



White Writing Teachers (or David Foster Wallace vs. James Baldwin)

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I

Unfortunately, at this point in history, very few white writers consider white identity as a prime area of investigation in their writing. Indeed, most white fiction writers don't ever think consciously about identifying their white characters as white; lacking a racial marker, characters are still to be regarded by default as white. Yes, there is a small but growing area of academia that investigates white identity, but most white writers can pass through a typical MFA program without ever needing to become aware of this field. Nor will most of these white MFA writers ever be told that a thorough knowledge of the literary traditions of writers of color is an essential requirement to the student being considered literate or becoming a writer.

This state of the world of writing will change. Recent literary controversies give proof to this, such as those involving Kenneth Goldsmith, Michael Derrick Hudson, Vanessa Place and Kate Gale, as well as controversies in other areas of culture, such as the continuing arguments between white and black feminists or comedians dealing with the issues of race. In the most useful of these responses, white identity is now being critiqued not simply as the actions of one egregious or insensitive individual or as an occasion for outrage, but as a set of social practices and beliefs. To dismantle white identity requires the identification of these social practices and beliefs and their connection to the racial inequities that continue to exist in our society (inequities which, as in areas such as income inequality, are growing). In this way, the practices and beliefs of whiteness are obviously political—that is, they have an effect upon the distribution of power in our society and how that power is distributed unequally and undemocratically by race.

In this essay, I focus on an essay of David Foster Wallace and use Wallace's interactions with his black students as an illustration of where the interactions between a white professor and a student of color can break down. As anyone familiar with his work knows, Wallace was nothing if not self-conscious. Yet for all his self-consciousness, Wallace, thinking himself armed with the best intentions, failed the black students he refers to in his essay. Beyond this, he did not, and was unable to, treat them as equals even when he thought he was doing so. What happened in these interchanges was a clash of epistemologies. One might have thought that Wallace, given his intelligence and even his readings

in black literature, might have understood this. But it wasn't Wallace's intelligence or literary reading which failed him. It was his pride. He was unable to admit that there were things about his black students, about who they were and how they thought and what they had experienced, that he did not know. He could not entertain that he might not know what he did know. To do so, would have been to admit a boundary to his knowledge as a white person in regards to the world of his black students *that he was unaware of*, and that he could not do.

I'm a third generation Japanese American writer. I come at these issues of race being neither white nor black. As a teenager, growing up in a white suburb, I wanted to be white; I wanted others to regard me as white. And then I realized I was not white, and I had to investigate my own identity both racially and ethnically in ways I had never imagined. Part of this investigation involved learning both from black writers and their works. Today it involves learning from writers, colleagues and students whose backgrounds stem from countries I never even thought about while growing up—Dominican, Nigerian, Palestinian, Sri Lankan, Liberian, Columbian, Iranian, the list spans the globe. I know that I have to keep learning, that I have so many areas of ignorance.

Whiteness views itself as central, universal, objective, essential, all knowing. This identity has to change in order to see what whiteness leaves out, what whiteness is ignorant of, what whiteness does not know.

David Foster Wallace was just a symptom of the stance of whiteness, as my opening anecdote will reveal.

II

The other day, a black writer friend recounted her experience in an MFA program. On the first day of class, the white professor took my black friend aside and advised my friend that she should go over to the remedial English center for some instruction, since there were grammatical errors involving verb conjugation in her poems. My black friend explained that the poems were written in black vernacular. The white professor responded that if my friend continued to write in that way, her poems would not be published.

I shouldn't have to add this, but my friend not only went on to publish poems and complete her MFA; she also earned a Ph.D. in English literature and later worked internationally for the US government. My friend was acutely aware of the differences between black speech and the conventions of white literary and professional language. On the other hand, the professor's ignorance of the tradition of African American literature or, say, critical works like Henry Louis Gates *The Signifying Monkey* or Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* was not an issue my friend, as a student, felt she could bring up.

In his introduction to *Dismantle: An Anthology of Writing from VONA* (a conference for writers of color), Junot Diaz critiques the damage done to student writers of color in MFA programs and the racism and ignorance of their professors and fellow students:

I've worked in two MFA programs and visited at least 30 others and the signs are all there. The lack of diversity of the faculty. Many of the students' lack of awareness of the lens of race, the vast silence on these matters in many workshop. I can't tell you how often students of color seek me out during my visits or approach me after readings in order to share with me the racist nonsense they're facing in their programs, from both their peers and their professors. In the last 17 years I must have had at least three hundred of these conversations, minimum. I remember one young MFA'r describing how a fellow writer (white) went through his story and erased all the 'big' words because, said the peer, that's not the way 'Spanish' people talk. This white peer, of course, had never lived in Latin America or Spain or in any US Latino community—he just knew. The workshop professor never corrected or even questioned said peer either. Just let the idiocy ride. Another young sister told me that in the entire two years of her workshop the only time people of color showed up in her white peer's stories was when crime or drugs were somehow involved. And when she tried to bring up the issue in class, tried to suggest readings that might illuminate the madness, her peers shut her down, saying Our workshop is about writing, not political correctness. As always race was the student of color's problem, not the white class's. Many of the writers I've talked to often finish up by telling me they're considering quitting their programs.

When Diaz placed a shortened version of this introduction on the New Yorker website, the responses in the commentary section revealed a barrage of ad hominem attacks and responses from white writers denying the truth of Diaz's own MFA experience as well as the experiences of other student writers of color. There was also the usual response by white writers, Well, I haven't seen this or that form of racial bias or insensitivity or ignorance—as if only if the white writer himself has seen things with his own eyes can he actually believe the accounts of people of color (which is not, in its essence, that different from the response of white Americans to black accounts of police brutality and injustice; the words of black Americans were not enough because, well, just because; there needs to be video proof).

Long ago, Richard Wright remarked that black and white Americans were engaged in a struggle over the description of reality. Despite our current rhetoric of a post-racial society, that struggle is still taking place today between white writers and writers of color. Where we are going in this struggle is difficult to say.¹

What would it take to prepare writer professors and students to be able to critique the writings of students of color?

Obviously, part of this is a matter of reading. In his essay "POC vs. MFA" Diaz writes the dominant literary tradition in his MFA program: "From what I saw the plurality of students and faculty had been educated exclusively in the tradition of writers like William Gaddis, Francine Prose, or Alice

1. We all know that we are coming to a point where whites will no longer be the majority racial group in our country; indeed, this year, 2012, was the first year in which more babies of color were born than white babies. Is it difficult to believe that with such demographic changes, at some point, the default race of an unidentified character will no longer be white? And if that is changed, will the aesthetics of white writers finally be forced to grapple with the realities most writers of color have been grappling with along? And finally when will writers of color begin to be read with an understanding of the complexity and literary merit that their works deserve?

Munro—and not at all in the traditions of Toni Morrison, Cherrie Moraga, Maxine Hong-Kingston, Arundhati Roy, Edwidge Danticat, Alice Walker, or Jamaica Kincaid.” Diaz provides here a contrast between a list of white writers and a list of writers of color. If you’re a white writer and have not read the names on the second list, you need to start reading.

Even in 2015, you can become a very famous and accomplished white writer without feeling like you have to be familiar with writers of color. I know a writer of color who told a white writer friend, “If you don’t read Baldwin, we can’t be friends any more.” This white writer was in his forties and soon won a MacArthur Fellowship; he’s someone who could quote poems from any number of East European poets who had studied Greek, Israeli or Latin American writers. But this same white writer considered himself well-educated without having read Baldwin.

But it’s not just that white writers should be reading more writers of color. In order to confront the writings of people of color, the white writer must also be familiar with the cultural, intellectual, historical and political contexts of these writings. Du Bois’ double consciousness, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin White Masks*, the essays of Baldwin or bell hooks or Audre Lorde are literary works, but they’re also part of an intellectual tradition of writing about and theorizing race. To understand these writers like Baldwin or Lorde, one needs to be familiar with the history of black culture, from Fredrick Douglass to the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts and Black Power movements, not to mention the history of black music, obviously including hip-hop; then all that needs to be seen in the context of specific criticism about black literature such as Henry Louis Gates *The Signifying Monkey* or the more recent example of Kevin Young’s *The Grey Album*. Similarly, a familiarity with immigration history is critical to an understanding of Asian American literature. Such literature should also be contextualized through the history and theoretical understanding of colonialism, such as the work done by Edward Said in his seminal *Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism*. This theoretical context is necessary to understanding say David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly* or Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dogeaters*.

One can do reading lists, and they are useful. But what is more difficult to change is the basic mindset of so many white writers, a mindset with both conscious and unconscious components. That mindset assumes that the reality of people of color, their lives and their consciousness, are secondary and minor, are not Universal, are not required understanding, are optional. Obviously, when my writer of color friend demanded that his white writer friend read Baldwin, that white writer was making an obvious choice not to read Baldwin, a choice based upon the belief that Baldwin was not a canonical writer, was inessential.

The same mindset is what Toni Morrison refers to when she writes in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, “For reasons that should not need explanation here, until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white. I am interested to know what that assumption has meant to the literary imagination. When does racial

2. What is at work here is a difference between an unconscious assumption about how race works in the reception of literature and a conscious knowledge of how race works in the reception of literature. White writers can and do remain unconscious of readers of color; writers of color must be conscious of white readers, even if, ultimately, they decide not to write to accommodate white readers. It is an unconsciousness of the issues of race in literature which enables and fosters the racial “metaphorical shortcuts” and tropes used by the white authors Morrison examines in *Playing in the Dark*.

“unconsciousness” or awareness of race enrich interpretative language, when does it impoverish it?” Though Morrison qualifies her statement by the phrase “until very recently,” one wonders how many white writers today actually wrestle with how their work might be received by readers of color. Whereas, every writer of color is certainly aware that white readers will be reading their work; the writer of color is aware that the evaluation of her work in the so-called mainstream literary world will, to a large part, be influenced by what white readers make of her work.²

In viewing the difficulties of her position in terms of writing about race, Morrison asks: “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal” or race-free? In other words, how is “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” made, and what is the consequence of that construction?” For the writer of color, an awareness of these issues are crucial to that writer’s development. As Morrison points out, her dangers are not in resorting to the tropes white writers have used to construct “literary blackness”:

Neither blackness nor “people of color” stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. My vulnerability would lie in romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it; vilifying whiteness rather than rectifying it. The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.

This passage brings up a key issue regarding the teaching of writing: What if the work of a student writer of color displays some of these missteps Morrison alludes to here?³ In your typical MFA program, would the white professor be aware of these “racially informed and determined chains” Morrison refers to? To achieve such awareness, the white writing professor would have to have educated herself in the same tradition Morrison writes out of and is thoroughly familiar with. To conduct her class properly, that white writing professor would also have to educate the white writers in the class in the same tradition if the white writing professor is going to prepare the class to deal with the work of student writers

3. At VONA, a conference for writers of color where I teach, the work of writers of color is often critiqued for the weaknesses Morrison alludes to here. This is part because the teachers of color at VONA have worked to understand the literary and intellectual traditions out of which the work of writers of color has emerged; the teachers of color at VONA can contextualize the work of student writers of color in ways that many white writing teachers are unable to do since those white writing teachers have done their homework. But beyond this, at VONA, the students of color are in a classroom with other writers of color, and while some of the writers of color may not have yet acquired the literary and intellectual knowledge of their teachers, the writers of color in the class have lived lives as people of color and come out of communities of color, and so their life experiences enables them to detect when the student writer of color is taking a short cut, is “romanticizing blackness rather than demonizing it,” is avoiding or silencing the complexities of people of color.

of color. But even with that, neither the white writing professor nor the white students would bring to the class a lifetime of experiences living as people of color in this society and interacting with a community of color.

But let's say the white writing professor has done this literary and intellectual work, and let us acknowledge that a white writing professor might have educated herself enough to read the work of students of color within the broader context of both white writers and writers of color, of American writers and global writing. There are still other questions to be asked. First, would the white writing professor feel comfortable critiquing the student of color? Secondly, would the white writing professor be able to provide her critique in a way that the student of color would trust and respond to positively?

II

In order to answer these questions, let me start with a "talk" David Foster Wallace would give to certain of his students of color. This talk didn't involve creative writing specifically, but it does reveal certain racial dynamics that occur between a white professor and a student of color, dynamics Wallace seems unconscious and ignorant of. For the relationship between a white writing professor and a student of color involves more than differences between them in terms of a knowledge of the work and traditions of writers of color.

In an essay, "Authority and American Usage," in *Consider the Lobster*, Wallace gives a written version of his specialized talk. This is how it starts off:

I don't know whether anybody's told you this or not, but when you're in a college English class you're basically studying a foreign dialect. This dialect is called Standard White English. From talking with you and reading your first couple essays, I've concluded that your own primary dialect is [one of the three variants of SBE common to our region].

Wallace goes on to explain some differences between Standard White English and Standard Black English. He then concludes:

I'm respecting you enough here to give you what I believe is the straight truth. In this country, SWE is perceived as the dialect of education and intelligence and power and prestige, and anybody of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender who wants to succeed in American culture has got to be able to use SWE. This is just How It IS. You can be glad about it or sad about it or deeply pissed off. You can believe it's racist and unfair and decide right here and now to spend every waking minute of your adult life arguing against it, and maybe you should, but I'll tell you something—if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously, you're going to have to communicate them in SWE, because SWE is the dialect our nation uses to talk to itself. African-Americans who've become successful and important in US culture know this; that's why King's and X's and Jackson's speeches are in SWE, and why Morrison's and Angelou's and Baldwin's and Wideman's and Gate's and West's books are full of totally ass-kicking SWE, and why black judges

and politicians and journalists and doctors and teachers communicate professionally in SWE.... And [STUDENT'S NAME], you're going to learn to use it, too, because I am going to make you.

Wallace then comments about this "spiel" and the way it was received by his students of color:

I should note here that a couple of the students I've said this stuff to were offended—one lodged an Official Complaint—and that I have had more than one colleague profess to find my spiel "racially insensitive." Perhaps you do, too. This reviewer's own humble opinion is that some of the cultural and political realities of American life are themselves racially insensitive and elitist and offensive and unfair, and that pussyfooting around these realities with euphemistic doublespeak is not only hypocritical but toxic to the project of ever really changing them.

One of the clues for me that this is a white guy talking is the phrase "This reviewer's own humble opinion...." There's nothing humble at all about how Wallace is addressing these students of color and critiquing their English. Wallace not only knows that he is an expert in discussing the academic arguments surrounding SWE and SBE, but he is also convinced he knows the way the world works, and he knows what respect is, and he knows what it is to tell the "truth." He assumes there is one version of the "truth" and that he has simply laid down that "truth" to the student of color—and to whatever colleagues who find him "racially insensitive." He is giving the student of color a gift, and she ought to see that. If the student rejects his gift, then it's all on the student; the student simply doesn't want to hear the truth. Similarly, his colleague who calls him "racially insensitive" is wrong; Wallace, cannot be "racially insensitive" since he is not a hypocrite, "pussyfooting around," but instead is telling the "truth."

Wallace's talk presumes an unquestioned preeminence of SWE—as a sociological, political and cultural fact. But it's hard for me or many writers of color to accept this premise. I could point to various works of literature which use SBE, like *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as evidence of Wallace's myopia. Or I could point out that when he says, "if you ever want those arguments to get listened to and taken seriously..." he's presuming an audience that accepts SWE is the standard audience of "education and intelligence and power and prestige". In other words, he's saying if you want to change things, you have to get that audience to listen to you. An audience who speaks primarily SBE cannot possibly change things (not an assumption Martin Luther King would have made).⁴ In obvious and not so obvious ways, Wallace is speaking the language of white supremacy, even as he seems to disavow

4. Obviously, Wallace isn't referring here to the black audience for hip-hop lyrics (despite the fact that he did write an essay on hip-hop), nor can he envision a world where those who speak SBE as their first dialect might ever be a primary audience. In other words, his very language relegates the community out of which the student who speaks and writes in SBE to a secondary status—not just politically or culturally but on a basic human level. And Wallace doesn't see that he's doing this.

5. And thus, one might be cautious about picking up the master's tools.

6. I'm excluding Wallace's until recently long out of print *Signifying Rappers*, which he co-authored with his roommate Mark Costello.

any racism on his part. Apparently, he doesn't believe Audre Lorde's famous observation might be relevant here--that the tools of the master will never dismantle the master's house.⁵

In his nonfiction, this passage is the only instance where Wallace actually says anything about any writers of color.⁶ But the problem here is not that Wallace has not read black writers. Rather, it's that Wallace seems to think that somehow that his allusions to Toni Morrison and Gates—that is, his seeming knowledge of black literature—provides him with free reign to say whatever he wants to his black student. For Wallace his seeming familiarity with this literature means that he understands the reality of black life in America in regards to the use of SWE and SBE. But it's difficult, if not impossible, for me to imagine Toni Morrison or Jonathan Edgar Wideman giving a talk exactly like this to a black student—which is not to say that Toni Morrison or Wideman would not want to the black student to learn SWE. Nor does Wallace imagine how even the same speech he makes might be heard differently by a black student if Toni Morrison were giving that speech.

Wallace maintains that he is not engaging in anything “toxic,” and yet he does not for an instant seem to entertain the possibility that his position as a white male professor might make his student regard him as potentially “toxic.” He's speaking to an African American student who comes from a community where SBE is the dominant language, and yet he exhibits no understanding of what that student's life might have been like, the distance she might have traveled to get to his office. He seems to have no idea how much she might distrust both him, the white male professor, and the institution he represents, how his very words might simply confirm and echo the stereotypes she suspects are in the minds of the white people she encounters at this predominantly white institution.

Wallace here presumes he knows what the student of color needs, and what that student needs is to hear and heed Wallace's spiel on SBE and SWE. Moreover, that student of color should know that Wallace means her well because Wallace knows he means that student of color well. Any doubt on the student's part of Wallace's intentions or his truth is irrelevant. The only reality—and “truth”—that matters is Wallace's. Wallace considers his own epistemology here to be the only relevant epistemology. He doesn't seem to consider that in his encounter with his black student, Wallace is encountering a very different epistemology than Wallace's. The less than satisfactory reaction to his talk stems from this clash of epistemologies.

Recall Wright's implication that white and black America are engaged in a struggle over the description of reality.

I showed Wallace's talk to a black poet friend. He said that his parents did instruct him that he should learn what Wallace describes as Standard White English. My friend was familiar from an early age that he should learn both SWE and SBE. But then he said that if David Foster Wallace had talked this way to him, my black poet friend—one of the most gentle and congenial people I know—would have wanted to strangle Wallace.

In short, aside from some of its faulty premises, Wallace's whole spiel is wrong-headed in tone and approach. And he is completely unaware of the possibility of this.

That he is unaware of that is not surprising. Wallace gives his whole talk in SWE. He instructs the

black student that she should consider him as a representative audience of the powerful in this country and that if she wants to reach that audience she should learn SWE.

But Wallace makes a fundamental mistake that is part of any basic instruction in rhetoric—you must be aware of your audience and how your message will be received by that audience. Wallace has no idea how what he is saying and the way he is saying it will be received by a black student whose first dialect is SBE and who is in her first or second year at a university where the standard language is SWE and where the faculty and students are overwhelmingly white—a black student who is listening to a white male professor tell her what the social reality of this country is and what she will need to get ahead in this country no matter what her path will be in life. In other words, Wallace has no idea how his “truth” will be heard by the black student.

Oh wait. He does. He’s offended them.

But wait. Their sense of offense doesn’t matter. He, Wallace, is telling the truth. That is all that matters. He knows he is not racially insensitive. And that’s that.

It’s clear Wallace never stops to ask his black student: “Why do you think I’m being racially insensitive? Is there something here I’m missing?”⁷

So what would I do with a student like the students Wallace addresses in his spiel? First of all, I would try to be cognizant of the fact that SBE has been the language of this student and her community; any hint of disrespect of that language from me would be taken as disrespect towards that student and her community. I would understand that SBE is the language spoken by those who love this student and whom this student loves, those who brought her up and those in the community in which she grew up. So I had best tread lightly lest in any way I insult those she loves and those who helped raise her and those who supported her and made her who she is. I would recognize that the elephant in the room is the assumption that those who speak SBE are less intelligent, less complex human beings, and are marked by the language they speak for second-class status as citizens. I would understand that even if I do not share this prejudice, there is little reason for the student to believe that’s the case; indeed, there

⁷ As an Asian American, what I hear in Wallace’s spiel and his comment on the reactions to that spiel is the arrogance of smarty-pants white guy. That arrogance makes me take anything Wallace might say to me with a certain skepticism. That arrogance sends up warning signs—This person does not mean you well. This person presumes that he knows more about the world than you. This person presumes that there is only one way of looking at the truth. This person doesn’t give a fuck in the end about how you might respond to his words. Even his lines that would seem to throw me a bone, like “You can believe it’s racist and unfair,” he’s already put my belief in the realm of the subjective and relative, whereas his belief about the primacy and necessity of SWE is objective and Universal. And as I read this letter, as an Asian American who did not grow up speaking SBE, I have a strong suspicion that two seconds into any discussion on race with Wallace, I would want to leave the room. He’s the type of white guy who thinks he’s thought it all out in terms of race, and there’s nothing I could say to him about what I know or my experiences that would ever cause him to doubt that he’s anywhere other in the exact right place, the place of “truth,” when it comes to anything dealing with race. Deep inside, I know he’s not on my side; he doesn’t want the best for me. And he has no fucking clue who I might be or how a creature like me might exist. The proof of this would be for each of us to write a description of our encounter and inhabit each other’s consciousness as part of that description. I am absolutely certain I could write a fuller and more accurate description of Wallace’s consciousness than he of mine. And yet he would walk away from the encounter believing that I was the one who was being narrow-minded.

are many good reasons for her to suspect that I do hold such prejudices—and this would be even more so if I were white like Wallace.

At the same time, I would understand that SBE has been used by American blacks for centuries and has enabled them to survive slavery, Jim Crow and contemporary American racism, and under those conditions, American blacks have used SBE to create aspects of American culture which are essential to all Americans no matter their color. I would acknowledge that all Americans have a debt to SBE and those who have spoken it for their contributions not just to American culture, but to American history and justice. I would understand that while someone like Martin Luther King, Jr. learned SWE, there were thousands of his followers whose primary language was SBE and without whom King would not have been able to accomplish what he did, that the Civil Rights movement was not just the SWE speaking King but unsung blacks who spoke SBE and who faced down death threats and jail and the KKK in order to rid America of Jim Crow segregation.

Taking all this into account, in facing this student, I would assume that because I'm an Asian American, that student might have some distrust of me. Certainly, the student would regard whatever I say differently than if a black professor or her parents were saying something similar about SWE and SBE. I would assume that I needed to know more about the individual student. I might have pockets of ignorance concerning who that student is and what that student's experiences have been and what his or her particular truths might be. I would know that until I earn the student's trust, I would have to proceed with caution. I can't presume the student should trust me and what I say. I would know that in the interchange between the teacher and the student, it is not just the student who is or should be critiqued. The student is critiquing me. And I would know that the society the student lives in has probably given that student a lot of reasons to regard me with wariness. Many people of color, for instance, are aware that Asian Americans are viewed as the model minority, and that many Asian Americans have chosen to play the "honorary white" status in order to be accepted by the white majority. Finally, I would have to learn more about the student as an individual—her background, how she sees herself and her place at the University, what has motivated her to work to get to where she is, for clearly she hasn't gotten here without overcoming any number of barriers I might not be aware of. I would take clues from her as to what she thinks she might need from me, which might not, at this moment, be a spiel about SWE and SBE, but simply to feel as if she just might be able to trust me, that I'm here to help her, despite our racial difference and the differences in our backgrounds. I would know that the first thing I would have to do with this student would be to establish trust, to establish an authentic relationship with her based on who I am and on my acquiring knowledge of who she is.

So if my black students might have reasons to distrust me as an Asian American, how would they approach a white professor like David Foster Wallace? Wallace can't or won't let himself imagine why his black students might distrust him, nor what their experiences have been that have reinforced that distrust. Nor does he think it his job to try to earn their trust. He does not feel the need to understand his black student's reality or to empathize or identify with how she views her world and his place in it—not that he should become her, which he can't, but that he should try at least for a moment to

understand what it is like to walk in her shoes.

After all why should he do this? He's a white male professor. The student is supposed to listen to him. Submit to his authority and superior knowledge.

Every summer for the past twelve years, I've taught VONA, a writers of color conference. When I teach at VONA, I come with a certain imprimatur. Students of color at VONA assume that my credentials for teaching students of color have been vetted. But with each student at VONA, I know I am in the process of winning their trust, and until I do that, anything I say about their work will be complicated by that lack of trust. I also know that writers are writers, and when we are criticized, we will look for ways of discounting that critique; in that case, any reasons for distrusting the person who is doing the critiquing becomes a reason not to hear that person. Beyond this, given what most writers of color have experienced in the education system, they do have reasons to distrust the intentions of their teachers. So I have to prove to the students of color that they can trust me, that I am not part of the system that has maligned and insulted and damaged them. And in this work, yes, the more I know about the literature of the student's racial or ethnic group, the more the student will trust me.

But literary knowledge is not sufficient. Literary knowledge is only one type of knowledge. There is a knowledge which comes from social interactions with people from that student's racial and ethnic group; the more of that knowledge I have, the more that knowledge will shape my interactions with the student, and so acquiring that knowledge will make it easier for me to earn the student's trust.

The fact that Wallace never discusses whether his students of color should trust him is a testament to his arrogance and his mentality as a genius white dude. But I'm not a genius white dude. I've had experiences where people assume English—any kind of English—is not my first language. I've had experiences where people have assumed I am not American or was not born here. I've had experiences where my authority as a teacher is challenged on a racial basis, and I've seen that happen to other teachers of color. At the same time, I've had experiences with people and friends of different races which have shown me how little I know about the experiences and lives of other people of color, and how much I have to learn. As a result of all this, I know my own life, my experiences, my community are seen by the mainstream culture as secondary, minor, or even not worth mentioning. I know that many of my deeply personal truths will always be considered subjective, personal, relative and non-Universal. Because of all this, I can never speak with the certainties and assumptions Wallace makes here in his spiel to his students of color who have used SBE in their compositions.

Here we get to a requirement which is not often discussed in the teaching of creative writing, and perhaps cannot be adequately discussed in that realm, but I'm going to talk about it anyway: That requirement is spiritual humility.

For me the basic text for the spiritual examination of race are the writings of James Baldwin. Lately, I've been reading the essays of Baldwin in conjunction with Norman Mailer, a writer who, back in the day, was considerably more famous than Baldwin and who today is far less read than Baldwin. While here and there, Baldwin's ties to his own times seem to date his work slightly, in so many telling ways, Mailer's essays seem much more dated historically. In particular, there's a timelessness and a

contemporary relevance to Baldwin's insights into race that Mailer's essays on the subject lack. This is particularly true for Mailer's famous essay from the 50's, "The White Negro," a rhetorically dense mash celebrating an outlaw or renegade white identity and aligned partly with the Beats and a white conception of hipness. Baldwin wrote his essay, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in part a response to Mailer's "The White Negro" and also to another essay "The Talent in the Room," where Mailer rates his contemporaries, including Baldwin, in ways that are less than flattering.

In "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," there's a key section where Baldwin lays out his differences with Mailer as a typical white man:

There is a difference, though, between Norman and myself in that I think he still imagines that he has something to save, whereas I have never had anything to lose. Or, perhaps I ought to put it another way: the things that most white people imagine that they can salvage from the storm of life is really, in sum, their innocence. It was this commodity precisely which I had to get rid of at once, literally, on pain of death. I am afraid that most of the white people I have ever known impressed me as being in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order, against which dream, unfailingly and unconsciously, they tested and very often lost their lives. It is a terrible thing to say, but I am afraid that for a very long time the troubles of white people failed to impress me as being real trouble. They put me in mind of children crying because the breast has been taken away.

The contemporary version of these last sentences is "white people's problems". This contemporary term connotes a certain awareness—or is it deflection—on the part of white people of the privileges bestowed upon them as white people. But the protection of white innocence? That continues, that continues to this day.⁸

White writers who continue to resist the inclusion of the writings of people of color or who, both consciously and unconsciously, relegate such writings to a secondary status are indeed "in the grip of a weird nostalgia, dreaming of a vanished state of security and order" in which their lives and imaginations and works are primary and unchallenged in their primacy. But this belief in the primacy of white writing is something slightly different than the belief that no matter the challenge or charge of

8. One sees manifestations of this not just in white conservatives, but in white liberals, of which, perhaps the writers at the Associated Writing Programs conference here is one the epicenters. I am never more aware we live in this country in segregated racial realities than I am at the AWP conference. At the recent conference in Minneapolis, I went to a group reading each of the four nights. Three were readings by writers of color—Cave Canem (the African American poets conference), The Loft EQ Spoken Word Reading (mainly of local Minneapolis poets of color), and VONA (a writer's of color conference). In these readings race, politics, history, and community all came up, and of course all the events of the past year which have prompted the Black Lives Matter and the Million Artists movements. But on one night at AWP I went with a Black poet friend to a reading of about 25 white poets and one Asian American poet. Other than my Black poet friend, none of the poem engaged race, politics, history or community; none of the poets made any reference to the killings of Blacks by police in the past year. These white poets—and the Asian American poet—seemed to live in a very different country than the poets of color I'd listened to on the other three nights at AWP.

racism or racial bias, the white writer or the white writing professor must be innocent. David Foster Wallace's self-absolution against the charges of racial insensitivity is just one example of this. In his essay, "Stranger in the Village," Baldwin observes: "People who shut their eyes to reality invite their own destruction, and anyone who insists on remaining in a state of innocence long after that innocence is dead turns himself into a monster."

Throughout his interchange with his black students, Wallace insists on his innocence. What buoys his sense of innocence is ignorance: Wallace does not know what he does not know. Wallace is unaware of how much he does not understand about who his black students are or what their lives have been like or how they might regard him; he has never questioned how the ways he regards them might still shaped by an ideology and psychology of white supremacy, since Wallace thinks he, like so many white liberals, has escaped all that. Your average white writing instructor just knows he or she cannot be guilty of racism or racial bias; that is impossible.

And yet, lingering within the consciousness of white writers and whites in general, resides the suspicion that they are guilty of such charges. Only what happens if they allow that guilt to rise to their consciousness? How will they be able to look at themselves? How will they be able to live with themselves? How will they be able to interact with people of color if they the white person know they are guilty? Will the people of color be able to detect that guilt? And what does that guilt consist of?

As Baldwin observes, it is not people of color who are fooled by protestations of white innocence. It is white people who are fooled, or rather, who fool themselves.

What if Wallace had said to himself, "Maybe I am being racially insensitive. Maybe the anger and hurt expressed by my black students at my spiel is justified. Where is the truth in my black students' reactions against me that I don't see? What are my limitations in understanding of who they are and how they see me? What if there are consequences of my actions that I don't see? What if my words have an affect I am not aware of? And what if my blindness to all that is my own racism?"

If Wallace had asked such questions of himself, he might have opened himself to a whole new way of thinking about the world. Certainly, his exchanges with his black students would have produced very different results. He might have then allowed the possibility of engaging his black students on a level where they were both equal; in such an equality, his own ignorance and his own guilt would need to be seen not in a white context, but a black context. And that would include the weight of negative racial stereotypes society has placed upon his black students, stereotypes which have implicitly and explicitly denigrated these students, and therefore hoisted upon them a weight that they are told they must carry—and yet, at the same time Wallace and other white liberals, can feel excluded from either any responsibility for the negative effects of these stereotypes. So Wallace would have to take responsibility for the ways he and other whites are subconsciously buoyed by these stereotypes and can easily ignore the effect of these stereotypes upon people of color. Perhaps there would be many things about this system that his black student might teach him about; perhaps there is a huge portion of our social reality—the lives of people of color—that Wallace might be relatively ignorant of.

But such a stance on Wallace's part would have required humility, true spiritual humility. It's really

the belief in his white innocence which Wallace cannot give up.

Is it because he was considered a white genius dude? Probably not, since the qualities he exhibits are those shared by many liberal white professors, the vast majority of which are not geniuses. At the same time, if you're a black genius or a black gay genius, as Baldwin was, you have already been taught the hard lessons of humility and guilt, and in many ways, your recovery depends upon the reclamation of your innocence, rather than the claiming of a guilt that was placed upon you from birth and which you can never quite escape. But you cannot ever lose your humility, or at least the knowledge that attempts to humiliate you are just around the corner. So you know that you can always become a stranger entering a foreign village, and in that state of transition, as Baldwin so eloquently expressed in *The Devil Finds Work*, your own identity is constantly in progress, constantly in the process of revision and reformulation:

The question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic--a terror as primary as the nightmare of the mortal fall. This question can scarcely be said to exist among the wretched, who know, merely, that they are wretched and who bear it day by day--it is a mistake to suppose that the wretched do not know that they are wretched; nor does this question exist among the splendid, who know, merely, that they are splendid, and who flaunt it, day by day: it is a mistake to suppose that the splendid have any intention of surrendering their splendor. An identity is questioned only when it is menaced, as when the mighty begin to fall, or when the wretched begin to rise, or when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger's presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself. Identity would seem to be the garment with which one covers the nakedness of the self; in which case, it is best that the garment be loose, a little like the robes of the desert, through which robes one's nakedness can always be felt, and sometimes, discerned. This trust in one's nakedness is all that gives one the power to change one's robes.

“This trust in one's own nakedness”—that is Baldwin's phrase for spiritual humility. We are not all knowing creatures. If we live in a village—and most white Americans live in an all white village—we think everyone thinks like us; we think our truth is the only truth; we think the way we see ourselves is the only way to see ourselves. But if a stranger walks into your village, or if you—god forbid—walk into a village of strangers, you are suddenly aware that there are other ways of looking at the world, and there are other ways of looking at yourself, at who you are, at your place in the world, at the ways you identify yourself. At that moment, to change your thinking about yourself and your place in the world, to contemplate changing your identity is, as Baldwin observes, a “terror as primary as the mortal fall.” And so you can either refuse that new knowledge—by labeling it secondary or minor or subjective, as the non-Universal—or you can admit that your view of reality is neither objective nor Universal. And you will have to change your robes--meaning your robes are not so splendid as they seemed to you a moment before; meaning you are not your robes, however magnificent they have seemed; meaning you are, as Shakespeare observed in *Lear*, a poor bare forked animal, a naked soul.

David Foster Wallace never let himself truly learn from the black students who walked as strangers into his white village.⁹ That is partly because he never saw what it truly meant for him to live inside his

white village. Wallace never saw that he refused to accept his Black students as equals, even though he thought he did. Because if Wallace did accept his Black students as equals, he would have learned something from them, and nothing in his essay indicates the presence of any such learning. For implied in Baldwin's words above, this shift of identity depends upon your seeing the stranger as possessing a knowledge you do not possess, and if you accept that, there are ways in which that stranger is knowledgeable and you are ignorant.

To admit one's ignorance is as difficult task as it is to admit one's guilt. That is why it is so difficult for white writing instructors to teach students of color. To truly engage in such teaching is to enter a terror primary as the mortal fall.

No wonder so few are adequate to that task.

9. As a counter example, this is not the case with Norman Mailer, when one looks at his essays on Black Power in the 60's (as opposed to "The White Negro" written in the 50's) or his essay in 2003, "The White Man Unburdened." Mailer demonstrates an interest in and a respect for what Blacks have to teach him, and he clearly is paying attention to Black writers, intellectuals and activists in a way that say, David Foster Wallace or Jonathan Franzen, never demonstrate. Further Mailer is willing to investigate his identity as a white male, despite his famed instances of chauvinism. Wallace is more of the white hipster generation, convinced of their righteousness, insulated in their racial encounters, and buoyed by living, until recently, in an era where they could feel, if not proclaim, that race as an issue was over. Mailer understood that the issue was not over, as he demonstrates in the 2003 "The White Man Unburdened," where he links the military aggressiveness of US foreign policy with a crisis of white masculinity. In a way, because he grew up in an era where white masculinity so dominated, Mailer is far more aware of the psychic effects of the relative diminishment in that domination than the white hipsters of today who don't notice or fret consciously over that diminishment and yet who react against it in so many unconscious maneuvers—including insulating themselves from the consciousness of people of color in ways Mailer did not. Yes, Mailer went overboard into ridiculousness with his "The White Negro," but part of that essay comes out of a desire for connection with Blacks and Black culture and a recognition of the power and gifts of that culture that one never feels reading the essays of Wallace or Franzen. Conversely, in his essay on SWE, Wallace mentions Black writers, but there's no warmth in the way he mentions their gifts, no sense that he sees a barrier between him and them that he wants to cross over. If Mailer was clumsy in his attempts to get to know Black jazz musicians, as Baldwin acerbically notes, at least Mailer was trying; he felt their power (though of course, he could not accept that he would be shut out of their world because of his being a white male, just as he could never actually connect with that power because that power came in part from their living a life Mailer could never live; it's so difficult for the white male ego to feel it is shut off from anything, that there is anything it cannot take possession of).

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