovered arising within me a deep heartfelt affectionate connection between my pregnant self and this nest-building female paper wasp. The feeling that washed over me, or through me, was powerful, undeniable and wholehearted, a natural flow of soft gentle compassion toward this tiny winged mother. This quite unexpected, surprising feeling of close connection and, yes, a form of identification, is one example of what I call a Wow! experience. When I search my memory I realize I have had similar Wow! experiences on other occasions as well.

But what does my experience with this female nest-building paper wasp have to do with our contingent identities? For one thing, it definitely “unsettled” the fixity of my own identified senses of self and not-self. My accumulated collection of socially contingent identifications that were aligned with my species as well as with my race, class, education, profession, broke open, expanded, and in a certain sense temporarily dissolved as well. I could no longer so clearly “dis-identify” myself from other creatures, or draw fixed boundaries between my own identity as a “human being” and the identity of others as “living beings.”

At this point, one might question what appears to be a shift in the focus of our concerns. If we agree with Levinson, our educational aim is not only to reconfigure identities but also to do so without denying or trivializing the harms that result from social positionings and alignments. Thus a significant discrepancy may appear to exist between the content of my Wow! experiences and those that concern Levinson. This discrepancy is captured in June Jordan’s observation that:

Race and *class*, then, are not the same kinds of words as *grass* and *stars*. *Gender* is not the same kind of noun as *sunlight*. *Grass*, *stars*, and *sunlight* all enjoy self-evident, positive connotations everywhere on the planet. They are physical phenomena unencumbered by our knowledge of our experience of slavery, discrimination, rape and murder. They do not presuppose an evil any one of us must seek to extirpate.³

In other words one might say, it is easy enough to identify with nature or with a female paper wasp when she is building her nest, but how does this help us work with the hard human cases, the painful social disjunctures? Or one might say, it's all well and good to reconfigure our identities so that they break open, expand, and become more fluid and inclusive, but what good are these sorts of expansive reconfigurations in the face of daily encounters with racism, sexism, or ableism?

My answer, in brief, is that our expansive Wow! experiences serve to remind us, under almost any conditions, that we are always more than our socially contingent identities. Furthermore, these experiences can also remind us that we are greater than the sum of all the identities constituted by our entire set of multiple social positionings. What does this mean? Where might such realizations ultimately lead us?

Let me suggest one possibility. After many life experiences of both the Boom! and the Wow! variety, followed by a whole series of reconfigurations and adjustments in one's sense of personal identity, one might ultimately reach the point where she or he could say with Thich Nhat Hanh:

Please Call Me by My True Names

Don't say that I will depart tomorrow —
even today I am still arriving.

Look deeply: every second I am arriving
to be a bud on a Spring branch,
to be a tiny bird, with still-fragile wings,
learning to sing in my new nest,
to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower,
to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,
to fear and to hope.

The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that is alive.

I am a mayfly metamorphosing
on the surface of the river.

And I am the bird
that swoops down to swallow the mayfly.

I am a frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond.

And I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks.

And I am the arms merchant,
selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl,
 refugee on a small boat,
 who throws herself into the ocean
 after being raped by a sea pirate.
 And I am the pirate,
 my heart not yet capable
 of seeing and loving.
 I am a member of the politburo,
 with plenty of power in my hands.
 And I am the man who has to pay
 his "debt of blood" to my people
 dying slowly in a forced-labor camp.
 My joy is like Spring, so warm
 it makes flowers bloom all over the Earth.
 My pain is like a river of tears,
 so vast it fills the four oceans.
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can hear all my cries and laughter at once,
 so I can see that my joy and pain are one.
 Please call me by my true names,
 so I can wake up
 and the door of my heart
 could be left open,
 the door of compassion.⁴

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1. William Connolly, *Identity/Difference* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).
2. Cornel West, "Our Next Race Question: The Uneasiness between Blacks and Latinos," *Harper's* (April 1996), 57.
3. June Jordan, "Waiting for a Taxi" in *Technical Difficulties* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 164.
4. Thich Nhat Hahn, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, Calif.: Parallax Press, 1993), 72-73.