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Nicholas Makoha

The Metic Experience: A Manifesto

THE question most writers ask me is what exactly is a Metic? The term means a foreigner whose allegiances are split between their homeland and their new country. The word itself comes from the word *metá*, indicating change, and *oikos* “dwelling”. In the ancient Greek city-state metics held a lower position in society. Being a citizen was a matter of inheritance. Metics did not become citizens unless the city chose to bestow citizenship on them as a gift, which rarely happened. Their political role was revoked. Metic is a Greek word which we might usefully read as a cognate of today’s bureaucratic term “resident alien”.

The Universal Metic Example: T. S. Eliot is contemporary poetry’s most celebrated Metic, born in Boston and moving to England in 1914 at the age of twenty-five. He became naturalised as a British citizen, renouncing his American citizenship. His poems are the bedrock of British poetry and he is celebrated as one of the finest examples of the English cannon. Matthew Hart charts for us Eliot’s metic experience in his paper ‘Visible Poet: T. S. Eliot and Modernist Studies’.

Hart points out:

Eliot was aware of being a metic and expresses this in a letter to his brother Henry in 1919:

“Don’t think that I find it easy to live over here. It is damned hard work to live with a foreign nation and cope with them—one is always coming up against differences of feeling that make one humiliated and lonely.”

But once we have got past the understanding of the metic, what next? A fish does not know it’s a fish until it steps out of the water. I am not trying to prove to you that you are a fish. I am more interested in what type of fish you are. The ocean is not just a bucket full of salmon. If

the ocean is literature and the fish is the poet, how can we identify your unique Metic experience? Furthermore, what agency does that give us in our writing?

I created the Metic Experience model, which I used to help me write *The Kingdom of Gravity* (Peepal Tree Press, 2017). It was from this discovery that I started to formulate ways of writing about Uganda. I wanted to avoid being imitative and predictable. I wanted to speak with urgency and grace about difficult things. It helped me deal with my shame. I had to get over my resistance to looking at my origins in Uganda and dealing with the trauma of fleeing Uganda because of the civil war during the Idi Amin dictatorship. I had to find a way to give myself permission to look into my past, to feel comfortable with my story. Indeed, a story is how we group the pattern of living, the explanation of life through personal and emotional truth, and a vehicle to search reality.

I have been investigating how black writers in exile are differentiated from natives, which I am using to explain the phenomena experienced by black writers in the UK and the US. The poets interviewed included seven African Americans (Chris Abani, Elizabeth Alexander, Gregory Pardlo, Danez Smith, Nate Marshall, Rita Dove, Terrance Hayes) and four Black British poets (Kei Miller, Kayo Chingonyi, Malika Booker and Anthony Joseph).

Metic writers are often homogenised in their experience, a homogeneity not allowed to be expressed in canonical tradition. Chris Abani distils this further when he says:

When you are a black person here, you are never an individual;
you are always a collective. Whiteness enjoys that idea of being an individual.
And so, whatever people have decided what the collective of blackness is,
that is what you are until proven otherwise.

The above writers are great examples of Black Metics. They are part of a new breed. The term encompasses them more than modernism, postmodernism, colonialism and postcolonialism. The historical terms act as forms of erasure. The term I hope counters this erasure. A Metic must negotiate the nuances of their story that consist of points of departure, return and initiation. At these thresholds of liminality there is an artistic opportunity to break through the myth of national identity. It is here that we can begin to recognize the Metic self that consists of the layered perceptions, multilevel systems and patterns of society, customary duties, and relational and familial positions. Each of us must seek to find our own Metic signature.

There are several observations to being a Metic:

1. Being a Metic is both liberating and isolating at the same time.
2. This liminality is brought about through one's experience of time and the way one moves through it.
3. Often Metic writers, when sharing their work, are homogenized in their experience.
4. Time, particularly the dimension of the present moment, is important to the Metic.
5. Oftentimes, Metics speak of a transplanted homeland.
6. Metics write to capture what they have come out of and there is a strong sense of place
7. The Metic uses art, as art endures its landscape and works against experiencing a sense of erasure.
8. Note that the Metic is not the alien; it is the area that he is transported to that exhibits the conditions of alienation.

What I am most interested in is the precision of identity that a Metic lens allows for. There are times when I want to be identified as an African writer, other times I would prefer Ugandan, other times Black-British, and other times I would like my life path to be represented: Ugandan born, but raised in England, Saudi Arabia and Kenya. Writers of colour often feel pigeon-holed, needing to claim a single identity and remain married to it. Being a Metic means being a

plural being, rather than a singular one. It pushes back against homogeneity. This manifesto is intended as a call to arms to claim the multitudes of our identities so that stereotypes about what we write will cease to inhibit our writing and our readership.