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Black-Eyed Blues Connection: Teaching Black Women II

Michele Russell

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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 but 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 fends 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 women’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-
taneous tastes in a larger way than before. This means they will see themselves with new significance. It also imposes the responsibility of selectivity on the teacher. Embrace that. Apply your own political acumen to the myriad survival mechanisms that colonization and domestication breed into subject peoples. Remind them of the choices they make all the time.

No life-area is too trivial for political analysis. Note that a number of black women, myself included, have begun choosing long dresses for daily wear. In one class session, discussion begins with the remark that they're more "comfortable" in this mode. What does comfort consist of? For those who are heavy, it means anything not physically constraining. For working mothers, comfort means "easy to iron." For the budget conscious, "easy to make." For some of the young women in class, comfort is attached to the added respect this mode of dress elicits from brothers they pass on the street. For a Muslim grandmother, cleanliness and modesty are signified. For her daughter, also in the Nation, Africa is being invoked. The general principle which emerges is that this particular form of cover allows us greater freedom of expression and movement.

Don't stop here. Go from their bodies to their heads. A casual remark about wearing wigs can (and should) develop into a discussion of Frantz Fanon's essay, "Algeria Unveiled," in which he analyzes the role of protective coverings, adornment, camouflage, as tactical survival modes for women in the self-defensive stage of a movement. Help them to recall the stages of consciousness they've all experienced in relation to their own hair. When did they start to regard "straightening" or "doing" hair as "processing" it? When did they stop? Why? If some women in the class still change their hair texture, does that mean their minds are processed, too? Read Malcolm on the subject. How do they feel about Alelia Walker in this context: the first black woman in America to become a millionaire for producing and marketing hair straighteners and skin bleaches. Take them as far as memory and material allow. Normally, there will be at least three generations of social experience personally represented in community college classes. Try to work with it all.

Go beyond what is represented in class. Recall all the ways, historically, that black women in America have used physical disguise for political purposes. Begin with Ellen Craft, escaping from a Georgia plantation to Boston in 1848, passing as a white man. Talk about the contradictory impact of miscegenation on their thinking and action. Then connect this to class members' public demeanor: the variations they choose and the purposes at work. What uniforms do they consciously adopt? Focus on motive as well as image; make intent as important as affect, a way to judge results.

Be able to speak in tongues. Idiom, the medium through which ideas are communicated and organic links of association established (i.e., community) must be in black women's own tradition. When black women "speak," "give a reading" or "sound" a situation, a whole history of using language as a weapon is invoked. Rooted in slave folk wisdom which says: "Don't say no more with your mouth than your back can stand," our vocalizing is directly linked to a willingness to meet hostilities head-on and persevere. Take the following description of a black woman "specifying" by Zora Neale Hurston, for example:

Big Sweet came to my notice within the first week that I arrived. . . . I heard somebody, a woman's voice 'specifying' up this line of houses from where I lived and asked who it was. "Dat's Big Sweet" my landlady told me. "She got her foot up on somebody. Ain't she specifying?"

She was really giving the particulars. She was giving a reading, a word borrowed from the fortunetellers. She was giving her opponent lurid data and bringing him up to date on his ancestry, bis looks, smell, gait, clothes, and his route through Hell in the hereafter. My landlady went outside where nearly everybody else of the four or five hundred people on the 'job' were to listen to the reading. Big Sweet broke the news to him, in one of her mildest bulletins that bis pa was a double bumpted camel and his ma was a grass-gut cow, but even so, he tore her wide open in the act of getting born, and so on and so forth. He was a bitch's baby out of a buzzard egg. My landlady explained to me what was meant by 'putting your foot up' on a person. If you are sufficiently armed—enough to stand off a panzer division—and know what to do with your weapons after you get 'em, it is all right to go to the house of your enemy, put one foot up on his steps, rest one elbow on your knee and play in the family. That is another way of saying play the dozens, which also is a way of saying low-rate your enemy's ancestors and him, down to the present moment for reference, and then go into his future as far as your imagination leads you. But if you have no faith in your personal courage and confidence in your arsenal, don't try it. It is a risky pleasure. So then I had a measure of this Big Sweet.

"Hurt who?" Mrs. Bertha snorted at my fears. "Big Sweet? Humph! Tain't a man, woman nor child on this job going to tackle Big Sweet. If God send her a pistol she'll send him a man. She can handle a knife with anybody. She'll join hands and cut a duel. Dat Cracker Quarters Boss wears two pistols round his waist and goes for bad, but he won't break a breath with Big Sweet lessen he got his pistol in his hand. Cause if he start anything with her, he won't never get a chance to draw it. She ain't mean. She don't bother nobody. She just don't stand for no foolishness, dat's all."

Talking bad. Is it still going on? Some class members do it all the time. All know women who do. Some, with a con-
cern for manners, find the activity embarrassing. One woman observes that it’s getting harder and harder these days to find targets worthy of such invention. Another, bringing the prior comments together, says there’s too little audience for the energy it takes. Whatever our particular attitudes, we all recognize in Big Sweet a pistol-packin’ mamma, conjure woman, voice of Judgment and reservoir of ancestral memory—all of which are the bases of a fighting tradition also personified in Harriet Tubman, Marie Leveau, Sojourner Truth, Ericka Huggins. Discover the continuities in their words, acts and the deeds done in their name. Emphasize how they transformed personal anger into political weapons, enlarged personal grudges to encompass a people’s outrage. When words failed, remember how Aunt Jemima’s most famous recipe, ground glass plantation pancakes, made the masters choke.

Take the blues. Study it as a coded language of resistance. In response to questions from class members about whether feminism has ever had anything to do with black women, play Ma Rainey singing, “I won’t be your dog no more.” Remind them of our constant complaints about being treated as a “meal-ticket woman,” our frustration at baking powder men losing their risables and of going hungry for days. Know the ways in which Peaches are Strange Fruit. Introduce them to a depression era Bessie Jackson responding humorously, but resolutely, to our oppressions in every form. When words failed, remember how Aunt Jemima’s most famous recipe, ground glass plantation pancakes, made the masters choke.

*Sometimes I’m up, sometimes I’m down. I can’t make my livin around this town, Cause Tricks ain’t walkin, Tricks ain’t walkin no more.*

I got to make my livin, don’t care where I go.

I need some shoes on my feet, clothes on my back.

That’s why I’m walkin these streets all dressed in black.

But Tricks ain’t walkin, Tricks ain’t walkin no more.

And I see four or five good tricks standin in front of my door.

I got a store on the corner, sellin stuff cheap.

I got a market cross the street where I sell my meat.

But Tricks ain’t walkin, Tricks ain’t walkin no more.

And if you think I’m lyin, follow me to my door.

By 1935, when they got to her door, they found she’d gone into a new business. The address was the same, but the commodity had changed. She sang:

*When you come to my house, come down behind the jail.*

I got a sign on my door, Bar-B-Que for Sale.

I’m talkin bout my Bar-B-Que.

The only thing I sell.

And if you want my meat, you can come to my bouse at twelve.

Bring the idiomatic articulation of black women’s feminism up to date by sharing stories of the first time we all heard what Aretha was asking us to think about, instead of just dancing to it. Let Esther Phillips speak on how she’s justified and find out if class members feel the same way.

Be able to translate ideological shorthand into terms organic to black women’s popular culture. Let the concept of internationalism be introduced. But approach it from the standpoint of a South African Miriam Makeba, an Alabama-born Big Mama Thornton or a Caribbean Nina Simone all singing Bob Dylan’s “I Shall Be Released.” Concentrate the discussion on each woman’s roots, her place of national origin. Reflect on the history behind the special emphasis each woman gives to phrases such as: “every distance is not near,” “I remember every face of every man who put me here,” “inside these walls.” Ask: What kinds of jails are they in? And what happens when we start acting to effect our own release? Devote one class session to a debate over whether it is an antagonistic contradiction for black women to use Bob Dylan’s music as an expression of resistance. Explore the limits of nationalism in this way.

The whole world is ours to appropriate, not just five states in the South, or one dark continent. Treat the meaning of this statement through Nina Simone’s recreation of Pirate Jenny. Play the music. Know the history it comes out of and the changes rung: from The Beggar’s Opera, through Brecht and Weil’s Threepenny Opera, to the Caribbean and Southern situations everywhere that Simone takes as her reference point. Know the political history involved and the international community of the oppressed she exhorts to rise. Particularly notice the cleaning woman’s role. Recall the rebellions of the 1960’s, when Nina Simone was performing this song. We all lived through the rebellions, but how did we relate to them? At what point did class members begin associating Detroit with Algeria, Watts with Lesotho, the Mississippi with the Mekong Delta, America with Germany? Share your own experience and growth.

Use everything. Especially, use the physical space of the classroom to illustrate the effects of environment on consciousness. The size and design of the desks, for example. They are wooden, with one-sided stationary writing arms attached. The embodiment of a poor school. Small, Unyielding. Thirty years old. Most of the
black women are ample-bodied. When the desks were new and built for 12-year-old seventh grade bodies, some class members may have sat in them for the first time. Now, sitting there for one hour—not to mention trying to concentrate and work—is a contortionist’s miracle, or a stoic’s It feels like getting left back.

With desks as a starting point for thinking about our youth in school, class members are prompted to recall the mental state such seats encouraged. They cite awkwardness, restlessness and furtive embarrassment. When they took away our desks were new and built for 12-year-old bodies, some class members who pin their hopes for the future on “new careers,” pose the following questions: How is a nurse’s aide different from a maid? What physical spaces are the majority of us still locked into as black women who must take jobs in the subsistence and state sectors of the economy? Do we ever get to do more than clean up other people’s messes, be we executive secretaries, social workers, police officers, or wives? Within what confines do we live and work?

Reflect on the culture of the stoop, the storefront, the doorway, the housing project, the rooming house bathroom, the bank-teller’s cage, the corner grocery store, the bus, hotels and motels, school, hospital and corporate corridors, and waiting rooms everywhere. What constraints do they impose?

If we conclude that most of our lives are spent as social servants, and state dependents, what blend of sex, race, and class consciousness does that produce? To cut quickly to the core of unity in experience, read the words of Johnny Tillmon, founder of the National Welfare Rights Organization in Watts, 1965:

I’m a woman. I’m a black woman. I’m a poor woman. I’m a fat woman. I’m a middle-aged woman. And I’m on welfare.

In this country, if you’re any one of those things—poor, black, fat, female, middle-aged, on welfare—you count less as a human being. If you’re all of those things, you don’t count at all. Except as a statistic.

I am a statistic. I am 45 years old. I have raised six children. I grew up in Arkansas and I worked there for fifteen years in a laundry, making about $20 or $30 a week, picking cotton on the side for carfare. I moved to California in 1959 and worked in a laundry there for nearly four years. In 1963, I got too sick to work anymore. My husband and I had split up. Friends helped me to go on welfare.

They didn’t call it welfare. They called it AFDC—Aid to Families with Dependent Children. Each month I get $363 for my kids and me. I pay $128 a month rent; $30 for utilities, which include gas, electricity, and water; $120 for food and non-edible household essentials; $50 for school lunches for the three children in junior and senior high school who are not eligible for reduced-cost meal programs. This leaves $5 per person a month for everything else—clothing, shoes, recreation, incidental personal expenses and transportation. This check allows $1 a month for transportation for me but none for my children.

That’s how we live.

Welfare is all about dependency. It is the most prejudiced institution in this country, even more than marriage, which it tries to imitate.

The truth is that AFDC is like a supersexist marriage. You trade in a man for the man. But you can’t divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce you, of course, cut you off anytime he wants. But in that case, he keeps the kids, not you. The man runs everything. In ordinary marriage, sex is supposed to be for your husband. On AFDC, you’re not supposed to have any sex at all. You give up control of your own body. It’s a condition of aid. You may even have to agree to get your tubes tied so you can never have more children, just to avoid being cut off welfare.

The man, the welfare system, controls your money. He tells you what to buy, what not to buy, where to buy it, and how much things cost. If things—rent, for instance—really cost more than he says they
Do, it's just too bad for you. You've just got to make your money stretch.

The man can break into your home any time he wants to and poke into your things. You've got no right to protest. You've got no right to privacy. Like I said, welfare's a super-sexist marriage.

Discuss what it means to live like that. What lines of force and power in society does it imply? A significant percentage of black women have had direct experience with welfare, either as children or mothers. In discussing "how it happened to them," all become aware of how every woman in class is just one step away from that bottom line. A separation; a work injury; layoffs; a prolonged illness; a child's disability could put them on those roles. It is a sobering realization, breaking through some of the superior attitudes even black women have internalized about AFDC recipients.

What other work do we do and how does it shape our thinking? Compare Maggie Holmes, domestic; Alice Washington, shoe factory order-filler; Diane Wilson, process clerk from Studs Terkel's Working. Study what women just like those in class say about themselves. Although, as with everything, a whole course could be devoted just to analyzing the content, process and consciousness of black women's jobs, be satisfied in this survey to personify history so it becomes recognizable and immediate; something they participate in.

**Have a dream.** The conclusion to be drawn from any study of our history in America is that the balance of power is not on our side, while the burden of justice is. This can be an overwhelming insight, particularly in times of economic stagnation, physical deterioration and organizational confusion. Therefore, it is important to balance any discussion of the material circumstances of black women's lives with some attention to the realm of their dreams.

In all other areas of life, we can talk about struggle, organization, sabotage, survival, even tactical and strategic victory. However, only in dream are liberation and judgment at the center of vision. That is where we do all the things in imagination that our awareness demands but our situation does not yet permit. In dream, we seek the place in the sun that society denies us. And here, as in everything, a continuum of consciousness will be represented.

At their most fetishistic, black women's spiritual dreams are embodied in the culture of numbers, signs and gambling. In every poor community, holy water, herb, astrology and dream book shops are for women what poolrooms, pawnshops and bars are for men. Places to hang on, hoping for a hit. As Etheridge Knight has observed in *Black Voices from Prison*, "It is as common to hear a mother say, 'I gotta get my number in today' with the same concern and sometimes in the same breath as she says 'I gotta feed the baby.' . . . In some homes the dream book is as familiar and treated with as much reverence as the Bible." In many homes, dream books produce more tangible results.

The most progressive expression of our dreams, however, in which mass liberation take precedence over individual relief, and planning replaces luck, is occasionally articulated in literature. Sarah Wright provides such an example in *This Child's Gonna Live*. In that story of a black family desperately trying to hold onto its territorial birthright and each other in depression Maryland, the most fundamental religiosity of poor black people is recreated, it's naturalism released. The landscape is made to hold our suffering and signify our fate. Particularly in the person of Mariah Upshur, the faith of the oppressed which helps us to fight on long after a cause seems lost is complemented by a belief that righteousness can make you invincible. Colloquially speaking, all that's needed is for God to send the sufferers a pretty day. Then, children will be cured of worms, and land thieves will be driven from the community, the wind will be calm for the oystermen, the newly planted rye will hold and a future will be possible in a land of "slowing-up roads" and death. That is, if we're deserving. What does "deserving" mean? Discuss Richard Wright's approach to this subject in "Bright and Morning Star."

Relate the fundamental hopes and values of Mariah Upshur's dream to other belief systems through which people have been able to attain freedom. The concrete experience of people "moving mountains" is communicated by the story of Tachi in the People's Republic of China. The triumph of vision, perseverance and organization over brute force to regain land is demonstrated in Vietnam and Cuba. Spell out the commonalities in all liberation struggles in this age which vanquish the moneychangers. Find examples in our own history where beginnings have been made of this kind. Make the Word become Flesh, so the new day that's dawning belongs to you and me.

As teachers, we should be able to explore all these things and more without resorting to conventional ideological labels. This is the basic, introductory course. Once the experiential base of the class-in-itself is richly felt and understood, theoretical threads can be woven between W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and Frantz Fanon. Then bridges can be built connecting the lives of ghettoized women of every color and nationality. In the third series of courses, great individuals can be put in historical perspective; organized movements can be studied. In the fourth stage, movements, themselves, may arise. Political possibilities for action then flow from an understanding conditioned by life on the block, but not bound by it. And the beginnings of a class-for-itself may take shape. But the first step, and the most fundamental, should be the goal of the first course: recognizing ourselves in history. □