

A Tribute to Professor Gay Wilentz:
A Speech at East Carolina University, November 14, 2005

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Abstract

This speech was delivered at the 2005 Multicultural/Ethnic Reading Day Students' Tribute to Professor Gay Wilentz at East Carolina University, North Carolina, United States, on November 14, 2005. The author is a former student of Professor Wilentz and studied for an English master's degree under her mentorship from spring 2003 to fall 2005.

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Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

My name is Alzo David-West, and I am a final-year English master's student. This evening, I wish to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to someone whose presence at the East Carolina University English Department has made my academic experience an enriching, invaluable, and momentous one. Her name is Dr. Gay Wilentz.¹

Prior to enrolling in graduate school in spring 2003, I sought an English master's degree program which would resonate with my international worldview informed by my Nigerian-Slovakian background and youth in metropolitan Nigeria and New York City. I was deeply attracted to the multicultural literature concentration at ECU, then the first of its kind in the continental United States.² However, it was only after I was successfully admitted and when I met Dr. Wilentz that I began to fully appreciate the nature of the program. Cosmopolitanism cradled in the earthiness of Greenville, North Carolina. How else can it be described?

The innovative and international character of the program appealed more and more to me in the course of my enrollment. I bore particular witness to how Dr. Wilentz, at the helm of the multicultural concentration, contributed to the expanding vistas of literary studies in a world where the phrase “English literature” can no longer invoke the traditional canon of American and British letters. That phrase has now begun to refer to all literatures written in the English language, whether composed by marginalized groups in our society or by individuals from societies outside our national borders. In a globalized epoch of transnational economies and information technologies, the contemporary study of literature means probing into fundamental questions of social humanity and using literature, as the unique artistic means that it is, to understand the practical and spiritual conditions of life.

As an English graduate student, I also began to admire how this progressive understanding of literature gives the language we speak and write a truly objective significance, implicitly affirming that language is a bridge to the cultures of the world—not a barrier—and that human ideas have no nationality. Literature, like other forms of art, is a special way of making sense of existence with the aid of images: accentuating and generalizing feelings, moods, and thoughts, and the most essential properties of reality, in an attempt to understand and change the world.³ That is the universal aspiration of all true art and literature. That is something all human beings do and to which we have increasing access in an age when English has become a truly international language.

When I decided to specialize in multicultural literature at ECU, Dr. Wilentz afforded me the intellectual space to undertake original academic research under that general conceptual framework. She tirelessly advised, encouraged, and guided me at every given opportunity. And she even came to my dramatic rescue in the face of bureaucratic hurdles that young intellectuals are apt to confront with bewilderment or bravado. Through these academic adventures, Dr. Wilentz has upheld what can best be described as a broadminded and motherly attitude.

She has, moreover, been unequivocal in nurturing my abilities as an aspiring literary scholar, a fact that was confirmed when she invited me to

head a graduate-level World Literature in English class in fall 2004 devoted to the arcane subject of North Korean literature in translation—the subject of my master’s thesis.⁴ I cannot imagine such an opportunity being offered anywhere else than at ECU, and for that I shall remain ever grateful.

Despite the temptation, this is not the place to go into my thesis, which is a humble attempt to analyze an unusual type of literature produced under an unusual type of regime. Nevertheless, the completion of the work owes so much to Dr. Wilentz, who has served as my thesis adviser, that I invite those who may be intrigued to examine the study when it will be available under the title “Party-Oriented, People-Oriented Literature.”⁵

Dr. Wilentz is a woman of great thoughts, great faith in her students, and a great heart. What is more, she is also a timeless voice. For those of us in the field of literary studies, it is generally agreed that the written word often speaks farther and louder than the vocal apparatus. I am confident that as the currents of history take their course at East Carolina University, Dr. Gay Wilentz shall speak even more magnificently as she fulfills her mission as educator and cultivator with greater determination and vigor.

Thank you.

Notes

- 1 Professor Gay Wilentz (1950–2006) was the director of ethnic studies and the co-coordinator of the multicultural literature concentration at East Carolina University and a visiting professor at the University of Belize. She passed away from Lou Gehrig’s disease three months after this speech was delivered. Wilentz is the author of *Binding Cultures* (1992) and *Healing Narratives* (2000); the editor of *Conch Shell* (2000), *Memories, Dreams and Nightmares*, Vol. 2 (2005), *She* (2001), and *Speak to Me* (1999); and the coeditor of *Emerging Perspectives on Ama Ata Aidoo* (1999). See an obituary for Professor Wilentz in Bruce Southard, “From the Chair,” *The Common Reader: Newsletter of the ECU Department of English*, Vol. 24, No. 4, February 2006, <http://www.ecu.edu/english/TCR/24-4> (accessed 23 October 2014).
- 2 The multicultural literature concentration at East Carolina University is now the multicultural and transnational literatures concentration. See “Multicultural and Transnational Literatures (MTL) Concentration,” *Department of English, East*

Carolina University, <http://www.ecu.edu/cs-cas/engl/graduate/multi.cfm> (accessed 23 October 2004).

- 3 These ideas are adapted from Aleksandr K. Voronsky, *Art as the Cognition of Life: Selected Writings, 1911–1936*, trans. and ed. Frederick S. Choate (Oak Park, MI: Mehring Books, 1998), and Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky, ed. William Keach (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).
- 4 The author was enrolled in Professor Wilentz’s ENG 6360: World Literature in English course and met with ten other English master’s students on October 20, 2004, from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. to discuss Se Bong Chon, *The People of the Fighting Village: Novelette* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1986). An audio recording of the class discussion is available in the author’s archive.
- 5 See revised and published sections of the thesis in Alzo David-West, “The Literary Ideas of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il: An Introduction to North Korean Meta-Authorial Perspectives,” *Cultural Logic*, 2009, pp. 1–34, <http://clogic.eserver.org/2009/David-west.pdf> (accessed 23 October 2010); Alzo David-West, “Nationalist Allegory in North Korea: The Revolutionary Opera *Sea of Blood*,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Fall 2006, pp. 75–87; Alzo David-West, “The North Korean Positive Hero in *The People of the Fighting Village*,” *North Korean Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Fall 2007, pp. 101–118; and Alzo David-West, “Reading *Sea of Blood* through Bertolt Brecht’s *The Mother*: North Korean ‘Revolutionary Opera’ and Nationalist Allegory,” *Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 2, October 2011, pp. 1–24.