

CHAPTER 8.

UNSUSTAINABLE WHITENESS

There were cracks in my desire to be White, which I'm thankful for now. In graduate school, it wasn't sustainable for me to think in this way. If I'm being honest though, it's only today that I recognize this. Then, while I may have been uncomfortable, it took time with my words, time with others, time away from it all to realize that what I yearned for was Whiteness and that it was mostly unattainable.

CRUMBLING WHITENESS

While getting my master's degree at OSU, I was also a teaching assistant, a TA. In that English department, this meant that I was the teacher of record for a first-year writing course, what many refer to as "Freshman English." It was the required writing course for all students at the university. I was one of about fifteen TAs, all grad students like me. The master's degree was a two year program, so you taught one or two courses a term (three terms in an academic year), and you could apply to teach an extra class in the summer between those two years. There were often extra sections needing an instructor in the summers when most of the professors were gone.

The summer after my first year of teaching as a grad student, I got one of those summer teaching assignments, a first-year writing course. Chris had given us a three-day orientation on teaching writing the summer before as we entered the program, and we'd all taken several grad courses that helped us with our teaching, so I felt quite prepared and excited. I could do this thing I loved doing, make money that summer, and not work at the gas station. I felt like a real, professional teacher, earning his way.

In the writing course that summer, I had a student who was a veteran, an older, White, working-class man from Oregon. He served at the tail end of Vietnam, then came home and worked in the lumber industry for maybe 20 years. Recently, his job had been eliminated. He was middle aged and in school to be retrained for something else. He seemed unsettled, quite unsure about the whole college thing. He said little in class, a class filled with students who could have been the age of his children at that time, although I don't know if he had a family. What I remember about him was his paper.

I asked the class, as was the custom in our writing program at the time, to write an essay on some experience they felt they could explore and perhaps

understand in some way. It didn't have to be a big, ground-breaking experience. It could be a mundane experience in their lives, as was the case for many of the essays we had read in preparation for our writing. In fact, I'm almost positive we read E. B. White's essay, "Once More to the Lake," an essay that does this very thing. In class, we talked about the ways those writers, as in White's essay, move from showing an experience to making sense of that experience, describing details in a scene then carefully analyzing them, drawing out big things from small details. This is the same move that Thoreau and Montaigne make in their writings. Chris taught it to us too.

Chris was the director of composition at the time. He trained us in teaching this kind of writing, the personal. We even used his edited collection of readings, a collection of essays and poems by a variety of authors, called *A Forest of Voices: Reading and Writing the Environment*. It was a thematic reader about nature, place, forests, and activism. I still like this reader, but I wouldn't use it in the ways we did then. I wouldn't use it to ask students to confess things, to draw on their experiences in order to learn some truth about the world or themselves or their pasts.

These moves in personal essays too easily come off as writers offering universal truths from calm, dispassionate reflections of their pasts. They rehearse HOWL as if they are the best habits of language, the best ways to language ideas. They too easily seem like they are the best ways to make sense of one's experiences. Like in White's essay, the move from personal experience to some big truth, with no other outside information considered, is a hyperindividualistic habit of White language that assumes most truths can come from inside the individual.

It is a version of what René Descartes gave us in his *Meditations* and his *cogito ergo sum*, or "I think, therefore I am."¹⁰ His *cogito* is a hyperindividualized precept that Descartes develops purely from his reasoning, his rationalizing. It's a truth from the inside of his mind, applied to the outside, the external world. The habit of hyperindividualism in this case is also linked to another White habit, an individualized, rational, controlled self. It's the rational self, the "I" in the essay, that produces universal truths for everyone through only the manipulation of words. Its central logic: thinking will give you the answers you seek. It considers one aspect of the dialectic of words, the power of meaning-making and logic, of reasoning, but ignores other aspects, the magic, the way words can bewitch, the context, the people.

10 In "Meditation Two," Descartes says, "Thought exists; it alone cannot be separated from me. I am; I exist—this is certain,"; see René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1998), 65.

While there were a few readings in the collection that discussed things in deeply contextual and historical ways, most readings we used in our writing program did not. I don't recall much in the curriculum that helped students work out how to contextualize and historicize the poems and essays. I don't recall anything that helped us consider the ways that our thinking about our own language experiences are structured by the conditions from which we each come to the classroom. What logics and thinking structures are we using to make sense of our personal experiences? Where did they come from? What do they afford and deny us?

Instead, we asked students to describe experiences, then analyze them and come to some conclusions or meaning from them, as if the most important meanings and logics are internal, inside each of us, accessible to us all in similar ways. But those conclusions were often universalized in all the writing in those classrooms—they were in mine—because we didn't contextualize our thinking and histories with language. We never asked students to situate their ideas, views, or assumptions in their lives and histories. We never asked them to consider the systems, structures, conditions, and histories that enable individual writers to make particular kinds of meaning. We never asked about the politics of language and our lives.

We never examined, for instance, under what conditions might someone have the tools they do to make the meaning they can from the experiences they believe they have reinvented on the page. We never asked how race, economics, gender, or the history of ideas in our lives have structured our ways of being in the world. We never asked how our being in the world affords us the methods we have to say what we think we can say and think what we think we can think.

The curriculum of that program, as good as it was in many ways, did not assign these kinds of readings. The writing program had a lot of strengths. It was doing a kind of writing curriculum that was popular at the time, but this was a Whiteness weakness of the field and our writing courses. It turned away from politics and locations of writers and readers. This was changing in the field at the time, but not in our writing program.

From this instruction, my veteran student, a big burly man with bulging, hairy forearms, wrote a confusing paper about being in the jungle. It was the image of the jungle I most recall and his own jumbled sense that he made of it. In the paper, he is in one place, then in a very different place. Others are around him. Then they are not. He's somewhere else. Things are happening, but he's not being very specific. The language was confusing.

Many of the sentences were not sentences. They didn't even read as fragments. They read like oddly put together phrases. Corn slight cracking. Lifter toading careful. Cheat rub red. Those phrases were not in the paper, and I don't

have the paper anymore. I gave it back to him. But they are the kinds of languaging I recall the paper filled with. He was describing his feelings in abstract ways only, I think. He was explaining how confusing the experience was, how there were arms and voices everywhere, how it was hard to recall, how it was hard to explain the feelings. As a young teacher, I was not prepared for this.

I had set up appointments with each student after reading their drafts. In those meetings, the student and I would talk through their draft, and I'd offer feedback so that they could revise. It was meant to be a dialogue. It was good pedagogy. Still is. My student sat down next to me in the conference room on the second floor of Moreland Hall. It was a warm summer day. Moreland had no air conditioning. The windows in the empty classroom across the hall were open so that an occasional breeze would caress my back and arms. I was dressed in a button up shirt and khakis. This was my typical teaching uniform because I looked young. I was young. I needed to look older than I was. I needed to look more teacher-like.

"So what is going on here? I can't tell what you are writing about. Can you tell me what experience you are trying to show in your paper?" I looked at him. I was a little nervous. He was so much older than me. I was just twenty four at the time. He sat silent, looking into his hands, which were in his lap. He had put his cap on the table, half obscuring his paper.

"I-I-I . . ." I could hear him breathing through his nose harder and harder. The utterance took ten seconds, but it seemed to my inexperienced ears like ten minutes. I thought, maybe he isn't sure what he's writing about. Maybe he has several experiences here, and we needed to focus on one of them. I couldn't see the distress that he was under, not yet. I was too busy trying to think of a way to help him clear up this paper, running through options in my head. I was too busy trying to enact the Whitely professor for the benefit of this White man. I was too busy thinking I knew what was wrong here. I was not attending to him.

"Maybe we can start with this first paragraph. Just tell me what you are trying to say here." I flicked his cap a few inches, revealing the first paragraph, and put my finger on the first line of his paper. He just looked at it. I watched his mouth, waiting for his explanation, waiting for his language move, for the move from this paragraph of jumbled words to a coherent idea, to something that I could understand and respond to.

"It's . . . It's about w-war—friends." His voice was hesitant and seemed to fade in and out with each word, as if he was inventing the words right then for the occasion. I could feel a cool burst of air come through the doorway behind us. "I guess. . . I was trying to write about my experience. . . of the war, and how I. . ." He choked up, and I thought he was sobbing. I didn't know what to say or do.

I sat waiting for some other language move of his, feeling like shit. I had fucked up somehow as the teacher. I knew it. The khakis didn't work. It took maybe three more seconds, and this middle-aged, White, veteran of Vietnam, former lumberjack with his large forearms, still wearing his rolled up flannel shirt in summer, just openly bawls, sobs, weeps in front of me, and I feel compassion for him. But I am lost. I don't know what to do. I don't want to be there, and I desperately want to help him, a preposterous, presumptuous, and Whately impulse on my part.

In my immaturity then, I thought: What could have possibly happened to him? Now, I think: What didn't happen to him? How is this not an expected outcome of an ill-fitting writing assignment like that one? Write about an experience that matters to you? Motha fucka, really? Imma ask this of a Vietnam veteran and recently jobless lumberjack? Imma tell this guy how to make sense of his experience?

For an instant, I thought, I ain't got it so bad. I ain't never had it this bad. Then: How do I help him? Do I wait for him to stop crying? Do I wait for this much older man who has seen things I simply do not understand? Do I say I'm sorry? Is this paper really that fuckin' important? Can I give him something else to write about? Will he even listen to me?

Somehow I mustered up enough to tell him, "I think this may not be the subject that you can write about at this time. It would be okay if you picked something else, something less emotional for you." He nodded in agreement, and picked up his hat, and tugged it on firm and low, and left.

The problem with my suggestion was that all our readings and discussions in class had hinged on one fact: Write about something that means something to you, that you care about. Write about things you want to learn or discover. Write about the gaps in your forest, the unexplored levels of flora and fauna. Use writing to know yourself, to learn, to grow. Language yourself into being. Re-understand yourself through words. It's good writing advice but also dangerous and reckless if you follow it in spirit without care and guidance.

He was following instructions very well. This was his gap, but there was no sunshine streaming through it. There was no rising from a chair, no words whispered in his ear that could help him do it, at least none that I knew of, none I was prepared to help him find. There was only: Corn slight cracking. Lifter toading careful. Cheat rub red. Now, I wonder: Must I always understand what my students write when that writing may emotionally unhinge them? Why should I expect to have full access to him and his languaging?

My suggestion was also contradictory, or maybe paradoxical, to the initial good advice the class worked from. This thing in front of us was what he cared about personally, and yet I forced him to start caring about it publicly by asking

him to write about it to me. And yet isn't it often the case that we must be forced to do things that are good for us? Is *that* my place as a teacher of writing? Is my job to encourage—or is it urge, or is it coerce—students to confess their secrets to me, submit their private languaging for my evaluation? Does my habit, my Ph.D., my regalia, robes, and other vestments, entitle me to demand or even ask for such disclosures from any of my students? I am not an academic priest in the cathedral of higher learning, only a mage-professor trying to cast spells, and some are just illusions.

My student's emotional response to his languaging kept him from writing in a way that I could understand for the purposes of our class and his own education. Yet again, is not emotional writing—*pathos*—an element of much good writing? Teachers want their students to deeply care about the things they write about. That's what makes good writing good, isn't it? That's what made his choices so important, so meaningful to him, even though they were meaningless to me—that is, they were difficult for me to see the meaning in them.

We don't write about things we don't care about, not really. And if we care, then we have emotional attachments, even if unexamined and undigested. But must we always digest our emotions? What was so wrong with him crying in my presence? Because he was my elder? Because that's not what dudes do in public? Because men don't give access to those kinds of emotions to anyone, and certainly not their teacher? Because we were in this educational exchange that is too often assumed to be one devoid of emotions, one conducted dispassionately? These are questions about Whiteness and its dominance in our thinking and in our ways of teaching English.

One thing that I can see now that I could not then, but I felt it, was the apparent contradictions in this teaching moment. They were contradictions that made it appear and feel like a teaching failure. Now, I'm not so sure. He was an older, middle-aged, White man, coming to kneel at the feet of a 24-year-old, graduate teaching assistant of color in order to learn how to write. There are no movies or novels or teaching stories that depict this scene, not because the White man is crying, nor because he was a war vet, but because the crying White man, the military veteran, was crying at the feet of a young man of color, who is and is not the authority, the higher power, the teacher, in the scene. I'm supposed to be Robin Williams, and he Matt Damon.¹

We were both out of place. Nothing seemed to hold together, not his languaging, not my instructions, not our dialogue, not our feelings. If either of us had met anywhere else in Corvallis—at the store, a restaurant, the DMV—my

1 In the film, *Good Will Hunting*, Robin Williams plays a college teacher of Psychology who helps a younger student, Matt Damon, who is math savant, but has deep problems.

words would have no power over him, and he would likely think nothing of me, maybe even ignore me. We were not men who would know each other or share a cup of coffee together. I could not say it at the time, but I felt like a failure because deep down I knew that I could not help this White man, even though I wanted to and he wanted me to, I'm sure. There was too much around us and before us that bound us, walled us in our own histories and lives. The systems and conditions of our lives and languaging did not allow for this.

He was a White man, old enough to be my dad at that time, always entering rooms where he is the authority, always watching and hearing stories where he is the hero. I was just a languaging of color who had grown up in rooms filled with White women. I was just a Brown boy faking his way through White places, realizing that I was not of these places, and they would not let me be so.