Teaching Black Women's Heritage

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By Betsy Brinson

In Fall 1979, I began teaching a course on Black Women in American History at the Open High School in Richmond, Virginia. The course was designed primarily as independent study with a weekly seminar discussion, and the students received three hours’ social study credit. Because of my inexperience with teaching the subject matter, I limited the class to six students and was delighted to have all young Black women choose the course.

Our basic texts were Gerda Lerner’s Black Women in White America and “Generations,” an issue of Southern Exposure Magazine devoted to Southern women. We also used a wide variety of feminist articles, pamphlets, and newsletters.

The curriculum was divided into eight units. In the first unit, we explored the condition of Black women under slavery. We looked at such questions as how slavery affected the Black family, what kind of educational opportunities were available to slave women, how slave women handled sexual abuse, and how slavery affected the way Black women felt about themselves as women.

In the second unit, on Black education, we studied the contributions of Black women in organizing early educational programs. We gave special attention to the variety of organization-building skills (including fundraising and public relations) used by these early educational activists to accomplish their goals.

The third unit focused on Black women as sex objects—how Black women have been treated sexually over the ages, how abusive treatment has affected Black women’s feelings about themselves, and how Black women are viewed sexually today.

In Unit 4, “Black Women Organize for the Welfare of Others,” we identified those factors which motivated Black women to become involved in antilynching campaigns and early interracial activities. We looked at ways Black women chose to work for self-improvement and for the benefit of others through the women’s club movement. We examined next (Unit 5) the role Black women played in both government employment and public political life in American history.

In the sixth unit, “Black Women and Racial Prejudice,” we studied how Black women challenged racial prejudice prior to the twentieth century. In exploring the role of Black women in the civil rights struggle (Unit 7), we read firsthand the stories of women like NAACP president Daisy Bates, who organized the Little Rock, Arkansas, campaign to integrate the high school, and sixteen-year-old Minnijean Brown and fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, who courageously faced white mobs and guardsmen’s bayonets in that same struggle. Finally, we considered how racial prejudice is still a problem for Black women today.

In our final section (Unit 8), we heard Black women speak of womanhood. We heard Pauli Murray describe how Black women, historically, have carried the dual burden of Jim Crow and Jane Crow. “One thing is crystal clear,” she said, “the Black woman can no longer postpone or subordinate the fight against discrimination because of sex to the civil rights struggle but must carry on both fights simultaneously.” And we listened hard to Shirley Chisholm, who shared with us her reasons for leading the 1968 campaign to eliminate restrictive abortion laws.

In the discussion seminars, the students were encouraged to reflect upon their own personal experiences in terms of the issues being addressed. Several students chose to keep journals in which they recorded their personal reactions to the assigned readings.

The students were also given several assignments which required them to interview mothers, grandmothers, and other older Black women to learn their personal experience on issues affecting Black women—i.e., race prejudice, employment, reproductive health, rape, education, family, and sexism. Almost all those interviewed recalled poverty as a Black experience and urged education as a preventive solution for the young women.

In a discussion of rape, almost all the class agreed that they would keep silent before they would subject themselves to a majority white police force and court system. Several spoke against telling their own mothers for fear of being judged promiscuous. They were able to trace these feelings to historical forces about which they had learned earlier.

All the students held part-time jobs in addition to attending school. In a discussion of Black women’s employment, both historically and currently, several students addressed the various forms of race discrimination they experienced on the job. One student recalled how she and other young Black women had been rejected for jobs which were given only to white women at a fast-food chain. They were less clear about sex discrimination, but, on reflection, several students offered personal accounts of situations in which white and Black women together had been paid less than men and in which fewer women were given promotions. Since most of the students came from families in which their mothers were single heads of the household, they were strong supporters for women having equal opportunity in the workplace. The students themselves had career aspirations which ranged from modeling to medical school; they all felt strongly that they would go farther than their foremothers.

The reading and discussion were supplemented by several additional learning experiences. First, we were fortunate enough to have Carolyn Reed, the executive director of the National Committee on Household Employment, speak to us during her visit to Richmond. As a Black woman, Reed underscored the issues already addressed in the reading with many of her own personal experiences. One student gained a new respect for her mother, a household worker in the white community. Reed’s visit received considerable media attention, which further impressed the students.

Secondly, several of the students were able to attend for one day the First National Scholarly Research Conference on Black
Women, sponsored by the National Council of Negro Women, in Washington, D.C. Here they had the opportunity to meet Gerda Lerner, the editor of their text, as well as to hear Black women leaders they had discussed. They met and talked, too, with several young Black women who were studying women's studies in a New York high school.

In the final evaluation, most students said that discussion was the most meaningful part of the course. One student wrote that the course had helped her to "see that Blacks and women must work together for equality." Another observed that the class was enjoyable "even though there were no boys."

For me, the class was a rich and rewarding experience in which I saw young women challenge and grow in appreciation of their historical past. They shared with me priceless moments of understanding and insight into their personal experience which I am convinced will allow them to join with all women in the search for feminist meaning.

Betsy Brinson works with the ACLU Southern Women's Rights Project.

Postscript: The ACLU Women's Rights Report, which is distributed nationally, carried an announcement on the course in its Fall 1979 issue, and indicated that additional information on the course curriculum was available. Several dozen inquiries were received, many of them from individuals interested in adopting the course for their own community. One of the more unexpected responses came from a Black male inmate at Reidsville prison in Georgia. He wanted to take the course. I am happy to report that the inmate has received the textbooks and curriculum and is busy studying. He has agreed to share his experience with his brothers at the prison and will help us with an evaluation when the course is completed.

"Out" at the University: Myth and Reality

By Toni A. H. McNaron

For the first eleven years I taught at the University of Minnesota, I stayed in the closet I'd fled to within the first month of recognizing my lesbianism.* During those years, I was awarded tenure quite early (the end of my third year); I won both a collegiate and an all-University award for outstanding teaching; I almost got a book on Shakespeare's last plays published; I was active in my regional professional organization. During those years, I experienced increasing pain at the dislike my immediate superiors [sic] had for me, no matter what I did. I learned quickly that it was not helpful to talk of my devotion to teaching or about my hard-working, enthusiastic students. So I tried a variety of ways to win approval.

One year I spent over $1,000 throwing cocktail parties and feeding people elegant dinners; the next I was hardly ever seen at social functions. One year I served on numerous departmental committees; the next I refused all nominations. One year I went to every department meeting and spoke vigorously to the issues; the next I sat silent at those few meetings I attended. One year I frequented the faculty coffee lounge daily; the next I was hardly ever seen. Nothing worked. I was confused, angry, hurt, and exhausted.

During those same years, I was in one primary relationship for seven years, only to rush through five others in the next four years. All of them were essentially clandestine, full of the false excitement and real fear attendant upon such liaisons. I was significantly overweight and increasingly alcoholic; lonely and detached from my feelings and body at first, but eventually from my mind and spirit as well.

For a year or so, while I was in a state of transition, I taught courses and administered a new Women's Studies Program. Newly sober and out within the local lesbian community,** I remained hidden at my job. I was honest with students in my office if they needed me to be, and I told friends at school. But I held back from telling my chair-man or from coming out in classes or from sharing my work if the focus was lesbian. Being the Coordinator of Women's Studies did not help me resolve this split, since, like all such programs, we were trying hard to appease male heterosexist administrators all too ready to believe that "women's studies is a lesbian plot."

Finally, in the summer of 1975, I had to face the hypocrisy and ill-health of my position: I was teaching Introduction to Women's Studies and decided to make the history of the lesbian/straight split one of the issues to read about and discuss. Knowing I couldn't say "lesbians ... they, I thought to invite a panel of younger community lesbians to talk directly from their lives. Then when I said "lesbian" in my lecture, I would use "we," letting students hear me or not, as they chose. Four friends agreed to participate, two others came to lend general support, and the students were assigned the relevant chapter in Sappho Was a Right-On Woman, dealing with the infamous scene in which Betty Friedan called lesbians a "lavender menace;**, the Furies walked out of the New York chapter

*I first acted on my feelings for women while in my initial months as a new teacher at an Episcopal girls' school in Vicksburg, Mississippi, I was twenty-one and the year was 1958. My employer, now the head of the Episcopal Church in America, threatened to fire me for "corrupting the youth." I denied my reality, kept my job, and made love with a wonderful young woman in a furnace room which had no window or light in it. Needless to say, "in the closet" has never been a metaphor for me.

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Postscript: I noticed with genuine humor recently that I had gone off to my favorite grocery store in my bright purple T-shirt with its bold white lettering: LAVENDER MENACE. At the checkout stand, the young woman working that shift said, in apparent innocence, "I like your shirt."