Mother Joseph, Builder and Architect

Erika Gottfried
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The Northwest's first architect, Mother Joseph, arrived in a wilderness that had almost none of the services and amenities available in the more settled parts of the United States. There were no hospitals, few schools and even fewer resources for the care of orphans, the aged, the destitute or the mentally ill when Mother Joseph arrived in Vancouver, Washington Territory, in December 1856. Over the next 46 years, Mother Joseph—who endured a three-month, six-thousand mile journey with four fellow Sisters of Charity from the motherhouse in Montreal—had a good deal to do with changing this situation.

Under her direction, the Northwest's first hospital, St. Joseph's of Vancouver, was built. She went on to establish ten more hospitals (including Seattle's Providence Hospital and Portland's St. Vincent Hospital), five Indian schools, seven academies and two orphanages.

But it is Vancouver's Providence Academy which brought her acclaim. The building, begun in 1873, sported three stories over two acres by 1889 and was thought to be the largest brick building in the state. Providence Academy, used as a school until 1966, still stands. It's now used for offices and shops.

Mother Joseph's involvement in the erection of her buildings went beyond the drawing of plans. She also supervised and often participated personally in the construction of her establishments. A hammer dangling from her belt, a saw in her hand, and wearing her black habit, Mother Joseph could be found bouncing on a high cross-beam to test its strength or wriggling out from beneath ground level where she had been inspecting a foundation. A perfectionist, Mother Joseph is known on one occasion to have torn apart and herself re-laid a chimney that wasn't to her satisfaction. In addition to carpentry and masonry, she was skilled in the arts of woodcarving and waxwork. She fashioned many devotional figures and carved most of the woodwork in the chapel of Providence Academy.

Her activities weren't confined simply to the building of these establishments. To pay the huge debts incurred by their projects, the Sisters of Providence had to embark on frequent "begging tours" to finance their projects. They traversed a country that was unimaginably wild, to search the closest source of money—the gold fields of Idaho, Colorado and British Columbia. And Mother Joseph went on many of the journeys, including an 18-day journey by horseback that ranged from the Lower Columbia to the Rocky Mountains.

That trip the sisters traveled through and camped in dense forest, miles from the nearest settlement and endured raging storms, a rattlesnake, being surrounded by wolves, having their tent catch on fire and their guide being chased by a grizzly bear.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these perils, Mother Joseph enjoyed these forays. In the same letter in which she described their adventures in the forest, she wrote cheerily, "Nothing is more congenial than a meal around the campfire with each one recounting a story while waiting for the crepe to be made or the meat to broil."

Besides, these were successful ventures. On this particular trip, for instance, they collected $5,000 in 10 weeks.

Mother Joseph's early activities included the equally arduous task of establishing a base in Vancouver. No preparations had been made for the sisters' arrival and the first year, five of them lived in a room that measured less than ten feet by twenty. They were immediately given the burden of cleaning, cooking, gardening, mending and laundering for three clerics, several boarding students and the care of an old man and two orphans. At the same time, they were struggling to start a school and care for the sick. Their only help—one man-servant. The ensuing delay in getting on with their work irked Mother Joseph. And her task was made more difficult by the fact that French-Canadian Mother Joseph, so capable with her hands, could only just make herself understood in English.

Eventually Mother Joseph's responsibilities grew to include the administration of the first care for the insane in Washington, besides the school, hospital and orphans.

Mother Joseph was born Esther Pariseau April 23, 1823, in a village not far from Montreal, the third child of a large French-Canadian family. The Pariseaux were proud people, and none more so than the impetuous Esther. She had reason to be proud, for she excelled in many manual arts, especially in woodworking and carpentry, which her father, a carriage-maker, had taught her. By the time she was 20, she was so proficient he could declare that Esther could "handle tools as well as I can."

But there was no future for the special gifts and needs of an Esther Pariseau in the life of an ordinary woman. There was only one place which could offer her the opportunity of exercising her abilities and providing scope for them—the church. Esther Pariseau's parents heartily approved her decision. They were well aware of their daughter's exceptional qualities. When he brought Esther to the order she joined, Monsieur Pariseau assured the Mother Superior that his daughter would "some day make a very good superior."

Esther Pariseau and her parents thought very carefully and made inquiries about the various orders before making a choice. The Daughters of Charity, "Servants of the Poor," were barely a year old when Esther Pariseau joined them in December, 1843.
This order, with its broader range of activities than the older orders of Montreal, gave the capable young woman scope in which to exercise her special abilities, and a chance to develop as well as learn new skills. At 20, she had the challenge of helping to supervise the kitchen, bakery, garden, shoeshop, poultry yard, weaving and dyeing of cloth, soap-making and laundry for a struggling community of more than 50. She also had the responsibility of managing the candle-making and selling operation.

In less than two years, she had added the jobs of infirmarian, pharmacist, community seamstress and bursar to her responsibilities. All were excellent preparation for the day when Sister Joseph was charged with establishing the Vancouver Providence community and shepherding it through its first difficult ten years.

The same ambition and drive that served so well in promising the growth and expansion of the Vancouver community caused conflicts between Mother Joseph and her sisters. Intent on her goal, she often was brusque and impatient with them. Their local bishop wrote, "Sister Joseph is too hasty. She is censured for not giving correction prudently. Her manner opens a wound anew instead of healing it."

Mother Joseph herself was unhappy aware of the problems posed by her blunt, impatient nature. She had begged to be spared the superintendency in the first place, and continued in many ways to feel inadequate to the task.

In 1866, after guiding the Vancouver Daughters of Providence from a community of five sisters to 100 children, half-a-dozen old people and 40 patients, Mother Joseph was relieved of some of her responsibilities. A co-founder of the community was given the superintendency, and Mother Joseph became Sister Joseph once more. Made bursar of the order's western Mission, she was free to do what she did best—raising money for, planning and constructing the establishments of the Sisters of Providence.

In 1900, when she was 77 years old, Mother Joseph planned and supervised Providence Orphanage in New Westminster, B.C. Every evening she still made a meticulous inspection of the day's work, climbing ladders to test beams or prying under the flooring to check the foundations. Two years later, on January 19, 1902, she was dead. A close friend wrote of Mother Joseph: "She had the characteristics of genius: incessant work, immense sacrifice, great undertakings...".

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**Nancy Hoffman**

**White Woman, Black Women: Inventing an Adequate Pedagogy**

**For Barbara Smith**

As a white woman teaching literature written by black women for some years now, my experience has begun to make sense, to add up to some principles and some observations which may be useful to other teachers. I teach older, urban students who are or will become human service workers. We do little by way of formal literary criticism; we read literature to learn about American values, about problems of race and class, to understand the choices of characters, and to reflect on our own lives. Particularly because students work in intercultural settings, we use the classroom to approximate as much as it can the diversity students encounter on their jobs. Nearly sixty percent of our students are women, and I teach black novels and poetry by women because that is where you find portraits of strong, independent women; that is also where you find good literature unencumbered by the burden of prior critical judgment. I teach literature by whites in my courses as well. I myself am in the midst of a research project on an aspect of the history of relationships between black and white women, so I learn from my teaching.

I most frequently teach five novels which span the past fifty years, and with *The Invisible Man* (1952), tell about a world largely absent from the work of Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Mailer, Bellow, Malamud, or even James Baldwin. Absent as well from Christina Stead, Agnes Smedley, Kate Chopin, or Kate Millet. These novels are Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1967), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1974), and most recently Alice Walker's *Meridian* (1976). (I note for the record that unlike white classics which are always in print, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *The Street* are out of print—unavailable to students except in libraries, or through Xeroxes.) These novels, particularly the recent ones by Morrison and Walker, carry on the tradition of the philosophical novel, a tradition which has been notably weak in America. The black woman's philosophical problem might be phrased as a question: How do I invent an identity for myself in a society which prefers to behave as though I do not exist? From Toni Morrison:

*And she had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not lady hood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality, she may very well have invented herself.*

From the final chapter of *Meridian* called "Release": the narrator, and then the black man, Truman, observe the black woman Meridian:

*She was strong enough to go and owned nothing to pack. She had discarded her cap, and the soft wool of her newly grown hair framed her thin, resolute face. His first thought was of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help. It still was amazing to him how deeply Meridian allowed an idea—no matter where it came from—to penetrate her life. "I hate to think of you always alone." "But that is my value," said Meridian.*

I mention the problem of inventing an identity to suggest the magnitude and sig-