Black-Eyed Blues Connections: Teaching Black Women

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In Detroit, I am at the Downtown YWCA. Rooms on the upper floors are used by Wayne County Community College as learning centers. It is 10 a.m. and I am convening an introductory black studies class for women on Community and Identity. The 22 women who appear are all on their way from somewhere to something. This is a breather in their day. They range in age from 19 to 55. They all have been pregnant more than once and have made various decisions about abortion, adoption, monogamy, custody and sterilization. Some are great-grandmothers. A few have their children along. They are a cross-section of hundreds of black women I have known and learned from in the past 15 years, inside the movement and outside of it.

We have an hour together. The course is a survey. The first topic of conversation—among themselves and with me—is what they went through just to make it in the door, on time. That, in itself, becomes a lesson.

We start where they are. We exchange stories of children’s clothes ripped or lost, of having to go to school with sons and explain why Che is always late and how he got that funny name, anyway, to teachers who shouldn’t have to ask and don’t really care. They tell of waiting for men to come home from the night shift so they can get the money or car necessary to get downtown, or power failures in the neighborhood, or administrative red tape at the college, or compulsory over-time on their own jobs, or the length of food stamp lines, or just being tired and needing sleep. Some of the stories are funny, some sad, some elicit outrage and praise from the group. It’s a familiar and comfortable ritual in black culture. It’s called testifying.

The role of the teacher? Making the process conscious, the content significant. Want to know, yourself, how the problems in the stories got resolved? Learn what daily survival wisdom these women have. Care. Don’t let it stop at commiseration. Try to help them generalize from the specifics. Raise issues of who and what they continually have to bump up against on the life-road they’ve planned for themselves. Make lists on the board. Keep the scale human. Who are the people that get in the way? The social worker, the small-claims court officer, husbands, the teacher, cops, kids on the block. Ask: what forces do they represent? Get as much consensus as possible before moving on. Note there is most argument and disagreement on “husbands” and “kids on the block.” Define a task for next meeting. To sharpen their thinking on husbands and kids, have them make three lists. All the positive and negative things they can think of about men, children and families. Anticipate in advance that they probably won’t have the time or will to write out full lists. But they will think about the question and be ready to respond in class.

Stop short of giving advice. Build confidence in their own ability to make it through whatever morass to be there at 10 a.m. the next day. Make showing up for class a triumph in itself. Because it is.

Try to make class meeting a daily activity. Every day during the week. Like language, new ways of seeing and thinking must be reinforced, even if only for half an hour. Otherwise the continuity is lost. The perpetual bombardment of other pressures upsets the rhythm of your movement together. No matter how much time you take with them or who they are, the following methodological principles are critical.

Take one subject at a time—but treat it with interdisciplinary depth and scope. In a variety of ways the women in class have been speeding. Literally, they will all either be on medication, be suffering from chronic hypertension, or be skittish from some street encounter. Encourage them to slow down. This does not mean drift—they experience that too much already. Have at least three directions in mind for every class session, but let them never and uppermost concerns determine your choice. They have come to you for help in getting pulled together. The loose ends of their experience jangle discordantly like bracelets from their arms. You must be able to do with subject matter what they want to do with their lives. Get it under control in ways which thrive on complication.

Encourage storytelling. The oldest form of building historical consciousness in community is storytelling. The transfer of knowledge, skill and value from one generation to the next; the deliberate accumulation of a people’s collective memory has particular significance in diaspora culture. Robbed of all other continuities, prohibited free expression, denied a written history for centuries by white America, black people have been driven to rely on oral recitation for our sense of the past. Today, however, that tradition is under severe attack. Urban migrations, apartment living, mass media dependency and the break-up of generational units within the family have corroded our ability to renew community through oral forms. History becomes “what’s in books.” Authority depends on academic credentials after one’s name or the dollar amount of one’s paycheck: the distance one has traveled, rather than the roots one has sunk. Significant categories of time are defined by television’s 30-second spots or 30-minute features.

Piecing together our identity and community under these circumstances requires developing each other’s powers of memory and concentration. When as a teacher, one first asks women in class, “Where did you come from?” you will get spontaneous answers ranging from: “my mamma” and “12th Street” to “Texas,” “Africa” and “Psych. 101.” They are scattered and don’t know what question you are asking in the first place. Still, the responses say something about their associational framework. The most important thing about them is their truth. Build on that with the objective of expanding their reference points.

Formalize the process. Begin with blood lines. Share your own family history and have class members do the same. Curiosity will provoke diligence and the abstractions of “identity” and “community” will give way before the faces of ancestry.

Historical narrative will be most difficult for the younger members of the class. Their knowledge of what it means to “take the A-train,” for example, will in most cases be limited to hearsay or music. They relate to TV. Minimally, you want to get them to a point where they will enjoy evaluating all their contemporaries on “Soul Train” or the three generations of black women in “The Jeffersons” series in relation to all the family.

(continued on page 7)
To ease the transition.

domestic workers on suburban express lines. Record the con­
versations. Help women learn how to use the streets for in­
vestigation instead of exhibition. Have them go out in pairs and compare notes, bringing the results back to the group.

Michele Russell

WOMEN’S STUDIES IN HIGH SCHOOL (continued)

the forms presented here, and in the manner of college courses—
from school to school—as supplementary “electives” added to
the senior high curriculum? Or will teachers attempt to patch
feminist segments onto their standard curriculum? Or is “our
real task,” as one teacher writes, a much more difficult one—
“to incorporate women and black and working people into
our entire curriculum”? And what of the other aspects of the
high school curriculum not touched on here—foreign languages,
economics, science, health, home economics, even mathematics
and business?

Regardless of approach, we will need local and national efforts to reeducate high school teachers who do not have the time
(or the time off) for the preparation of new courses or for
scholarly research that college teachers take for granted. In
addition, high school teachers are not expected to be curriculum
developers or researchers. But as everyone teaching women’s
studies knows, to do so requires being both curriculum devel­
oper and researcher as well as innovative classroom teacher.
High school teachers will need time off and support not only
for inservice courses, but for summer institutes and sabbatical
study. College women’s studies programs ought to plan special
offerings for high school teachers, including evening courses,
intensive summer programs and year-long internships or assist­
antships. Only with such cooperation can we look forward to
revising educational programs to meet the human needs of
students during the years of critical life choices.

Florence Howe

NEWS FROM SPAIN

Jornadas Catalanes de la Dona. More than 2000 women representing 100 organizations in northeastern Spain par­

ticipated in a four-day women’s meeting at the end of May,
the first such conference to be held in Barcelona during the
40-year period since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.
Topics of discussion during the much-publicized meetings
included women in the workforce, women and the family,
women and politics, women and education, women and
the law, women and sexuality. One point made in the con­
ference was that women had greater legal equality during
the period preceding the war than they have had since.
Meetings were conducted in catalán, the language of the
region, with the service of simultaneous translation to
Spanish available.

Vindicación feminista, Spain’s first feminist magazine, began
publication in July 1976. Established to fill the existing in­
formation gap about women in Spain, the journal plans to
deal with problems facing women in employment, in the
professions, in legal status, in penal codes and in the family.
It also intends to discuss the women’s movement throughout
the world. The initial issue of Vindicación feminista con­
tains articles on abortion in Italy and in Spain, on women in
Spanish jails, on the culmination of International Women’s
Year in Spain, on Spanish women during the Civil War and
on various other aspects of the feminist movement. Sub­
scriptions from the United States are 1,155 pesetas ($17.35)
for six months and 2,250 pesetas ($33.85) for one year and
may be obtained by writing the magazine at Roger de Flor,
96, 2ª, 2ª; Barcelona 13, Spain. For further information
contact Linda Gould Levine, Spanish-Italian Department,
Montclair State College, Upper Montclair, NJ 07043.

Increased media attention being given to role of women in
Spain. With the new governmental reforms in Spain, in­
creased attention is being given to the role of women in
society and to the women’s movement in general. News­
stands in Spain during the summer of 1976 displayed many
magazines containing articles on the attitude of the various
political parties toward women’s rights, the viewpoints of
particular feminists like Lidia Falcón, the difficulty women
have in obtaining credit and the role of the Women’s Bank
in Madrid, and particularly on the importance of family
planning as a means of improving the status of women. One
magazine called Dossier dedicates issues “toward the equal­
ity of women” and includes articles on birth control, a sub­
ject previously taboo in Spain. The May 1976 issue con­
tains a number of articles relating to different aspects of
women’s rights. Also of particular interest is the June 10-16
issue of Destino, which includes several pages of articles on
the political aspects of the women’s movement, abortion
and other related issues. On the negative side, the same in­
creased liberalism which has allowed the open discussion of
sexuality has also permitted nudity on the Spanish stage for
the first time—with its concomitant exploitation of women.
An interesting example of the latter was the production of
Antonio Gala’s ¿Por qué corres, Ulises?. The middle-aged
Ulysses has spent several uninterrupted days in bed with a
19-year-old woman when the action of the play begins.
She is clad only in bikini bottoms while he is fully clothed!

Phyllis Zatlin Boring
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