

Interview with Rebecca Walker

JOY GUGELER



ON THE DAY AFTER SENATOR BARACK OBAMA HISTORICALLY triumphed to become the first African-American President, *Room's* Joy Gugeler spoke with Rebecca Walker who had been covering the election campaign for theRoot.com, where she blogs regularly about parenting, and the *Guardian's* Observer section. From her home in Hawaii, she spoke about how her famous parentage, biracial identity, and role as writer and mother have made her own history a unique lens through which to see the world poised for change.

Time named Rebecca Walker one of the fifty most influential

American leaders under forty because of her views on race, gender, sexuality and power. She is one of the original founders of the Third Wave Foundation—a non-profit to support young women ages fifteen to thirty working towards gender, racial, economic, and social justice—and lectures widely on intergenerational feminism, multiracial identity, and transformational human consciousness. She is the daughter of Alice Walker, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple*, and Mel Leventhal, a civil rights attorney responsible for several pivotal civil rights lawsuits over the last two decades.

ROOM: Though we often talk in broad terms about race and identity, we rarely define what these words mean for us personally. Can you speak to their significance in your own private lexicon, given years of writing about how the definition of each has evolved in parallel to your own journey?

RW: At this point in my life I re-evaluate these terms every day because the world, and my experience of it, is constantly changing, and there is no fixed sense of who I, definitely, am. My position of power is constantly shifting in relation to situations and individuals, and the way I engage racial performance or gender identity is varied, expansive rather than reductive. People project their expectations onto me based on portions of my life I've written about, or they've heard or read about, but despite my books exploring my identity, I don't think about it constantly.

I believe there isn't a transcendent, objective truth; we all have the freedom to choose the identity that most reflects our aspirations. I've let go of the tropes of the moment, ways others define my identity—blackness, femaleness, bisexuality, Americanness, able-bodiedness. I work to cultivate an identity that is more nuanced, more intuitive than these blanket terms.

ROOM: As the mother of a four-year-old boy, and the author of *Baby Love*, you've wrestled with how being a mother would, has, changed you in your own eyes and in those who know you. How has this new particular aspect of your identity surprised you?

RW: It's the first time I've felt I've belonged to a club. I feel such a primal attachment to my son, fierce, protective, maternal. I am not performing the role; the motherscript feels, in some ways, like the ultimate anti-performance. I've felt it so naturally.

This isn't to say that I don't occasionally become caught up in the "right" and "wrong" ways to mother, what I "should" and "shouldn't" do according to prevailing wisdom, but though I'm curious about other mothers' experiences and I'm often evangelical about the merits of motherhood, I also respect that it's a very private journey. I'm most surprised by how wholly I've embraced every aspect of it and made it my own. I'm also surprised by how many mistakes I make as a mother, even while trying to do a good job.

ROOM: You've written about many transformations you've made as a woman, in addition to motherhood, but you've also been an advocate for larger scale social transformation, from Third Wave feminist initiatives to anti-racism campaigns to pleas for religious tolerance. What progress do you feel we've made on these fronts and how is technology changing the way we create grassroots movements?

RW: Some media outlets would have us believe we've won the battle, but there are ways to avoid being mesmerized, persuaded, by what looks and smells like progress, but often isn't. In my experience, true change is most often found in communities that cultivate a continual state of openness, a backing away from judgment, safe spaces that open up new portals of being, spaces more immune to dogma and more encouraging of art as a means to heal.

I'm interested in Web 2.0 and connectivity in this regard. When I blog and write for online outlets, I feel the immediate presence of these communities. The Net offers us opportunities for revisioning the way we see the world and relate to each other globally. Consider its power and role in Obama's win. This may be the first post-ideological election. We don't just understand Obama, we *feel* him as a result of our interconnectedness with him through the Web's news feeds and Twitter threads.

I like pith and in an information-driven world, I'm open to any medium that allows me to get to the point and connect. The Web is perfect for this as long as we can monetize what we do digitally to create an economy that pays the creators; that's the rub.

ROOM: Given the current twenty-first-century default to be cynical or suspicious of virtually any belief, it's surprising that media studies classes and academia haven't quashed our ability to believe in a political leader, in the nation's future, in our own futures. As a student of academia, how have you embraced the seemingly opposing forces of theory and belief—in your case Buddhist practice—to forge your own future?

RW: As an academic, deconstruction was my god, I'd become too savvy about semiotic analysis and refused to believe in anything except the practice of taking things apart. It was so extreme that I eventually had to cut myself off from that mode of thinking in order to choose a partner, a child, a family. I had to suspend my training in order to make real choices. That's what *Baby Love* is all about: stepping outside of the critique and deciding that some things are more real or important to this human life than others. Sometimes deconstruction is a way to avoid making decisions; you contemplate directions but don't move.

I had to accept that I was a co-creator of my future and could step outside of the language of relativism in order to invite what I wanted. I had to dismantle that way of thinking and replace it with something more regenerative. Dharma, Buddhism, saved my life. I had to empty myself in order to accept that all ideas are valid, but they are just stars in the sky and the sky is vast. I had to neutralize the power of my inherited ideas in order to have new ones.

ROOM: Your father was a Jewish civil rights lawyer and your mother an internationally renowned writer of fiction and outspoken feminist and black activist. How did their beliefs influence your own identity before and after their early divorce?

RW: I was a sensitive young person and my body was a battleground for various wars—feminist, Zionist, black nationalist. What I eventually had to do was create space between my psyche and the dogma of those who had ideas of who I should be, what I should believe. I lived with people who were so wedded to their politics and identities that they couldn't truly care for the people in their lives.

It's cliché, but I had literally built my life on the political ideals of my parents, and until I let them go, I couldn't move beyond them, couldn't transition from ideology to something more archetypal, human. In rebuilding myself, I have had to be very conscious not to do to my son what they had done to me. It's hard, I'm successful about fifty percent of the time.

ROOM: The process you describe is not unlike giving birth to yourself, but you also said in *Baby Love* that you didn't think you could fully disengage from your own mother to do this until you'd had a child yourself, that is, ceased to be daughter in order to be a mother. Has birthing these books helped you articulate this growth, and how does the medium, print versus online, affect the process?

RW: I think I'm at the end of writing about family. I've resolved a lot and am ready to move on. I believe in the power of words, but I also have been around writers who are over-identified with their creations and that can be a trap. I'm not defined by my writer's persona or by print per se. I am bigger than the Word. Language itself is limiting. What I'd like to do is author my own life outside of other narratives, rebirth language in my own way to avoid its limitations. I really write to connect to readers for whom my work has meaning. I'm always reaching for new heights, but I fundamentally write to reveal, connect and affirm.

I'm inspired by writing on the Web, on its orientation toward relationships and transparency—audiences either believe you or they don't, they affiliate with you synergistically or they ignore you. There's no interlocutor, no brand shaping, it's very direct. By contrast, there's something almost oppressive about a book that gives the writer full and final ownership and locks it in a form (of course, like most writers, I'd resist alteration of my original work) and time as a means of control. Ideas are codified in this medium and though I participate in it, I'm contemplating it, starting to question it.

ROOM: As someone who's often asked to comment for the media on the feminist movement, having observed it for over two decades, how would you describe its present focus and what are your own thoughts on its agenda?

RW: Currently we're looking for intersections, global commonalities, helping women across the world escape from political, cultural, sexual, spiritual domination by regimes that keep them subservient and limit their mobility. The fashion in women's studies programs is "global feminisms" and though it's chic, exotic, and trendy, certainly necessary, it sometimes feels like an excuse to avoid advocacy for racial equality in our own local communities.

Because the feminist movement was initially very white, it's compensated now by swinging so far the other way that it feels manufactured. While these women around the globe are our sisters—we've chosen them rather than inherited them—abandoning our own families, biological and domestic, in order to care for them is a price we don't have to pay.

ROOM: As you say, it's so easy to allow ourselves to become overwhelmed by what needs to be done on the macro scale that we lose sight of opportunities for change in our own homes. Can you site some examples of "break-throughs" or opportunities you've identified in your own life as a mother, advocate, and feminist?

RW: Perhaps it's being a mother to a son, but I think the greatest gains are to be made in revising our understanding of masculinity. That's when I notice change happening in the room. Men are actually hungry for this, as women were thirty years ago. We have new role models for men now—Obama, Gore, the Dali Lama. They are a third alternative to the two dominant models—fight back or be beaten down.

Men have been brutalized psycho-emotionally and physically because it is deemed unmanly to question it. There is a war being waged against boys that both men and women need to end. I think this is one of the battles we can win, and that poses an exciting opportunity for a change that would benefit us all. The stakes are high for our sons and daughters. They deserve peace. They deserve to be free. We have to keep working.