

Four Questions for Brian James Schill

Claire Harlan Orsi interviews the PS Fall 2012 Contributor
on his essay, “The Superego State: A Lover’s Reply”

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Brian James Schill is a North Dakota native. He teaches a variety of courses for the University of North Dakota Honors Program. His scholarship and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Clamor*, *Punk Planet*, *Extra!*, *Anarchist Studies* and elsewhere.

You write that you “can no longer ignore” the social and psychological ramifications of being a North Dakotan. Why do you think you’ve chosen to investigate this subject at this moment in your life? Was there a catalyst that provoked you to reflect on your state heritage?

I’ve actually been kicking these ideas around in my head for some time—years, in fact. I finally started to write some of this down perhaps 18 months ago and the essay slowly began to take shape. Then a series of events in 2011 and early 2012—the Marilyn Hagerty episode, the “Fighting Sioux” retirement and lawsuit and the rhetoric emerging from the Rick Berg/Heidi Heitkamp Senate campaign—seemed to come to a head around the same time and played nicely into what was beginning to be the essay’s theme of this state’s “bipolarity,” if you will, and its effect on people. Each of those examples helped me articulate things I’d been thinking about the roadside billboards for years. So, there wasn’t really any single catalyst, save the billboards, which have been screaming for a some sort of interpretation for years (beyond what the newspapers have written about them). Also, I suppose being a father of two young children—8 and 6—influenced my response as well. Specifically, I had to start trying to explain to curious little people why “those signs say that” along the highway and what the controversy was over the former UND nickname and logo, among other examples specific to this state.

Of the contradictory character of your state you write: “North Dakota is simultaneously independent, industrious, tight-knit, and kind; irrational, consumed by feelings of inadequacy, and surprisingly spiteful.” Of the disparate forces shaping Nodak life, what do you see as the most encouraging, a trend or movement that exemplifies the “better” character of your state?

A few things strike me as encouraging. The first is that despite the fact that this is a very conservative state there are signs this campaign season that the democratic candidates—who are still rather conservative, as is the case in Nebraska I’m sure (I’m thinking of Ben Nelson)—are making a strong showing in the polls at this time. We’ll have to see who wins, but that fact signals to me that many North Dakotans do make an effort to consider the person more than their ideology. We tend to want strong, positive, competent representatives in Bismarck and Washington, regardless of party affiliation. That’s stereotypically practical of us but also a good thing, I’d argue. Super PAC money and poor journalism is, of course, making a muddle of all of this, as it is everywhere, but this still signals to me that people here are perhaps

more knowledgeable about many political issues and serious about at least appearing “nonpartisan” than many typical American voters. In so doing we also challenge the conventional wisdom that America is divided or increasingly partisan and ideological or apathetic or whatever.

Another interesting development is worth noting. That United Church of Christ congregation led by Keith Mills, the minister I quote in the essay, had to sell its building since the journal went to print. But what happened was they ended up selling to the local Islamic Association. So now that building functions as an Islamic Center which rents the space back to the UCC church for Sunday morning Christian services. This all developed after the UCC church had been renting the former church to the Muslim group for months. So far the arrangement has been mutually beneficial, from my perspective at least; I’m not aware of any conflicts that have emerged between the groups. I know of nowhere else in the country (world?) where such a thing has occurred—Muslims and Christians literally worshiping together and sharing space. But it happened out here in North Dakota because it had to: both faith communities needed help and collaborated on at least a short term solution despite their differences. Out in the wilderness, so to speak, these North Dakotans did what in other places seems either crazy or impossible simply because they had no other options. And that can, at times, lead to surprisingly creative and cooperative developments for communities.

Also, the outcome of the “Fighting Sioux vote” mentioned in the essay was encouraging—two thirds of voters statewide voted in a June 2012 primary election to allow UND to drop the nickname—something that would’ve been impossible a decade ago. That too signals, if not egalitarianism, at least a better understanding of the issue and a certain pragmatism that allows us to move forward in all sorts of ways as a state. Critics would say the State Legislature and university only acted when forced to from without—when the cost of keeping the nickname and logo became greater than the cost of dropping it, which is fair. But I do think I’ve seen a shift in public opinion in the right direction on this for the right reasons over the last few years as well.

The other thing, though, is that in spite of the sometimes unsettling stories of the oil boom in the Western part of the state—if you read the newspaper accounts it’s almost like *The Road Warrior* out there with crime and E.R. usage skyrocketing, thousands people living in tent cities, pollution from hydraulic fracking escalating, and so on—there are indications that the current Administration may do something (or many things) productive and publicly-oriented with much of the tax revenue being generated by the state at the behest of the energy corporations out here. We’ll have to wait and see what that means specifically, but that’s positive and also provides some evidence for the state’s egalitarian self-image.

Do you think a writer has a particular responsibility to his/her place of origin?

It depends on what you mean by that question. If it means “does a writer have a responsibility to write about her place/people only?” the answer is obviously “No.” I know Louise Erdrich, for example, has taken heat from some writers—I think Leslie Marmon

Silko was one critic—not only for her style and characterization of Native people, but her decision to spend a lot of time writing about the German immigrant experience in North Dakota. This type of criticism is frustrating and limiting. There’s no reason that because Erdrich is part Native that she should be restricted to writing about American Indians on the northern plains in a certain, “positive” way—or prohibited from writing about gay German immigrants in the early 20th Century. And even if Erdrich may have certain insights into a particular place or people, so might a curious, committed, well-read outsider, as my essay suggests. And to suggest that simply because one is from a certain place they have a “responsibility” to that place might establish limits to a writer’s style, subject matter, and politics.

But if you mean “does a writer who does know a place well have a responsibility to be honest about it in print?—whether challenging outsiders’ stereotypes and inaccuracies or blowing the whistle on unsettling elements of a place from within—I guess I’d argue that everyone has a responsibility to all places always, to producing the most honest, piercing narrative or fiction or journalism possible, whatever the subject matter and context. Physical place is secondary to the idea that one should try to write well and honestly generally. I feel just as responsible to writing honestly and critically about North Dakota as I would Maine, were I to do an essay about Maine. But I don’t feel more compelled to write about North Dakota because I’m from here; I just chose to because I had an idea I wanted to run with, so I did. There’s a lot of fascinating material to work with here, as there is anywhere, if you know where to look or how to frame a piece. Even Maine.

Finally, you give the most intelligent, nuanced and generous reading of the Olive Garden review fiasco I’ve seen! I have to ask: do you eat at the Olive Garden? If so, do you do it earnestly, ironically or somewhere in between?

I’ve eaten at that chain in the past, but haven’t yet been to the one in Grand Forks. Everything I’ve heard about the place is that it’s fine, but it’s not really my scene. That said, what the reactionary readers—outside the state—of Hagerty’s review never seemed to even wonder was if Grand Forks has any other Italian restaurants. We do! There are a few local joints that are pretty good, maybe better, than the franchise in question. But the blogosphere didn’t care to know that, of course; this viral snapshot of North Dakota fit so nicely into stereotypes of this part of the world that most writers’ commentary and analysis was automatically askew. And, yes, spot-on at times. But incomplete generally. That relates to your previous question, of course—do people from outside a region have a greater responsibility to try to learn as much as they can and really understand a place before drawing broad conclusions or making public statements about it? I’d argue yes.

Perhaps more interesting, though, is that now Mrs. Hagerty has her own Girls Scout merit badge! No joke. It’s this round badge with her name and likeness embroidered into a fabric patch that young women can earn for whatever accomplishment or event—

it's not clear to me what yet. Talk about internalizing the Superego: the Girl Scouts here have that mastered well before adolescence.

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