



the contexts that shape me

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I sit in my desk, observing the other grad students around me and silently cursing the beads of sweat forming above my lip and brow. I'm sure the perspiration has more to do with the humidity on this warm August afternoon than with the butterflies turning cartwheels in my stomach, but I don't think my anxiety is helping. I tell myself: There are fifty-seven of us crammed into one classroom, so it's no wonder that I'm feeling a bit suffocated.

However, the heat doesn't explain why I'm also feeling dissimilar and inadequate.

I'm at an orientation for first year teaching associates, and we're talking about 'context'. Context, for our purposes, is interpreted to include broad categories (like race, gender, and ethnicity) as well as more localized categories (like our hometowns, favorite sports teams or television shows). We're not only discussing the influence of personal context on writing but, also, how it affects our self-definitions. The best writers are aware, as much as possible, of how their backgrounds and experiences have informed their perspectives; therefore, we're told to begin thinking of ourselves as parts of contexts.

So, I ask myself questions. Things like: How am I a typical member of my gender? How do I differ from others who share my race? What kind of person would I be if I hadn't been a 'military brat'? How have these specifics impacted who I am, today?

Such queries aren't alien to me. They're parts of a dialogue I've been having with myself since my freshman year at NYU. It was then that I first realized that a context need not be about direct cause and effect. It may be—as was my case—a reaction *against* some other context. I'd spent my whole life, until my 18th year, on well-guarded Army bases in small towns. It was no wonder, to me, that all the universities I applied to were in or around the largest city in the U.S..

Although I don't find the concepts of contexts and labeling to be foreign, I'm suddenly struck by one new idea. I look down at the web I've drawn on the back of the salmon-colored assignment sheet. My name, Eboni, is in the center circle with strands stretching out to identifiers such as: 'African-American', 'Female', 'Military Brat', 'Preacher's Kid', 'Middle Child', and 'Cheerleader'. I glance sheepishly around the room and then, quickly, add another: 'Writer'.

For everyone in this room, that epithet also applies—although I'm sure most aren't corny enough to actually write it down, as I just have. Yet, on the surface, I don't seem to share much with the

others in this coterie. Apparently, I don't read as much 19th Century female literature as the curly-haired girl with the "I'd rather be reading Jane Austen" bumper sticker. I do, however, take comfort in the fact that, at least, I know who Jane Austen *is*, and have read most—though not all—of her work. That much *can't* be said about the modernist, feminist writers that the bald girl behind me has been bandying about. The spectacled boy from Athens, Georgia has been publishing his own poetry journal for years now. The older woman in the corner already has a Master in Literature and has now decided to get her MFA in Creative Writing.

Then there's Carson, who looks exactly as one would picture a writer: tall and lanky, with pale skin, dark hair, and thick, dark, glasses; meanwhile, I'm chubby and brown. Brian—who's a shorter version of Carson—loves all things underground and dislikes anything mainstream. I immediately feel ashamed of the Britney Spears CD in my Discman.

It's like Junior High all over again. I'm the poor, awkward schlub on the outside looking in at all the popular kids. Except...I *was* popular in Junior High. I was a cheerleader for Christ's sake! I don't think that information is going to help me at this time, though. The sweat beads form faster as I fear that I'll be found out. I'm not a Lit chick. I've never been published. I'm not a real writer. I don't belong here.

The program director wants us to share some of our contexts. I start to panic. What am I going to say? Soon, they'll discover I'm a poser and turn on me like wolves. I try to slink casually in my chair, but I'm too sticky and can't move. No one says anything for, what seems like, a full minute. We look down at our papers, at each other, at the ceiling, but not at the program director. Finally, she says *she'll* start. She writes 'Female' on the chalkboard. After a few seconds, Arissa shouts out another obvious context: 'African-American'.

Others join in. Bob is a middle child. I can relate to that. Jeremy is from a working class family. I can *certainly* relate to that. Amy, from Texas, mentions she's an Air Force brat. I bet we've had similar experiences. A blonde named Cate tells the group that she's addicted to "Sex and the City". Yes! A wave of relief washes over me. I'm not the only mainstream television watcher! I guess I'm *not* so different from everyone else in this room.

"Band geek!" "Bi-sexual!" "Catholic!" People are shouting out sobriquets with rapidity, now. I, too, am growing more comfortable. Perhaps, we're *all* different. No doubt, we're all a bit nervous. Someone might even be looking at me and thinking that I seem more like a writer than he or she. I wonder if anyone else, in this place, feels fraudulent.

"Cheerleader!" I shout. It comes out of nowhere. Did I just say that? I look up at the program director. She nods at me as if to say, "Yes, you *did* just say that." Then, she smiles at me as if to say, "And that's OK." As she turns to write the word 'Cheerleader' on the board, I look down at my context web. My name is in the center surrounded by identifiers and I realize that I'm all of these things...all at the same time. I'm a big city girl who just happens to be from a small town.

I'm feminine but, also, a feminist. I'm a writer and a cheerleader. I'm different, yet the same as everyone here. And I'm comfortable with that.

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