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White Teacher, Black Writers, White Students: Colorblindness and Racial Consciousness in Teaching African American Literature

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"You're Teaching This Class?"

The first time I offered to teach the course in a mid-sized state university in the rural upper-Midwest, Ben, a student in my composition class, asked me whether "*you're* really teaching 'African American literature.'" I replied that I was.

"And you're qualified to teach it because you're from the Bronx?" he asked, smiling.

His question, while facetious, implicitly addressed several problems, assumptions, and biases: could I, a white man, really be teaching something called African American literature? He clearly wouldn't have asked in such a way about, say, a survey of British, or French, or German literature; yet I also doubt he would have asked if it were a Native American, Immigrant, or general Multicultural American literature class. Still, his tongue-in-cheek response masks the more profound question shared by others in and outside the teaching profession: why does African American literature specifically seem to require racial identification in ways that few, if any, other fields do? And rather than allow this resistance to unravel the class, how can college instructors instead weave this challenge into its very fabric?

COLORBLINDNESS

My initial experience differed from that of Joyce A. Joyce, a black professor, who writes, "As I introduced myself, I realized that although [the white students] knew they had signed up for a course in African American literature, they had unconsciously assumed that the teacher would look like them" (2005, 38). Our students' seemingly opposite reactions, however, underlie the same biased binaries and analogies—even in twenty-first-century America, unconsciously, black remains to white as primitive is to modern, natural is to cultured, and authentic is to mediated. Joyce's students could not see her as an intellectual authority; my student could not see me as authentic. And yet this inability to see is a result of, not an aberration from, what has become known as the (white) American ideal of "colorblindness."

Colorblind is a revealing metaphor, one that repositions deficiency as asset. The willful aspiration not to see, or, obviously, discuss race has paradoxical effects: first, it discourages white students from learning about any culture other than their own, by reinforcing the fallacy that, in fact, there is no culture other than their own: *we're all the same.* Then, it implies that those who do call attention to race, even when the purpose is to analyze the texts of black people historically excluded by the so-called colorblind canon, are themselves prejudiced: *we're all the same, and anyone who suggests otherwise is a racist.* Even when students opt to enroll in a class that obviously eschews colorblindness in its title and curriculum, the entrenched, default colorblind code prevails: for many white college students, to call attention to race, regardless of the reason, is itself a racist practice. Eventually, however, the repressed reality of race—which should be, but frequently is not, apparent to anyone who is a member of a minority group or is close to someone who is, or anyone who has taken a census, filled out a college application, watched television or movies, listened to the radio, or lived in or near a city or knows someone who has—uncannily manifests itself in a Freudian return, through a sporadic joke, slip, or question.

Indeed, each time I've subsequently offered the class, now five times in two different colleges, I've had one white student ask me whether I was really teaching the course. My response has been twofold: 1) Tell the student "yes." But: 2) Incorporate the question into the class. To do otherwise becomes the white elephant, as it were, in the room once we begin. Colorblindness, while maintaining its function as the rhetoric of good etiquette but bad faith (in arguments from affirmative action to the federal government's response to the

2005 hurricane disaster in New Orleans), finally breaks down when, for many white students, black culture simply equals street culture, a credo that by definition cannot be learned or earned in a classroom. When I suggested above that Ben's question was biased, I did not necessarily mean against me. I also meant that his question represents Joyce's flipside, a prejudice against African American literature as an intellectual object of critical inquiry. This reversal, finally, creates two different but equally objectionable consequences: first, that if I'm from the Bronx, then I must have lived with actual black people, like some anthropologist or missionary from a faraway land with first-hand contact with the natives; second, that Bronx residency procures the street cred, the "keepin' it real" ethos ironically learned by many white Midwesterners from MTV, necessary to teach African American literature but irrelevant, even antithetical, to more intellectual or cultivated forms of higher learning. The course, then, must strive to correct these fundamental misreadings.

It's too bad, then, that all I could think to tell Ben was that in fact I'm from Brooklyn.

SENDER, MESSAGE, RECEIVER

For all his bluster, Ben was on to something. Should only black people teach black authors, since, to borrow from Malcolm X as well as Gary Howard's book on white teachers and multicultural pedagogy, "We can't teach what we don't know"? But then, what does it mean to "know"? For some students, regardless of their race, "knowing" has less to do with understanding and critical engagement and more to do with the word's metonyms: to identify, and, crucially, to see. Students blinded by the colorblind have already decided that seeing is not only unwelcome but even futile. As Clare Oberon Garcia observes, "Several times, especially in my black women's fiction classes, I've had students preface remarks with, 'As a white, middle class male . . .' [. . . The qualifier often] 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" (1999, 120).

Ben's questions and Garcia's nervous students raise concerns similar to the one that has openly beset the field at least since 1998, when Nellie McKay questioned "Who shall teach African American literature?" in *PMLA* (1998). In the book, *White Scholars/African American Texts*, that followed, McKay highlights "the pitfalls of [white scholars'] work [on black authors]," including Ann duCille's

warnings against "guilty conscience rhetoric" and Michael Awkward's fear that "the self referential moments of white scholars can make white scholars themselves the focus of African American literature" (2005, 2). Later, however, McKay explains that "the sad truth is that most institutions of higher education have no one, black or white, able to attract the next generation of scholars to this important part of the life of the mind" (23). If McKay, and separately Henry Louis Gates, fear that not enough research institutions are looking for African American literature specialists (Gates 1992, 99–100; McKay 21–22), then McKay's concern that such courses will go untaught may prove even grimmer for teaching-oriented colleges, satellite campuses, and community colleges, schools more likely to hire "English," "Writing," or "Literature" generalists than anything as specialized as African American (or, for that matter, say, Renaissance) literature. If African American literature classes are to be taught, they will sometimes be staffed by white instructors. The question, then, changes from "Who shall teach . . . " to this: How can white instructors find a midpoint between staying out of the texts' way yet calling attention to the problems of colorblind reading? How can we simultaneously acknowledge our—and our students'—position as well as do justice to the writers, neither dominating nor patronizing the texts?

Blind adherence to colorblind correctness in a class of all white students would in fact be far easier than the anxious acknowledgment that perhaps there is something odd about a white teacher teaching black writers to white students—the dynamic is disturbingly reminiscent, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1988), of the character Schoolteacher, a white man who harms and terrifies black people under the auspices of studying them, yet his ostensible understanding is empiricism without empathy, ultimately with the goal of dominating, not educating.[1] And as Schoolteacher and his ilk represent corrupt white authority, so do the recipients of his studies: his students are not black people but rather other whites hoping to use his knowledge of black people against them.

Instead, white teachers of black writers must acknowledge their own whiteness to dispel the colorblindness. I cannot move students from colorblindness to racial consciousness while asking them to ignore the fact that I am white, and that perhaps African American literature is the one class in which they might have reasonably expected to see a black professor. If I want them to read the texts and themselves critically, then I must do the same. To do so can be uncomfortable, given the context of white authority of black bodies of work, to say nothing of black bodies themselves, but to do otherwise would be

hypocritical. Being a white teacher of black writers is not fraudulent, but to ignore its historical context and political implication is.

What such instructors must understand and communicate with their students is how strongly the themes and thrusts of so many of the works, such as *Beloved*, suggest that colorblindness is naïve at best and unhistorical and complicit with institutional racism at worst. From Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, through her most recent, *Love*, white students may be tempted to read the "us" and "we" pronouns as universal, rather than allowing them to reflect the particular qualities of the black, female American voice and experience. To an extent, I hope, these pronouns may be universal—*Love*, like *Beloved* before it, and like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, is surely interested in rewriting and reclaiming a larger American voice and history, one open to widespread understanding. Conversely, however, Morrison's and Walker's novels examine race largely intraracially, with the few white characters providing a backdrop of institutionalized oppression that only openly emerges occasionally. At the same time, the plots eschew the linearity of the conventionalized narrative, operating instead in three dimensional circles, cycles, and ellipses. White characters and racism, then, lie behind much of the action, just below the surface enough that white students can ignore them, since "racial" for many students is synonymous with "interracial."[2] As strange as it may sound to instructors, some white students avoid reading race in these works. But to ignore it, of course, would misread the novels and their devotion not just to black people but to an African American style of language and storytelling. Morrison herself puts it this way, in a quote with which I begin my classes,

> I remember the language of the people I grew up with. Language was so important to them. All that power was in it. And grace and metaphor. Some of it was very formal and Biblical, because the habit is that when you have something important to say you go into parable, if you're from Africa, or you go into another level of language. I wanted to use language that way, because my feeling was that a black novel was not black because I wrote it, or because there were black people in it, or because it was about black things. It was the style. It had a certain style. It was inevitable. I couldn't describe it, but I could produce it. (qtd. in Zinsser 2001, 242)

Morrison, then, collides with colorblindness by claiming the existence of "blackness," but at the same time she moves away from essentialism and into the realm of language. In keeping, the "Who shall teach . . . "/ "Are you qualified because . . . " questions converge not just in terms

of identity, but identity's intersection with language. As Henry Louis Gates suggests, "No one, it seems clear, believes that the texts written by black authors cohere into a tradition because the authors share certain innate characteristics" (1992, 100)—or, I'll add, communal characteristics, such as social background, political ideology, or, of course, city of origin. Rather, Gates concludes, "Many black authors read and revise one another, address similar themes, and repeat the cultural and linguistic codes of a common symbolic geography" (1992, 101). Therefore, in addition to narrative elements, one aspect of particular concern for the white instructor of these black writers is precisely what happens to that language when it's assigned, discussed, and in some cases read aloud by a white instructor—or a white student.

To start with the most extreme, yet ubiquitous, example, as the white rap group the Beastie Boys discovered when they addressed the predominantly black audience in Harlem's Apollo Theater, the word "nigger" cannot be separated from its historical function of degradation when a white person uses it, no matter how much authenticity the Brooklyn-born Beasties imagine they possess. Similarly, law professor Gerald Wetlaufer created an "environment that is hostile to" black students when he read passages—albeit from Pulitzer Prize-winning sources—containing racial slurs at the University of Iowa Law School. At issue were not the epithets themselves but the lack of warning, preparation, and context, together with the suggestion that the incident was "indicative of a much larger problem," according to the Black Law Students Association (Jordan). As Gloria Naylor, author of *The Women of Brewster Place*, writes of "nigger," the word carries vastly different meanings depending upon who says the word, to whom, under what circumstances, and using which tone: "Words themselves," she writes, "are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power" (2004, 93). Even if the text and the language—the message—remain the same, what happens when the sender—the teacher, acting in the author's obvious absence—is white, and so are the receivers—the students? As any student of linguistics understands, the message subsequently changes with it. And of course, many works use potentially offensive language.

The teacher, then, while welcoming the controversy requisite to the topics at hand, should neither take imagined insider's liberties, as the Beastie Boys misunderstood, nor imagine that words exist in a vacuum, as Wetlaufer inadvertently implied. This temperance may take different forms; for me, it means never saying "nigger" aloud unless I'm reading directly from the text of a black writer, only if the

word is necessary, and even then only with preparation and discussion. One famous example is Countee Cullen's poem "Incident" (1997):

> Once riding in old Baltimore,
> Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
> I saw a Baltimorean
> Keep looking straight at me.
>
> Now I was eight and very small,
> And he was no whit bigger,
> And so I smiled, but he poked out
> His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."
>
> I saw the whole of Baltimore
> From May until December;
> Of all the things that happened there
> That's all that I remember. (1306)

The word "nigger" is of course offensive, yet its offense becomes the poem's point. The word may be even more shocking to today's "colorblind" white students than it was when it was published in 1925. Yet, returning to Morrison and Gates, a class discussion should not reduce this poem to the single word, but analyze its language closely: the way in which the title sets us up for something small, which in a sense the "incident" is, but also how it proves ironic considering the word's effect and magnitude; the four-line stanzas, with their ABCB rhyme scheme, in iambic tetrameter, reminiscent of childhood itself, from nursery rhymes to Dr. Seuss's story "What Was I Scared Of," and not a form necessarily identified with African American literature (indeed, Cullen disliked the "black writer" label); to the chilling conclusion, that this greatest insult marks an end of childhood—that it blots all else in memory—in a way that perhaps only that word can.

At the same time, "offensive" can mean different things, not just the obvious epithet. Are, for example, certain African American folktales, such as "Why Negroes Are Black," taken from Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1996), offensive to contemporary colorblind sensibilities?[3] Written in dialect, the folktales and other vernacular forms can sound derogatory when read irreverently. Hurston, maintaining the voice of the people, opens with this line: "Long before they got thru makin' de Atlantic Ocean and haulin' de rocks for the mountains, God was makin' up de people" (81). The content of the story may prove equally objectionable as well: after failing to show up before God, who had "set [that] day to give out

egroes" were so scared that "they begin to push and
ıer.... So God hollered 'Git back! Git back!' And they
Him and thought He said 'Git black,' and they been
" (81).

conservatives have suggested that multicultural college
xercise in political correctness, certainly anyone who
l these folktales, as well as Morrison and Alice Walker,
ow subversive, how politically incorrect, their actual
And this point, for me, is worth emphasizing with
of whom have been taken aback not by the literature's
ome imagined political line as much as its ability to
nsight. Here, the folktale, as I encourage my students
read closely, demonstrates not only a sense of humor,
-and prescient—notion that, somehow, the Negroes
groes before anyone actually had skin color. Centuries
/ was invented, this folktale suggests that race is a
istic, rather than a biological, category. While a cur
/ reinforce racial images of lazy or irascible blacks, the
es that the story, even hundreds of years ago, was in
re of these stereotypes and is playing with them in
conventional white notions of oppression; in the tale,
y arbitrary rather than preordained or deserved, a
e, of miscommunication.

l Lawrence Dunbar (1996), in his poem "When
uses the vernacular to express its idea that regular
sically illiterate, but they nevertheless understand
ɔer level than the educated musician:

ıit dat noise, Miss Lucy—
c book away;
e to keep on tryin'?
se twell you're gray,
't no notes a-flyin'
ıat rants and rings
ıen to de big woods
ly sings. (129)

is not to analyze these works thoroughly in and of
ther to highlight the many aspects of the texts that
ional attention or emphasis in the classroom. The
ı texts must encourage close readings, allowing
ıd hear the ways in which, despite their oral and

vernacular quality, they are indeed works of literature. At the same time, however, the course must acknowledge the multiple ironies inherent to a "literature," with the word's relationship to literacy produced by a group of people for whom it was illegal to read or write. Close reading alone is not enough, yet neither is history alone sufficient, for as Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto (1979) point out, again recalling Morrison and Gates, "To read Afro-American literature simply as a document of Afro-American history is to deny the importance of its formal and linguistic properties" (234). Clearly instructors must undertake a multifaceted methodology.

THE PARADOXES OF HYBRID PEDAGOGY

Many contemporary approaches to literature, following reader response theories, center upon the reader: he or she, more than the author, constructs meaning from what is otherwise a series of signs. Such an approach allows students to generate their own readings; it disabuses them of their intentional fallacies; and it allows them to see themselves as authors in their own right. In composition and introductory literature classes, I have frequently emphasized the role of the reader, hoping to break students out of their imprisonment metaphors involving "keys" to poems or "hidden meanings" to stories.

However, African American literature necessarily complicates this method. While reader response privileges the reader over the author, the approach becomes contextually disconcerting considering the centuries of denial, denigration, and dismissal of black authorship. After Phillis Wheatley's trial to verify her authorship,[4] William Lloyd Garrison's pretext to Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, and decades of white-authored introductions to black literature expressly attempting to validate black authorial identity (such as Saul Bellow's introduction to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*), I cannot presume to say that the author's background is irrelevant or that his or her intentions don't matter; Roland Barthes unfortunately declared the "death of the author" just as black authorship began to receive critical acknowledgment. Close reading alone risks divorcing texts from their crucial authorial and cultural contexts, but, recalling Garcia's nervous students, we must consider how an orthodox reader response approach may perturb white readers when they deem their own experiences detrimental to their understanding.

On a larger level, how can white students, on the one hand, begin to feel as though the class is more than an exercise in "diversity" or "multiculturalism"—for many colleges, the ostensible rubrics of the

ome a realization of *uni*versity? On the other hand, g the universal become detrimental to the particular and? While I can offer no easy answers, I have my ılph Ellison's essay, "What America Would Be Like originally published in 1970, as a preliminary we can begin to understand the consequence of his ial to black nationalists and white bigots alike, that whites are culturally part Negro American without (1996, 739). Students, then, face the challenge of ıe "American" in African American literature while becoming aware of the African American traditions absorbed, assimilated, or appropriated by white

's goal, then, may be to help students paint in the ıted by colorblindness, allowing them to understand es, the context in which they were published, and and literary movements: close reading with a sense t and history. The instructor must emphasize that ınique perspective, even while acknowledging that inevitably must, bring his or her specific cultural work at hand.

ırid approach—close reading with historicism, sm with reader response—might seem paradoxical, d I want to emphasize that of course instructors , should, take multiple approaches to everything ıd this combination of seeming contraries especially e teachers of black writers. In the end, we need to cal contraries to arrive at the most difficult one: ıican literature can at the same time represent s well as African American particulars. For, to read ersal diminishes their authority and veracity; as ı be read as anthropological, mere artifact rather oach creates a necessary tension: we must resist on approaches that privilege the text over context at the same time, we must also emphasize that cs as historical documents alone devalues the esthetic value, and shared traditions that African ve emphasized.

ON: What's in a Name, Revised

f proves to be one of paradoxes, one that breaks ns, then the pedagogical approach must do the

same. And if the texts continue to revise and amend literary and cultural traditions, then perhaps the appropriate lens through which to view African American literature is not one of colorblindness, but a kind of opposite: revision. Ultimately, colorblindness reveals itself to be a striking name, since people who are truly colorblind, a rare condition called monochromasy (not to be confused with the more common and mild anomalous trichromasy) see worse, not better. And paradoxically, monochromatics see only in black and white, precisely the opposite of political colorblindness's purported aspiration. Yet both senses of the word ultimately miss the variations, hues, and nuances of the world. Even if white people aspire toward political colorblindness, visually and physically they certainly do not. White students' obedience to colorblindness ultimately makes, and keeps, both blackness and whiteness invisible. Colorblindness equals blindness.

Perhaps we have arrived at the time for a new metaphor beyond "blindness," which should no longer be misconstrued as a better way of seeing. If the main character Sethe, in Morrison's *Beloved*, understands the world and the past through "rememory" (1988, 215) and if Sethe's rememory allows *Beloved* the novel to correct a literary history strewn with Wheatley's trials and black exclusion, perhaps white students can be taught a kind of re-vision, a way to re-see, re-write, and re-right the blind spots of the past. What allows me, compels me, even, to teach African American literature is that in it, I see the cognitive dissonance between "black studies as human studies," as the title of Joyce A. Joyce's book puts it, that black "literature addressed any human being and that they [white students] did not need to stress that the writers were Black" (2005, 37), versus the seemingly opposite notion that African American literature reflects a unique set of historical experiences and cultural aesthetics.

The course title alone becomes the lens through which we can see—or revise—the world, and its useful contradictions: "African American," yes, but to acknowledge that this is a relatively recent label, that not all, or even most, black people use it to describe themselves, and that it is a hybrid, and for a long time, hyphenated, word and identity. The course, then, must also emphasize the "American" in African American, and the notion that much of the literature under consideration is very much about white people, whether they are visible or not, and that whites have much to learn about themselves as whites, rather than some notion of learning about others or even "multi"culturalism. African American literature, then, is American literature—and for Ellison, American literature is African American literature. Yet even to call it "literature" is ahistorical, for as I have suggested, many crucial examples were produced not as a part of a

but as part of a collective oral tradition, one that the
;e still aspires to maintain. And it is something more
es, one that, taken together, ironically complicates the
nolithic African American literature even as it, like
and allows us—all of us—to recognize a cohesive
an literature.

each African American literature because it helps me
myself, as well as others; it exposes the seeming
/hite culture, and its concomitant privilege, while
visibility and agency of black people. Yet these seem
) not, in the class, or to me, feel paradoxical as much
ry. My background—yes, being from Brooklyn—
ething to do with my interest in teaching African
ıre. And it also has nothing to do with it, or with my
:hing it. It is not because I am from Brooklyn, or
merican, but rather because I want to learn fully,
lor)blinders, what "American literature"—indeed,
—means.

ı, bother with labels at all? Why not stick with the
ı becomes another way of saying that categories, that
rinsically matter? And so Henry Louis Gates, in a
/e chapter introduction, asks "What's in a name?"
Shakespeare's Juliet, as everyone knows, thanks to
means nothing: the name has no relationship to the
ı, so that the feud between her and Romeo's families
o her individual love as a signifier to its signified, as
inguist Ferdinand de Saussure would put it centuries
: no relationship to the things they name. Yet the
:nd, understands that the opposite is equally,
: that names are everything, and that it is Romeo's
ıames, rather than their individual persons, their
ıpe their tragedy.

, white or black, what's in a name? Nothing, of
:hing, of course. So I will continue to teach African
e, not despite the Bens of the world, but for them.

NOTES

-9, as well as Gail Griffin's *Season of the Witch* (1995),
:r analogy between Morrison's Schoolteacher and white
ı American literature.

2. People are so accustomed to understanding all issues involving race as interracial conflict that even neutral (colorblind?) spell-check at first automatically changed "intraracial" to "interracial."
3. This story, as well as Dunbar's poem and Ellison's essay, which I refer to later, have been anthologized together in *Cornerstones*, worth mentioning because it is one of the books that I use in my class.
4. See Henry Louis Gates, *The Trials of Phillis Wheatley*, for a book-length treatment of Wheatley and her effect on our understanding of African American literature.

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