

OPEN LETTER TO SHARON DOUBIAGO

By MICHAEL VENTURA

February 12, 2010

Dear Sharon,

Since receiving your book, weeks ago, I've owed you a letter and an explanation. *My Father's Love: Portrait of the Poet as a Young Girl: A Memoir, Volume I* – how to tell you I can't read this book of yours? You spent 10 years writing it and I can't hardly open it, so, my friend, my *compañera* in the arts, you deserve to know why.

That piece I wrote about you in '93, the piece that began our friendship ["Physical Acts: Writing Poetry Sharon Doubiago's Way", available for no fee at www.michaelventura.org; go to "Search Ventura's Work by Topic" and scroll to Sharon Doubiago] quotes from your 1988 *The Book of Seeing With One's Own Eyes*: "The only art I'm interested in is of the intimate and personal facts of our existences. Most stories haven't been told yet. Sometimes I think the telling of these stories is the only thing that can save us."

In those terms, then:

I was shaped, like you, by incest and rape. Witness to madness (not once but continually, from age 6). Wracked by abandonment, homelessness, "food insecurity" (as they call it now), and the violence of the poor who have no one to turn their rage upon but each other – all by age 14. You know this about me. As with you, the parents who hurt me also deeply loved me. Our childhoods, though very different, are more alike than not. And we know ours are not special stories. Ours are the stories of millions, which is why self-pity is forbidden in contemplating the kinds of pasts we share. I reject it as absolutely as do you. I'm writing to say you kept intact something that I lost by 14 -- something that was burned out of me, something I never journeyed back to find. My dirty little secret is: I'm glad it was burned out of me. Even if it was a piece of my soul, I was glad to lose it. Which means, as you must know, that I was a co-conspirator in the loss.

It's a "something" hard to name. Let's get at it this way:

I write because that is what has been given me to do. So I felt by age 13; so I feel still. For me, it's a job, all of it -- the column, my poetry, my novels -- a working stiff's job. That's not meant to disparage. The world runs or totters as people do or fail to do their jobs. I feel what I do is no different, at its core, from what anybody else does to keep this crazy world going its crazy way. Cooks, mechanics, cab drivers (like my father), janitors, fruit-pickers, clerks, ranchers, teachers, nurses, construction workers, soldiers, Joes and Jans on assembly lines and in sweatshops – and models, lawyers, scientists, hookers, and the deformed guy in the motorized chair whose head bobs and whose arms don't work well when he rings the Salvation Army bell in front of my market in December and says "God bless you" in his spittle-splattered voice when I donate a dollar as I'm thinking, "It takes more courage to be you for a day than it takes to be me for a year." That's also what I think when I see a mother shop with kids in tow. All of us, doing our jobs, and I'm just one of the gang, one of the work force. I can't feel that what I do matters any more, or any less, than anyone's job. I'm an itinerant worker, the 13 year old homeless street kid, rescued by the kindness of strangers, who finally found his job to do and, with it, a way to be in the world. I write as well and true as I'm able, but I never had a sense of

mission. I like to think my writing is useful to some, and I write this column because I love the work of it, but that hardly makes for a sense of mission.

Wrote the novel of my childhood and placed it tenderly in a drawer. Haven't lifted a finger to get it published. Spent 40 years, on and off, writing a long poem that tells it all, tells everything; sent it to a few friends and let it, too, sleep in a drawer. I wrote those books to write them. That's all. I've worked hard on a novel these last two years, and it's at least a year from completion, when it, too, will join the others in the drawer. At this point in my life, the work, in itself, is enough.

But you, Sharon, you have the courage of a sense of mission. Every line, every paragraph, even every photograph of you, shimmers with that mission. "Sometimes I think the telling of these stories is the only thing that can save us." So you give 10 years of your life to tell the story of your incest, rape, transcendence, dance, grit – passionate to save us. Your constant work, faith and hope are a living prayer.

Don't get me wrong, I don't despair. My beliefs meld into one: At every moment there is every possibility. It's a quantum life.

But getting back to why I can't read your book:

In the Brooklyn I knew more than half a century ago, age 9 or 10, there was a park. In that park was a public bathroom. When I think of it, I see only a kind of white haze, permeable but impenetrable. On the other side of that haze the "big kids" are at it again with me. All of it, from those years – the incest, madness, rape -- I've written about them and written around them and learned to live with it, all of it, and I'm not even angry anymore. I've learned to respect everything that made me what I am. But I don't want to go back there.

I look at your book and know your story will evoke mine and, well – honestly, I can't say whether it's cowardice, maturity, or battle fatigue, just that I don't want to go back there. But when one of the few truly important writers in this country – you, Sharon Doubiago – spends ten years on a book, I can't let that go by, even if I don't want to go where the book goes. Hence this public letter.

When my brother Aldo died in 2004, age 54... well, it stripped me down, stripped me all the way. That next year and a half I wrote what I called my "oh shit" books.

In doing my job – being a writer – what I feared most was writing the "oh shit" books, defined as: A truck jumps a stop sign, and my last thought as it smashes into me is: "Oh, shit! I never finished the long poem that tells all I know! Oh, shit, I never wrote the novel of my childhood! Oh, shit, I never did the memoir about John Cassavetes!" So Al's death goaded me on. In my grief I completed the long poem, the memoir, and wrote the novel. (The memoir was published. Not by my effort. By a flip of fate.)

But Sharon – beautiful, brave Sharon – I can't open your book because I do not want to go back there. Went back as far as I could in the poem and the novel. I don't give a damn if anyone reads them. I wrote them to keep a pact with myself. Your pact, holier by far than mine, is with the world.

What I wrote of you in '93 stands: "As a man, it has been invaluable to me to be exposed to all the storms of Sharon Doubiago's sensibility. ...It is reading that enters my experience and *becomes* my experience, and feeds both the masculine and feminine within me *as* experience."

That's exactly why *My Father's Love* is beyond me now. Maybe someday I'll need to go back again to my early years, and your book will be the portal. My favorite line of

yours, from *Hard Country*: “Writing is a physical act, erotic and dangerous.” So is reading, when the writer is good enough. I still live dangerously, but I’ve learned to choose with care which dangers I engage. For me, it’s not time for the danger your book braves and invites.

With love, and beseeching your understanding,
Michael

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