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TEACHING ABOUT BLACK WOMEN WRITERS

As a Black female who is also a graduate student in English, I have always felt outside the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon male consciousness which pervades the course materials I have been required to investigate. My long and deep involvement with Afro-American literature has been individually fulfilling, but I have never had a course in it nor gained the impression that white scholars view it as anything approaching valid art. Women's literature also strikes a responsive chord, but with both sets of non-mainstream writers there have been problems for me. I am not a Black male, but a female; I am not a white woman, but a Black one.

When I read that the poet-novelist Alice Walker was teaching a course in Black women writers at the University of Massachusetts in the fall of 1972, I was exhilarated. I had been trying to select a Black woman writer for a paper in a women's literature seminar, and I thought that sitting in on an entire course would give me just the inspiration I needed. The course was an inspiration indeed. Alice Walker's teaching is as poetic as her writing. In this course, she began with slave narratives and the early Black poets, Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, and then launched into Margaret Walker's brilliant Civil War novel Jubilee.

In an interview, Alice Walker describes a similar course she taught at Wellesley the year before.

When I first started teaching my course in black women writers at Wellesley (the first one, I think, ever), I was worried that Zora's [Zora Neale Hurston] use of black English of the twenties would throw some of the students off. It didn't. They loved it. They said it was like reading Thomas Hardy, only better. In that same course I taught Nella Larsen, Frances Watkins Harper (poetry and novel), Dorothy West, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, etc. Also Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf—not because they were black obviously, but because they were women and wrote, as the black women did, on the condition of humankind from the perspective of women. It is interesting to read Woolf's A Room of One's Own while reading the poetry of Phillis Wheatley, to read Larsen's Quicksand along with The Awakening. The deep-throated voice of Sojourner Truth tends to drift across the room while you're reading. If you're not a feminist already, you become one (from Interviews with Black Writers, ed. John O'Brien; Liverwright, New York, 1973),

Black women and Black women writers are inherently feminists because they are used to coping independently, to being practical about both external and internal situations and to seldom getting the pampering, chivalrous treatment that is the birthright of most white females.

When I began teaching at Emerson College in the fall of 1973, I was able to teach my own course in Black women writers. I did not attempt an historical approach, but focused primarily on novels. About half of my students were white women and half were Black students of both sexes. The few white males who signed up seemed taken aback at the course's focus and after a time hostile to it, although the class itself was the most open and human one I have yet conducted. Personal experiences, both the students' and my own, were an integral part of class discussions. For the first time I felt that my own identity and life experience directly connected me both to the teaching process and to the subject matter.

The students seemed to love the works I had chosen as much as I did, and one question we repeatedly explored was why they had never heard of these authors before. Both racism and sexism were obvious answers, but of the particular kinds that permeate literary and academic establishments. In the introduction to her extensive Bibliography of Works Written by American Black Women (see review in Women's Studies Newsletter, Winter 1974), Ora Williams describes the reactions she got when she told people about her project:

My search for writings of American Black women has been given additional impetus by various reactions from my friends, co-workers, and teachers. Some colleagues engaged in teaching women's literature have not known works of Black women. Some have been excited about this bibliography indicating such a compilation is greatly needed. Others have reacted negatively with such statements as, "I really don't think you are going to find very much written," "Have 'they' written anything that is any good?" and, "I wouldn't go overboard with this women's lib thing." When discussions touched on the possibility of teaching a course in which emphasis would be on the literature by Black women, one response was, "Ha, ha. That will certainly be the most nothing course ever offered!"

As evidenced by Ora Williams' bibliography, interest in the academic exploration of Black women's unique experiences is growing. Mary Helen Washington of the University of Detroit has taught a course entitled "The Black Woman in History and Literature" for the past two years. Hortense E. Thornton at California State University in Sacramento is also teaching a course on "The Black Woman in Literature," using works by both female and male authors.

Because these writers have been largely overlooked, research in this area is particularly challenging and stimulating. Each teacher, critic, and student who approaches the works of Black women authors has something new and vital to add to a field that is just opening. I plan to teach another course next fall using many different works than in the first one and hope to have again a learning experience that transcends the remoteness and cultural myopia of the average classroom. If I am very lucky, another student may again hand me a note saying: "Thank you for opening my eyes."

Barbara Smith

Note: Ms. Smith used the following texts in her Fall 1973 course: The Black Woman, ed. Toni Cade; Aphra, Summer 1971 issue; Jubilee by Margaret Walker; Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston; I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings by Maya Angelou; The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison; Revolutionary Petunias by Alice Walker; Selected Poems by Gwendolyn Brooks; The Street by Ann Petry.