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On the Need for More BIPOC Literary Critics & Reviewers

YEARS AGO, in a positive review of my first poetry book, *After We Lost Our Way*, a critic cited the long lines in my poem as influenced by the long lines of Allen Ginsberg. Titled “Song for Uncle Tom, Tonto and Mr. Moto,” the poem referenced anticolonial and antiracist positions around the globe, and the long lines were actually influenced by Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*). Had the reviewer been aware of Césaire and the Négritude movement in Francophone literature, the literary influence would have seemed obvious.

A couple decades later, Junot Diaz published *The Brief Wondrous History of Oscar Wao*, a novel chronicling the misfortunes of a Dominican family both in the Dominican Republic under Trujillo and in America. One of the novel’s minor features was an extensive use of footnotes. In a couple reviews, the influence for these footnotes was cited as David Foster Wallace. But Diaz himself has explained that the use of footnotes was influenced by Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, a novel set in Martinique at the time just before and after slavery was abolished. That Diaz would have been influenced by a fellow Caribbean writer is quite understandable, especially given Chamoiseau’s focus on Creole linguistic and cultural practices, and the shared themes of political repression, colonialism, and racism in both works.

Both these misreadings of influence are relatively minor. Still they point to the ways an ignorance of the traditions of writers of color and the history of colonialism and racism can easily lead to a lack of understanding in how writers of color practice their craft and how their work should be contextualized. In both instances, a white male American writer is deemed as possessing a greater influence and universal relevance than is actually the case. Just as significantly, the influence of a writer of color goes unnoticed. I would add that while myself and Diaz have read Ginsberg and Césaire, David Foster Wallace and Patrick

Chamoiseau, our respective critics appeared to have read only the white writer of each pair.

Rather than the mistaking of influences, a more fundamentally distorting reading took place with my next book, my memoir of my year-long stay in Japan, *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei*. With that book, all the white reviewers praised my descriptions of Japan and the Japanese but they put to the side or even belittled the sections on my identity as a Japanese American. In contrast, all the Asian American critics saw the book as an exploration of my identity through the experience and lens of Japan and they took my exploration of my racial and ethnic identity to be the central theme of the book.

Certainly, such misreadings point to the need for BIPOC critics who are familiar with the literary traditions we draw from. One would think such familiarity would be common coin by now, but unfortunately many MFA reading lists and workshops are still dominated by a focus on white writers and their traditions. Given the general state of education then, BIPOC writers must be familiar with the traditional white canon and literary practices and often must seek out the traditions of writers of color mainly on their own. But in an ironic reversal, this means that our literary development has equipped us to critique both white writers and BIPOC writers, and this reinforces the argument for more BIPOC critics.

For it is not just the criticism of BIPOC writers that is helped by a more diverse field of critics. BIPOC critics can often challenge or critique the work of white writers in ways a white critic would not be equipped or willing to do. We can see this in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* or Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In my recent book, *A Stranger's Journey: Race, Identity and Narrative Craft in Writing*, I partly focus on how the issues of race and identity must be incorporated into the teaching of creative writing. In the book, I make a critique of Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* and its portrayal of a young twenty-five-year-old Indian American woman, a critique I did not see in any of the reviews by white critics in the major publications that reviewed Franzen's novel.

Admittedly, this character, Laila, is not a member of the white family that anchors the book, but she does have an affair with the white middle-class middle-aged husband, Walter, an affair where she is portrayed as worshipping, adoring, and flattering him. The novel never investigates or even mentions how Laila's family might view this affair,

nor what in Laila's upbringing and psychology might have led her to such an affair, but the novel does mention Walter's dismissal of Laila's previous Indian (American?) fiancé, whom Walter characterizes as smart—he's a surgeon—but ugly. One wonders here, or at least I wonder, according to whose standards is the Indian fiancé considered ugly—Walter's, the author's, or a general assumption by white America that Indian men are not attractive (c.f. *The Big Bang's* Raj, who is portrayed as an unattractive geek even though in real life, Kunnal Nayyar is married to an Indian Miss Universe)? Certainly this derision of the former fiancé's looks is not Laila's viewpoint.

But beyond all this, Franzen seems totally unaware of how the worshipping young Asian women paired with an older white male duplicates so many colonial tropes—because the ideology of colonialism in Asia was predicated on a vision of a feminine, inferior, and less powerful East being rightfully ruled by the masculine, superior, and more powerful West. This reduplication of a colonial trope and stereotype reaches its nadir in Franzen's description of their lovemaking:

His emotions couldn't keep up with the vigor and urgency of their animal attraction, the interminability of their coupling. She needed to ride him, she needed to be crushed underneath him, she needed to have her legs on his shoulders, she needed to do the Downward Dog and be whammed from behind, she needed bending over the bed, she needed her face pressed against the wall, she needed her legs wrapped around him and her head thrown back and her very round breasts flying every which way.

“Downward Dog”? As Toni Morrison demonstrates in *Playing in the Dark*, the unconscious racial assumptions of white authors can reveal themselves in myriad ways. One is terrible prose. The prose is so bad here—“almost literally dripping with desire,” “bottomless well of anguished noise,” “In good cardiovascular shape”—that at first I wondered if the passage were simply satirizing Walter, but Franzen's brand of satire is not Tom Wolfe's. Beyond the poor prose, there's an undergirding to this passage that's clearly racialized. If this were not one of the most celebrated novelists of his generation, and instead a student of mine, I can't imagine getting through a workshop without flagging this passage (though I can imagine that in certain white instructors' workshops, a student of color who flagged this passage would be called out for “political correctness”).

What's further revealing is that in a *Slate* interview, Franzen (this was before his most recent novel) admitted he had never written about race—which means he did not see this white middle-aged man's affair with a twenty-five-year-old Indian American woman as even involving the issues of race. Similarly, I suspect most of the white critics of this novel did not think of these racial issues either. (After all, aren't Asian Americans just like white people?) But then in *Freedom*, Franzen—like almost all white writers—never specifically designates his white characters as white. Whiteness is supposedly the universal default, and only the ethnicity or race of characters of color need to be indicated; moreover, the racial identity and racial experience of white characters must remain beneath the surface, unmentioned and unexamined. In other words, Franzen doesn't think his portrayal of and assumptions about his white characters—both in the introduction of such characters and their context—are racially based. But this is not an assumption most critics of color would make. We don't assume whiteness is the universal default and thus we view the worldview of white authors or their characters with a different critical lens from many white critics.

My overall point here is that we need a much more diverse range of BIPOC critics, and those critics need to be encouraged and sought out. I would add here a personal note: Almost thirty years ago I stopped reviewing, mainly because I was dropped from an editorial board and never asked to write again for a critical review, *The Hungry Mind Review*. The reason the editor did this was that I wrote an article in *Mother Jones* about arguments with a white friend over the yellowface casting and Orientalism in *Miss Saigon*, and this white editor was friends with my white friend. I shouldn't have let this stop me from pursuing further reviewing (C. K. Williams told me he and his editor both felt my review of his book was the best they'd seen). But I was young, and it is especially easy to discourage young BIPOC writers and critics in a field and society which is still white dominated. Those white writers and editors who run publications and serve as gatekeepers need to keep this in mind if they want to include a more diverse range of critics, a change which will serve us all and help us prepare for an increasingly diverse American and world literature.