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Chapter 10

“Have YOU Ever Lived on Brewster Place?”: Teaching African-American Literature in a Predominantly White Institution

Clare Oberon Garcia

During a course on black women’s literature I was teaching a couple of years ago, we were studying Ann Petry’s naturalistic study of an ambitious single mother’s life in the inner city, *The Street*. After class, as I chatted with some students who had lingered to ask questions, I mentioned—I don’t remember in connection with what—that I had been to school in Switzerland. One young woman expressed astonishment, and then proceeded to tell me what she had seen as my life’s story: “I pictured you working your way through high school and college, in somewhere like Chicago, struggling through with all your children, and then finally getting this job at our college.” Laughing, I explained to her that I had had a rather middle-class childhood, gone to private schools, had my children *after* I married an attorney, and had been living in Colorado for five years before I joined the college faculty. I wondered how many other students had seen me as their local version of Petry’s Lutie Johnson, or as one of the women of Brewster Place, or the up-close-and-personal illustration of a *Time* magazine story on successful workfare.

I teach several African-American and American literature classes at a small, predominantly white liberal arts college. I have never had more than two black students in a single class, and at most I have had four students of color in one class. Certain things happen in my African-American literature classes which simply don’t happen in my

American literature classes, although writers of color are included in all of the classes I teach. In conversations with other minority faculty at predominantly white institutions, I've discovered that these issues aren't unique to my experience. In fact, an hour ago I had lunch with a young black man who was interviewing for a position on our faculty. We asked him how his classes responded to his teaching strategies, which were very "real world" oriented. "The vast majority of kids in my class are white," he said. "And they sit there looking at me as if I were from Public Enemy."

The new emphasis on multiculturalism in education and the revisions of the canons of several disciplines have meant that many white undergraduates are being exposed to the creative and scholarly work of minorities. In addition, thanks to increased recruitment efforts, more and more minority faculty are teaching in predominantly white institutions. I've found that the issues of authority, anxiety, and what I call "emotional baggage" come up again and again. To be an effective teacher, I must address them.

On the first day of class, I encourage students to talk about their interest in taking the class. Many white students express the fear that they won't understand the texts because they come from such different worlds. Several times, especially in my black women's fiction classes, I've had students preface remarks with, "As a white, middle-class male . . ." Sometimes the qualifier is merely an excuse for not engaging in the discussion or the reading. But more often it reveals the speaker's anxiety that he or she isn't "getting" something which is apparent to readers who have either race or gender in common with the author of the book. I try to convey to the students that there are no privileged readings in my class—only readings which are more or less interesting than others.

I also try to establish a classroom climate where students can actively question their own biases as well as those of the author and other readers. I encourage students to feel that they can speak freely without being self-conscious about their lack of knowledge, experience, or political savvy. Merely telling them they are free in this way is not enough, of course, so I try to model different responses to the texts for them. I do this in several ways. I might take lines of interpretation which aren't "politically correct." Or I share the processes of my own reading and rereading. For example, when teaching Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, I compare my initial rather confused readings of the book with later readings, when I was familiar with most of the

allusions. I emphasize that we are *all* readers, and if our readings are more interesting than others' it isn't necessarily because of "what we have in common" with the author or the protagonist. And of course, the texts themselves challenge any preconceptions the students may have about any kind of monolithic "black experience in the United States." If anything, all my students come away with a sense of the rich variety of black experience in literature, black aesthetics, and black ideologies.

As in all English classes, the question of which readings are superior to others raises the issue of authority. Yet again, the racial dimension adds an extra twist or two to an already complex problem. When I taught *Black Literature in America* last year, at least half of the twenty-five students in the class came to me individually to express consternation that there weren't any minority students in the class. So I decided that we needed to talk about these feelings as a class. I asked: What was it that they expected any minority student, as a minority, to contribute to the class? We had been reading texts from slave narratives to sketches of black bourgeois angst, from the uncompromising anger of Richard Wright to the genteel humanism of Charles Johnson. Yet the consensus of the class was that any black student, no matter what his or her background, would be able to "help the white students understand the books better," because the black student would have "actually lived" the situations depicted in the various texts.

The conversation led to the issue of my authority as the only black person in the room, and whether or not they would take this course if it were taught by a white teacher. The vast majority of the class said that they wouldn't, even though most teachers on our English faculty include texts by writers of color in their courses. I then asked the class if they felt that I shouldn't teach Henry James (my dissertation subject) and other white writers. Perhaps out of politeness, they agreed that *this* was all right, as black people "have always had to learn the ways of the dominant culture," and I had a Ph.D. from a "white" university. I concluded, privately, that the issue of authority is a double-edged sword. I would always be expected to have an extra insight into black texts—especially black women's texts—just by virtue of experience. And perhaps on some level this is true. But I also realized that they don't see black literature, or black scholarship, as on a par with traditional literary scholarship or the Euro-American canon. A working-class Jewish woman from Brooklyn can become an expert on Shakespeare or Baudelaire, in their view, if she masters the language,

the texts, and the critical literature. But they would not grant that a middle-class white man could ever be a trusted authority on Toni Morrison.

Because we live in such a racially polarized society, students bring a lot of "emotional baggage" with them to a black literature class. Their experiences with black boyfriends, black maids, their perceptions of cliquish black students in their own high schools, their impressions of black life that they glean from television, MTV, or—in one case—a tourist's drive-by of Cabrini-Green, the infamous Chicago housing project, all influence their perception of what the course is about and texts that they read. My challenge as a teacher is to discern which baggage it is educational for the whole class to unpack and analyze, and which baggage must be dealt with in other areas of the students' life. I used to set aside a session early in the class which I called, to myself, "a rap session." Here I let the students "let it all hang out" in a freewheeling conversation in which they confronted and shared their own doubts, prejudices, fears, questions, and notions about race. I thought that these rap sessions would allow us to clear the air and then get down to the business of reading texts. However, I found that emotions came up in these classes which I was unprepared to handle: a biracial student exploding in anger about high-school incidents which still smarted, a white student expressing wonder at how much he didn't know about the life of the black maid who had served his family for over twenty years, the descendant of Virginian slave owners weeping in guilt. . . . I haven't entirely abandoned the idea of allowing the students to examine how their own experiences influence their reading, but I now insist that class discussions be focused, structured, and rooted in the particular issues raised by the texts. I have the students do a lot of small group work in which I don't participate directly, and I suspect that a lot of these issues are dealt with in conversations outside of class with each other.

Finally, I encourage the students to take risks. I am always impressed by how brave most of the students who take my classes are. Many of them have read works by black authors before my class—either in other classes or, more often, on their own. They are excited by the new territory of African-American literature. They are open to new perspectives on history, social structures, relationships, and their own privileges.

Teaching in a predominantly white college where there is only one other African-American woman on the faculty can be bewildering and

lonely, but it is my students' enthusiasm and patience that sustain me. I always try to meet them wherever they are, and guide them to places they might not have imagined.