THE UNARTICULATED IDENTITY

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In her essay "Speaking in Tongues," Zadie Smith explores the distinction between those who possess and exercise a single voice and those who utilize a multiplicity of voices. Indeed, Smith introduces herself with a voice that she acquired via her posh education at Cambridge and vocation in the literary world. However, she feels that she gained this voice at the expense of the voice from her childhood spent in the working-class London district of Willesden:

> Hello. This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port. Maybe this fact is only what it seems to be—a case of bald social climbing—but at the time I genuinely thought *this* was the voice of lettered people . . . This voice I picked up along the way is no longer an exotic garment I put on like a college gown whenever I choose—now it is my only voice, whether I want it or not. I regret it; I should have kept both voices alive in my mouth (Smith).

While Smith introduces herself as single-voiced, she paradoxically regrets and even condemns this as a limitation of her identity. In addition, throughout her essay, Smith celebrates others who possess multiple voices. Yet, rather than also establish herself as a possessor of numerous voices and thus as an expert, Smith shockingly deprives herself of this authority. This forces the reader to contend with a paradox: Why, as readers, should we maintain our faith in her credibility as a writer enough to continue reading her essay?

Smith denounces her own voice-adaptation with the use of mocking diction, a rhetorical choice that captures the circumstances surrounding the sacrifice of her original speaking voice. Her choice of words ("picked it up") implies that this chicer voice was not fundamental to her identity, but was cavalierly acquired, like a persistent bad habit, in her attempt to fit in among her peers. Furthermore, she admits to her almost comical naivety in believing at the time that "this was the voice of lettered people," a voice she defines no more specifically than by its singularity and exclusivity. She condemns this as "a case of bald social climbing," her acquired taste for these bourgeois things so obviously and perhaps embarrassingly a means for social inclusion in the "univocal . . . [Cambridge] pond" and literary world "puddle" (2). Surely Smith did not one day wake up enamored of the expensive flavor of port and the length of Samuel Richardson's unabridged novel. Instead she perhaps forced herself to acquire a palate for such pretentious things as a means of entry into a world that apparently coveted such tastes. In addition, the almost excessive use of "I"—occurring nine times

in this opening passage—implies that her identity was informed by a series of personal choices that were nonetheless contingent upon the social pressure generated by her peers.

Despite the mocking tone with which Smith treats her tale of voice sacrifice, the experience of social pressure is universally applicable. Perhaps empathetically, the reader even begins to consider the voice or voices they have lost to prevent being ostracized. However, in the act of telling us about her background, Smith adds, if not another voice, another layer to her identity, perhaps challenging the reader to suspect that there is more to her than the supposedly singular, polished voice with which she writes.

In her personal introduction at the beginning of her essay (that I quote above), Smith presents her voice somewhat superficially. She begins the essay with the word "hello," a rather generic salutation that divulges little of Smith's character. That is until her next sentence implies that the reader should have absorbed every detail of her identity from "this voice" that said "hello." Smith then continues to define her voice simply by her pronunciation: as an "English voice with its rounded vowels and consonants in more or less the right place."[1] Smith describes what people first hear in her voice but gives nothing more than this most superficial classification. Furthermore, Smith categorizes her voice as "English," as if there is only one accent and one identity to define some fifty million people. The most that the reader can absorb from this introduction is the properness of the grammar, suggesting the education she proceeds to describe. Thus, in this introduction, Smith mimics what people hear superficially upon first meeting her; she is imitating the way others receive and categorize her. The unwritten challenge to the reader is to not catalog her, but to continue to get to know her through her essay. For surely there must be more to this voice and this identity than just correct pronunciation of the Queen's English.

Although Smith claims that she herself is merely single-voiced, she nonetheless extols others who have been successful in maintaining a multiplicity of voices despite any social pressures they might have encountered. In seeming contrast to herself, Smith praises those writers—particularly George Bernard Shaw, President Obama, and Shakespeare—for their ability to absorb and utilize so many different voices. Smith believes that multiplicity of voice is even a power when fully embraced by the individual. In Shakespeare's plays "he is woman, man, black, white, believer, heretic, Catholic, Protestant, Jew, Muslim." Smith's choice of omitting the indefinite article before each adjective further emphasizes Shakespeare's universality. He is no woman or man in particular, but instead omnipotent, creating characters who themselves speak in a multitude of voices and possess countless identities. Smith argues that such versatility of voice is the ultimate freedom, freedom from a "single identity [which] would be an obvious diminishment." Perhaps as a writer, Smith feels that she has limited her ability to share her experiences when she sought to take on the singular voice ascribed to the literary elite. Indeed, Shakespeare's ability to assume the identities

of so many different people gives him the power to relate to a majority of people who "have complicated back stories, messy histories, multiple narratives."

However, Smith herself arguably has multiple narratives as a black woman from a working-class background trying to gain entry to the exclusively posh communities of Cambridge and the literary world, and her subsequent life in the United States. Given this history, is it possible that Smith has, as she says, only one voice? Perhaps on the shallowest level Smith's use of language would suggest that she is, as she says, able to communicate with only one voice, that of the posh, literary elite. Yet, as we read her essay and encounter the multitude of examples she provides—of all classes, vocations, genders, and nationalities, from Eliza Doolittle and President Obama to Shakespeare and Thomas Macaulay—we come to realize that Smith is in fact possessed of a veritable symphony of voices. She is as comfortable referencing American culture as she is referencing her native British culture and she passes between both with incredible ease. Her ease with such material is the result of her multitude of experiences as a British-born woman, in the posh literary world, and in the United States. Thus, the reader must conclude that Smith is not, as she initially identifies, "single-voiced," but in fact multi-voiced. Although she tempts the reader to categorize her, the variety of evidence she uses in her essay ensures that any such attempt fails. This multiplicity renders her essay more interesting and accessible to a greater number of people.

The tension in Smith's essay is that she tells us one thing—that she is single voiced—yet demonstrates another—that she has multiple voices—throughout her essay. With this rhetorical strategy, Smith forces the reader to be more conscious of the societal predilection for categorizing people so as to lackadaisically understand them. Unsurprisingly, such cataloguing provides nothing but the most superficial and even flawed understanding of a person. For example, if the reader is not aware of Smith's rhetorical strategy they run the risk of leaving her essay with the embarrassing conviction that she is, just as she introduces herself, single-voiced. However, if the reader is more perceptive and questioning of the lacuna in Smith's argument, then they see the multi-textured fabric of her identity. Thus the reader has not conformed to the societal obsession with classifying people. Perhaps this more conscientious reader will proceed through life neither superficially categorizing others, nor allowing others to superficially categorize them. Smith's essay, and in particular her rhetorical strategy, compels the reader to become more aware of the great variety of stories and conflicting identities that render us human.

NOTE

1. Perhaps "this English voice" also refers to how she is received as an English-born woman living in the United States.

WORKS CITED

Smith, Zadie. "Speaking in Tongues." *The New York Review of Books* 26 Feb. 2009. Web. 30 Sept. 2012.

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