White Woman, Black Women: Inventing an Adequate Pedagogy

Nancy Hoffman
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 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 unhappily aware of the problems posed by her blunt, impatient nature. She had begged to be spared thesuperiorship 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 thesuperiorship, and Mother Joseph became Sister Joseph once more. Madebursar of the order’s western Missions, 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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**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*: “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 chin, 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-
nificance of themes in black women's writing, and thus the importance of teaching it, and teaching it well, not just to students like mine, but to people at Wellesley and in Iowa as well.

There are two principles for whites who would teach about black women. First, do your research and class preparation more thoroughly than you would for teaching about your own female tradition or the majority white male Anglo-American one. You must be able to generalize about black women's culture when appropriate, and you will probably feel ill at ease when doing so. Second, be prepared to play dual and conflicting roles; only sometimes will your own anti-racism and your solidarity with other women protect you from representing the group oppressing black women. You must face interpreting literature in which white women like yourself (not society as a whole or, as in the poem which I discuss, a no good white "cracker" man) inflict pain on black women. You may be helping black women experience anger and sadness directed in part at you.

Here is Alice Walker's brief poem, "Revolutionary Petunias." It's not a difficult poem for a white woman to teach, because it permits the teacher to be comfortably anti-racist. I'm going to explicate it much as one would in a graduate school classroom; the poem demands in part knowledge from graduate school.

**REVOLUTIONARY PETUNIAS**

Sammy Lou of Rue
sent to his reward
the exact creature who murdered her husband,
using a cultivator's hoe
with verve and skill;
and laughed fit to kill
in disbelief
at the angry, militant
pictures of herself
the Sonneteers quickly drew;
not any of them people that she knew.

A backwoods woman
her house was papered with
funeral home calendars and
faces appropriate for a Mississippi
Sunday School. She raised a George,
a Martha, a Jackie and a Kennedy. Also
a John Wesley Junior.
"Always respect the word of God," she said on her way to she didn't know where, except it would be by
electric chair, and she continued
"Don't y'all forgot to water
my purple petunias."

The poem shows that literary convention crosses lines of race, sex, and culture. Its title, "Revolutionary Petunias," is, of all things, an oxymoron, or an epigrammatic combination of contradictory terms. Although usually oxymorons are expressions of personal, private contradiction—mute cry, pleasing pain—the idea is potentially explosive and political. A puzzle like "revolutionary petunias" demands synthesis. When Walker contrasts Sammy Lou with the sonneteers, the word "sonneteers" carries further Walker's play with Renaissance convention. Walker associates the sonneteers with falseness; their sugar-coated phrases are easy art. Truth comes writ plain, as some of the sonneteers themselves also know. To translate the convention into the political world some four hundred years later, the bards of the civil rights movement, caught up in a rhetoric of martyrdom (as standard as the rhetoric of love), make an ideologically correct interpretation of Sammy Lou's non-political act of anger. As Walker herself tells us in Interviews With Black Writers, these "cultural visionaries" misconstrue the power of the unselfconscious rebel. They don't see Sammy Lou because she is "incorrect."

Once the self-conscious reformers are undercut, however, we are left with Sammy Lou herself and the need for research that graduate school usually ignores. The poem becomes for whites obscure and for many blacks uncomfortable. Even with Walker's own commentary on the poem, most whites do not know what to make of that catalogue of Americana—funeral home calendars, children named for Jackie Kennedy. I've been trying to escape, say black students, two syllable names which belong to maids; the naive, depressing habit of blacks to admire and imitate the ruling class, to honor our children with their names; and the narrow minded religiosity which dreams of death and judgment day.

Here is where I as teacher must know enough of American culture to explain that Sammy Lou is probably a sharecropper, that with her lethal hoe she chops cotton for a white man; that funeral home calendars usually have religious pictures on them, and that old fashioned black folks who believe in Martin Luther King and the American presidency often grace their children with famous names. From Walker's article, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens" (Ms.), I learned that Walker places the creativity of Southern black women in their miraculous, colorful flower beds, and from Interviews With Black Writers, that Walker's own mother brought her a stalk of her old purple petunia bush when Walker's daughter was born. Are these details different from those a black teacher would supply? I think not. Could a black teacher explain these without research? Probably so. But if I could spend four or five years learning to understand Renaissance poetic convention, I can learn about black culture as well. It is far more accessible.

Perhaps I say the obvious, but there are white teachers who teach only Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings because they say they don't understand other black writers. (Personally, I think they like Angelou's self-portrait as the misunderstood bright girl who read Shakespeare in Arkansas. She confirms their values, and the value of high culture.) How did I find out about funeral home calendars and names like Martha and John Wesley? I happen to have worked in black Mississippi, but there are some perfectly obvious ways to get the same information. There are black bars, churches, restaurants. There is Atlanta, and most of Washington,
D.C. There are black radio and TV stations, magazines and newspapers. (I could have found out all I needed to know from reading our local Bay State Banner.) There is a major field called black history. Then I could have asked Barbara Smith what she thought about my reading of the poem. (If you have no black person to ask, you might as well put down your book and start working on an affirmative action plan.)

But once the obscurity of the poem vanishes, the interpretation of its meaning remains. Here is where I always feel tense, reluctant to be the vehicle through which Walker exhorts black women to see their flower-loving, conservative, religious mothers in a different light. With her godliness, her willing relation to death, her so-called counter-revolutionary love of beauty, Sammy Lou exalts a certain kind of ordinary private self-definition which implicitly criticizes black militancy. I grit my teeth, and say so, and say at the same time Walker’s broader point—“revolutions will have need of beauty”—which she quotes from Camus.

If my anxiety in interpreting “Revolutionary Petunias” is somewhat diffused by blacks and whites sharing a common enemy—the “cracker” Sammy Lou killed—let me turn to a passage from Meridian where I am positioned as the enemy by virtue of my white womanhood. It’s a funny, bittersweet passage which dismisses white women and mythologizes the power, verve, and daring of black women. In this passage I am more than a vehicle through whom black women’s experience of oppression is laid bare and interpreted; I am the direct source of oppression as well. Under circumstances which I know are a source of humiliation and anger for many of my black female friends, a black man—Truman—has just rejected Meridian in favor of a white, Northern woman. Naive young Southern civil rights worker, this is Meridian’s first encounter with such a possibility. She is “bewildered” by his preference. “It went against everything she had been taught to expect.”

For she realized what she had been taught was that nobody wanted white girls except their empty-headed, effeminate counterparts—white boys—whom her mother assured her smelled (in the mouth) of boiled corn and (in the body) of thirty-nine percent glue. As far back as she could remember it seemed something understood: that while white men would climb on black women old enough to be their mothers—“for the experience”—white women were considered sexless, contemptible and ridiculous by all. . . .

Who would dream, in her home town, of kissing a white girl? Who would want to? What were they good for? What did they do? They only seemed to hang about laughing, after school, until when they were sixteen or seventeen they got married. Their pictures appeared in the society column, you saw them pregnant a couple of times. Then you were no longer able to recognize them as girls you once “knew.” They sank into permanent oblivion. One never heard of them doing anything that was interesting.

On the other hand, black women were always imitating Harriet Tubman—escaping to become something unheard of. Outrageous. One of her sister’s friends bad become, somehow, a sergeant in the army and knew everything there was to know about enemy installations and radio equipment. A couple of girls her brothers knew had gone away broke and come back, years later, as a doctor and a schoolteacher. Two other girls went away married to men and returned home married to each other. . . .

But even in more conventional things, black women struck out for the unknown. They left home scared, poor black girls and came back (some of them) successful secretaries and typists (this seemed amazing to everyone, that there should be firms in Atlanta and other large cities that would hire black secretaries). They returned, their hair bleached auburn or streaked with silver, or perhaps they wore a wig. . . .

Then there were simply the good-time girls who came home full of bawdy stories of their exploits in the big city; one watched them seduce the local men with dazzling ease, some used to be lovers and might be still. In their cheap, loud clothing, their newly repaired teeth, their flashy cars, their too-gold shimmering waffles and pendants—they were still a success. They commanded attention. They deserved admiration. Only the rejects—not of men, but of experience, adventure—fell into the domestic morass that even the most intelligent white girls appeared to be destined for. There seemed nothing about white women that was enviable. Perhaps one might covet a length of hair, if it swung long and particularly fine. But that was all. And hair was dead matter that continued—only if oiled—to shine.

Although Walker makes no causal links between her dismissal of white women and the mythologizing of black women, there is a strongly competitive sexual-political dynamic in the portraits. Walker takes over “ownership” of the conventions with which black women are stereotyped by whites. She celebrates the usual litany of evils: outrageous drama; wit and strength; independence; sexual liberty; a love for adventure and risk. In order to exalt black women, she renders white women impotent and lifeless. Here are a few of the most volatile, dehumanizing perversions of American racism and sexism, because, no matter how skewed the contrast between black and white women, its occasion is true. Truman, like other black men, for whatever reason, prefers white women. He is a stock character in James Baldwin, in Imamu Baraka, in Ralph Ellison where his rejection of black women is rarely discussed. To make matters more complicated, Walker follows this tour de force with a portrait of a second stock character—the sugar daddy. He is Meridian’s employer, an aging black professor with “a limp old penis” and “a veritable swamp fog of bad breath.” While claiming to protect black women from white men, he pursues her around his desk and bribes her with pres-
ents. No wonder Walker needs to mythologize black women, paint them larger than life.

I have read this passage from Meridian five times this Fall to various classes; each time, despite the humor, my own feeling of tension is almost unbearable, the complexity of my own response difficult to sort out. And I listen for students’ responses: surprise at the portrait of white women; silence at the portrait of white men who climb on top of black women old enough to be their mothers; startled and sympathetic laughter at the portrait of daring, outrageous black women. The passage has power to shock us. It shocks black women because they didn’t think anyone would dare to say what they have always known: it shocks white women because they have never been asked to think from a black woman’s vantage point about white women who choose black men. And if they are feminists used to critiquing white male portraits of women—the standard approach in “images of women” courses—they have never experienced such a radical denial of the commonality between women before. To Meridian, white women are “others,” opposites, the “not me.”

For these remarks to be useful, I mustn’t dwell on Meridian’s particular plot and characters. However, in each of the other four novels I mentioned at the outset, similar powerful issues are raised, and the teacher of black literature—no matter what her own color—must confront them. Here are the observations that I make in class—

First, I say that I do not respond to black women stereotyping white women as angrily as I do to men stereotyping all women. While the acts are equally distressing morally, politically they are different. White men have power to invoke their stereotypes to discriminate against women; black women have no power to invoke. I, a white woman, may freely discount Meridian’s stereotype of me; it is inconsequential except as it lends off her own bitterness and anger.

Second, I say something about the sad domination of race over personal relations between black and white women. The burden of history—plantation mistress, mammy and slave; white lady, maid; menial worker, boss—has politicized friendships—despite feminism. This is a situation which white women must treat in a particular way: any feminist politics must continually account for the interests of black women; and individual white women should, of course, nurture their personal friendships with black women. Inevitably, however, white women must accept a certain mistrust from black women.

These first two observations are mainly directed at white students, many of whom care, for the best feminist reasons, about black women. The third observation concerns the key issue which divides black and white women—black men. Relationships either explode or go silent on the subject. My judgment as a white woman is to permit that division, to fix an arbitrary boundary. Although I have black friends who will criticize black male behavior in my presence, I refuse to do so in class. I “explain” Meridian’s Truman and other black male characters at a distance: there are unemployment statistics; social policies which exploit or ignore black men; competing theories of the history of the black family. I know these, and cite them. But Truman, as his name suggests, has a set of familiar male problems: black women, I believe, should be free to sort out these problems privately, to test a black feminist viewpoint beyond the hearing of white women. Even the common simplistic formulation of the problem is too volatile and overwhelming for me to handle: white racism has robbed the black male of his manhood; how can a black woman criticize him, or watch out for interests which are hers alone? This silence, I should add, contradicts my usual feminist pedagogy, teaching that combines personal, literary, and political perspectives.

My fourth observation returns us to the vitality of literature by black women and the theme with which I began—the “other side” of black woman’s double oppression which I call the magnificence of inventing yourself. In her own growth, Meridian, like other black women characters, passes through two stages of development. She first tries to define herself by converting the oppressor’s stereotype to her own use. Then she learns that she, in Toni Morrison’s language, must raise herself actively, that she has nothing to fall back on. She, unlike Lazarus, hasn’t God’s help; invisible to most, outside of history, she has a special freedom. Black women present a challenge and a model for us all.

Would a black teacher make the same observations? Probably not. She would be less worried than I about relations between blacks and whites and more worried about the integrity of black culture, I suspect. She would simply have a good laugh at or ignore the pallid, useless white women of Walker’s Meridian; and she would, of course, not share my fear that in my admiration for black women writers, I am like those of whom I am always suspicious—people who feel alive and healthily self-critical only outside of their own culture. Still I teach from my own identity, and with my own problems visible. I’m fully alive to the complexity of reader-writer relations in the classroom, the potentiality for hurt and misunderstanding and awakening. And the students deserve the best writers we can offer.

Michele Russell

Black-Eyed Blues Connection: Teaching Black Women II

In the first half of this essay (Fall 1976, Vol. IV, No. 4) the author described the Wayne County Community College classroom at the downtown YWCA in Detroit, her students, her role as teacher, and the ways in which she took “one subject at a time” and encouraged “storytelling.” In a subsequent issue, we will publish her annotated bibliography.

Give political value to daily life. Take aspects of what they already celebrate and enrich its meaning so they see their spon-