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Reflections on Teaching Literature by American Women of Color

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Last year UCLA received a Ford Foundation grant to integrate material by and about women of color into the undergraduate curriculum. As someone who has taught courses on Ethnic American women writers and co-facilitated a faculty development seminar funded by the grant, I would like to venture some suggestions on how to decenter longstanding assumptions and approaches.¹ I believe that the greatest challenge in teaching such classes is not introducing new material but ushering in alternative critical perspectives, especially if instructors seek to go beyond integration of texts to transformation of mind-sets. To achieve these goals, it may be necessary to cross all kinds of boundaries, not just ethnic but also generic, disciplinary, political, epistemological, and even metaphysical boundaries.

1. Suspend established literary criteria

Susan Stanford Friedman has demonstrated convincingly that genre is often gender-, and one may also add, culture-specific: "A binary system in particular has shaped the expectations governing the reading and writing of epic and lyric poetry, a dualism that intersects with the cultural oppositions of masculine and feminine." She contends that in choosing to use the masculine genre, women poets such as Elizabeth Browning and H.D. "self-consciously reformulated epic conventions to suit their female vision and voice" (Friedman 203-204). We can detect analogous innovations among ethnic women writers who appropriate the conventional forms of autobiography and novel and who frequently dissolve the boundary between the two genres. Works such as Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, Alice Walker's *Meridian*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* pulsate with personal experiences, yet they are also imaginative works with strong political implications. Instead of asking whether these authors are capable of maintaining the detachment or artistic distance of novelists, we must question our received notion that the rendition of certain experiences is too personal or too political to be taken seriously as literature. Following the lead of feminist critics who have shown that women often express themselves artistically in journals and letters, we must invent new criteria that do not make light of texts which deviate from established norms. If we hold on to a critical apparatus designed to serve a white male canon, not only will some works by women of color seem to fall short but their cultural specificities and subversive energy will also go unnoticed.

Similar cautions must be exercised against placing these works in a purely Western literary tradition. Both Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* and Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* (which incidentally also blurs the boundary between prose and poetry) abound with allusions respectively to Chinese epics and Native American myths; and both authors draw on oral legacies of storytelling. No less influential are musical forms such as *corridos* and *canciones* on Chicano poetry, or spirituals and blues on Afro-American poetry. These ethnic resources ought to be reckoned with as part of the American heritage.

2. Question globalizing feminist assumptions

Women of color have repeatedly challenged white feminist theories. Paula Gunn Allen argues that patriarchy as such did not exist in many Indian tribes (which had been gynocratic) till they were colonized by whites.² Even common notions of masculinity and femininity are by no means universal. Both Tayo in Silko's *Ceremony* and Lipsha in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* are "feminine" figures by white standards. And then, there are men of color who have been emasculated in America. The opening myth in Kingston's *China Men*, in which a Chinese man is transformed by force into a woman, underlines the parallels between the racist treatment of Chinese American men and the sexist subjugation of women. Even the misogyny of Cholly Breedlove in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* or of Grange Copeland in Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* must be viewed within the context of racial inequality. Theories that at once polarize the sexes and equalize men and women tend to drown the particular pathos dramatized in these texts.

3. Decenter Western ideals and dominant modes of seeing

While ideals such as rationalism and competitive individualism may be shared by people of color, ethnic women frequently present competing sets of beliefs. Instead of seeing and judging diverse cultures from Eurocentric perspectives, these perspectives must themselves be interrogated and oppositional viewpoints be entertained. For instance, when we encounter ghosts and spirits in works such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Silko's *Ceremony*, and Ana Castillo's *Mixquiahuala Letters*, we must not jump to the conclusion that the characters are superstitious or hallucinatory, or, what is equally problematic, assume that those beliefs are shared by all members of the ethnic group under discussion (more on this in 4).³ Unless we refrain from relegating literature by people of color to the realms of the benighted or the exotic, it can never become a site for possible transformative thinking.

Harking back to my first point, the resurgence of an alternative cultural ethos may well be one reason why works by women of color so often depart from

conventional aesthetic structures. For instance, while a single hero is the norm in traditional novels, fiction by ethnic women (e.g., Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club*) is often family- or community-centered; it contains multiple protagonists and points of view rather than a single hero(ine) or narrator. Granted that these writers may be influenced by modernist techniques, their world views tend toward connection rather than fragmentation.

4. Contextualize without conflating text with context

Historically and socially anchored criticism is indispensable. For instance, knowledge of Japanese Canadian internment is crucial in studying Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and information about the Korean independence movement will enhance our understanding of Theresa Cha's *Dictee* or Kim Ronyoung's *Clay Walls*.

At the same time, we must avoid seeing creative work by one writer as testimony for the entire race. The controversies surrounding *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior* amply reflect these assumptions. Both Walker and Kingston are accused of reinforcing stereotypes of sexism in respectively the Afro-American and the Chinese American cultures. Such insistence on representativeness, in precluding the possibility of a private vision, denies subjectivity to the author. It is, furthermore, a burden borne exclusively by ethnic—especially ethnic women—writers. (Norman Mailer is seldom taken to be representative of the entire white race.)

5. Confront the issues of marketability and audience

Bell Hooks argues that creative work by Afro-Americans "is shaped by a market that reflects white supremacist values and concerns," that "in this social context . . . novels highlighting black male oppression of black females while downplaying white racist oppression of black people would be more marketable than the reverse" (Hooks 53-54). Students can read more critically if they are made aware of this interface of literature and politics.

A distinction should be made, however, between an author's accomplishment and responsibility and the forces of cultural production such as publisher's decisions, marketing strategies, reader's predilections and misappropriations. Just because a work is a national best seller does not necessarily mean that the author is a "sellout," as some critics have insinuated.

In addition, an author's ethnicity frequently skews a reader's response. A work that is perceived to be progressive and funny when written by a Mark Twain may be judged as militant or bitter (if not self-interested) when written by an Alice Walker. Texts, *pace* New Critics and Roland Barthes, are seldom read independently of the authors.

6. Avoid tokenism or ghettoization

On the one hand, it is important to show that race and gender do not merely affect the literary production of women and ethnic minorities but shape the work of canonized authors as well. (How anxiety about white ideology informs Melville's *Moby Dick* has been brilliantly illustrated by Toni Morrison. [14 ff.])

On the other hand, we must overcome the prevailing assumption that works by women or people of color are studied largely because of their gender and ethnic quotient. In many Survey of American Literature courses and even in courses on women writers, it is not uncommon to see these works assigned only in the one week thematically devoted to "Gender and Race." Instructors may want to consider distributing these works throughout the syllabus and unlocking them from preconceived categories. Writers of whatever gender and color go for style, poetic or narrative strategies, and "universals."

7. Stretch the bounds of gender and cultural identities

Gender and cultural stereotyping is not peculiar to "outsiders." The pervasive belief within one school of Asian American critics that there is a "fake" and a "real" Asian American sensibility and the reluctance among some black scholars to address feminist and gay issues (dismissed as "white") suggest that there are certain essentialist prescriptions for being Asian American and Afro-American. (Yet no one says, "White men don't do this.") In place of paradigms which further exclude the marginal we need feminist and cultural theories that allow for fluid identities—identities that are neither colorblind nor colorbound, that are defined neither by nor merely in binary opposition to white male constructions. Julia Kristeva, for one, has advocated a new "*signifying space*, a both corporeal and desiring mental space" beyond gender dichotomies ensuing in exclusion and violence (33).⁴ Perhaps a similar space is needed that can go beyond racial opposition and that can accommodate multiplicity of identifications.

These points, I must stress, are more reflections than considered or proven pedagogies, and certainly not the final word. In fact, a bonus of the Ford seminar, in which everyone was challenged at one time or another, was the displacement of authority. Where lively exchange, passionate confrontation and critical dissent can take place, however painful at times, there is still hope for radical transformation.

NOTES

¹ I owe many of my ideas to my students and to the participants of the Ford seminar. I would like to thank in particular Karen Rowe, the principal investigator of the Ford project, and Brenda Marie Osbey, my co-facilitator.

² Paula Gunn Allen, guest lecture in the Ford seminar. See also *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, 30-42.

³ Such condescending attitudes not only interfere with appreciation of the texts but also provoke hostility in the classroom. According to Johnnella Butler, one of the forces polarizing the classroom into black vs. white is that "white students insist on reducing all experience to the same—theirs" (232). An example occurred within the Ford seminar itself, when a black colleague was asked to explain what she meant by "spiritual encounter." She said she knew she was visited by the spirits when she felt a sudden surge of energy while jogging. She was understandably chagrined and offended when another colleague rephrased her experience as a "second wind."

⁴ Waxman also discusses how Kristeva's idea may be used to expand the borders of the black American literary canon (88).

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