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Teaching African-American Literature to White Students

Originally published in 1940, Richard Wright's *Native Son* sold over 200,000 copies in one month and is still one of the most widely read novels in the world, not just in the United States. It is clear that this novel is so popular and widely read because it strikes at the core of racism, thus at the core of the emotionally devastating disease that separates Whites from people of color. In the earlier part of the novel, Bigger Thomas, Wright's well-known main character, receives a job as chauffeur for a wealthy White family. Although Bigger lives in the big city of Chicago, he lives on the southside, the poverty-ridden Black community of Chicago in the 1930s. Born in the South and now isolated within the Black community, Bigger has had very little exposure to Whites. All of his life experiences and those of his parents have taught him to fear and distrust Whites.

Bigger's first assignment on his new job is to drive his boss's daughter to school. Rather than going to school, she directs Bigger to pick up her boyfriend and drive them to the southside of Chicago so they can hang out in the Black community. Although Mary and Jan, her boyfriend, think they like and respect Black people, they are totally ignorant of the history and realities that shape Black people's lives. Richard Wright demonstrates in the car scene the dramatic chasm that separates Blacks and Whites. During a discussion between Mary and Jan, who initially discuss their desire to help Black people as if Bigger is a mannequin, they begin singing the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and ask Bigger to join in. As they sing, Bigger smiles derisively, thinking, "Hell, that ain't the tune [. . .]" (67). Bigger's thinking that Mary does not know the tune to one of the oldest of the Black American spirituals parallels the difficulties

I experienced teaching African-American literature to predominantly White students in Nebraska. For Mary does not know the tune to this song because she does not identify with the experiences that forced the African and African-American slaves to compose that song. Analogously, the White American student, particularly the White American student who has had very little contact with African-Americans, knows very little, if any, African-American history and has given no real thought to the realities that underlie the differences between their psyches and those of their Black peers.

It is quite depressing and almost terrifying that we still live in a world where White people, particularly White people in isolated sections of the Midwest, have not had much contact with Black people and do not know the ramifications of this lack of contact. Because the institution of slavery demanded that Black people serve Whites in all possible endeavors, Blacks worked in the White American's fields and homes. History documents that Black women nursed and raised the White man, his wife, and their children. After slavery, while Black men were being lynched and denied work and an education, Black women continued to work for the White family. Once some employment and educational opportunities opened up for Blacks after the Civil Rights Movement, Blacks began to enter White colleges and universities in larger numbers. My point here is that slavery and racism have done the White American far more psychological damage than society addresses. Having placed themselves in privileged positions, Euro-Americans have attempted to force all people of color to accept their concept of God, their intellectual ideas, their economic system (capitalism), and their political concept (democracy). And as a result, people of color understand what it means to be a White person; we know how White people think. The White American, however, for the most part, is not aware that he or she fears being in a setting in which he or she is a minority or in which he or she is not in control if the group is predominantly Black or if the person in charge is Black.

Even though my students at the University of Nebraska (in Lincoln) knew that the literature we read was written by Black writers, too many of the White students were hostile toward an interpretation of the literature that particularizes the Black American's dilemma. In other words, they wanted to discuss the literature from what they and others call a "universal perspective." While I am fully aware of Paul Gilroy's, Stuart Hall's, and numerous others' ideas regarding hybridity and the dangers of restricting the human psyche to an exclusive racial perspective, I am also aware that we live in an extremely contradictory society. For at the same time that many intellectuals

propose that we celebrate difference, they contend that we belong to the American melting pot. Interestingly enough, America has East Indian restaurants, Chinese restaurants, Thai restaurants, Mexican restaurants, Jamaican restaurants, African restaurants, African-American restaurants, and Cuban restaurants, as well as others. Yet, intellectuals do not agree that the ethnically diverse people who own these restaurants and prepare food that embodies their particular culture also have varying indigenous religious beliefs and ways of looking at the world that differ from a Euro-American perspective. In other words, if we really celebrated difference, we would agree that varying cultural experiences produce varying ways of looking at and responding to the world. Some scholars refer to these diverse perspectives as worldviews. Most of my White students at the University of Nebraska attempted to escape the racial dimension of African-American literature, proposing that the literature addressed any human being and that they did not need to stress the fact that the writers were Black.

Numerous problems emerge here. The two most important are the students' unwillingness to face the horrors of racism and their resistance to accept the interpretation of their Black professor. Of course, these two problems are integrally related. The White students' lack of knowledge of African-American history and their minimal interaction with Black people, particularly Black authority figures, undergird their racist responses to African-American literature and to me. The students approached the literature from a falsely superior position, ignorant of the depth of the works they were reading. They were quick to say that slavery and racism do not involve them and that they are not responsible for the actions of their parents and their parents' parents, and so on. This fear of the legacy of their ancestors and their failure to take responsibility for this fear cause them to propagate and continue the racism that they struggle so assiduously to deny.

Most of my White students at the University of Nebraska had never been challenged to face the meaning of what having a Black professor who confronts racial issues excited in their psyches. These students, like most White Americans, had been taught all their lives—through direct statements, gestures, jokes, innuendoes, movies, books, glances, dinner conversations, and other actions—that Blacks are inferior to them. Therefore, when they find themselves in a competent Black professor's class, we should all expect them to undergo changes in their perception of Blackness and the reality of the human being charged with the job of teaching them. I address this dilemma directly and openly in my classes.

During my first year at the University of Nebraska, on the first day that I walked into a new class, I noticed the glares and strange looks on my students' faces. As I introduced myself, I realized that although they knew they had signed up for a course in African-American literature, they had unconsciously assumed that the teacher would look like them. I do not think that the students were aware that they found the fact that I am Black disturbing. They relaxed as I engaged them in a discussion of the historical appropriateness of my teaching African-American literature.

To teach issues addressing racism, I strongly believe, requires a kind of honesty and self-introspection that I think is almost lost from the academy today. Most professors, if I can judge from discussions with my colleagues, with their students, and from reading poststructuralist-influenced scholarship, play it safe by not challenging the status quo and by not questioning whether their teaching methods are better for them or better for their students. I see very little soul searching in the American academy. And as a result, students are graduating, denying their fear that they are not yet prepared to join the workforce as anything other than a clone who cannot write an organized, well-developed essay free of excessive grammatical errors without paying a computer service to write their essays for them. Employers increasingly complain about the verbal and literary weakness of the students they hire. If professors fail to talk honestly with students about the quality of their work, how can these professors address conscientiously the horrors of racism that strikes at the core of who we are as human beings who destroy each other? I am suggesting that if we professors have truncated emotional lives, if we lie to ourselves about who or what we are, we are ill equipped to teach a course such as African-American literature regardless of our color.

Two examples of typical misreadings of two incidents from African-American fiction demonstrate the conscientiousness and studious attention necessary in reading literature with high emotional content. In *Native Son*, Bigger brings Mary Dalton home drunk. He carries her upstairs to her room because he is afraid he will be blamed for her drunkenness. So he attempts to get her into bed so that her parents will not detect her state. While he is in Mary's room, her blind mother comes into the room because she has heard a noise. The mother, shocked by the smell of alcohol on her daughter, stops at the door. When Mary begins to moan, the mother moves forward. In order to prevent Mrs. Dalton from coming closer to the bed and detecting his presence, Bigger, totally enwrapped in fear, takes a pillow and holds it firmly down on Mary's face.

Mary mumbled and tried to rise again. Frantically, he caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips. He had to stop her from mumbling, or he would be caught. Mrs. Dalton was moving slowly toward him and he grew tight and full, as though about to explode. Mary's fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly. Mary's body surged upward and he pushed downward upon the pillow with all of his weight, determined that she must not move or make any sound that would betray him [. . .]. He clenched his teeth and held his breath, intimidated to the core by the awesome white blur floating toward him. His muscles flexed taut as steel and he pressed the pillow, feeling the bed give slowly, evenly, but silently. Then suddenly her fingernails did not bite into his wrists. Mary's fingers loosened. He did not feel her surging and heaving against him. Her body was still. (74)

We, the readers, know that Mary is dead, but Bigger does not know it immediately. As Mrs. Dalton gets closer to her daughter's bed, she is sure of the alcohol smell and quite disappointedly leaves the room. Again the narrator describes Bigger's reaction: "He relaxed and sank to the floor, his breath going in a long gasp. He was weak and wet with sweat [. . .]. Gradually the intensity of his sensations subsided and he was aware of the room. He felt that he had been in the grip of a weird spell and was now free" (75). Bigger very gradually realizes Mary is dead. In order to hide his murder, he puts Mary's body in her trunk, carries the trunk to the basement, takes the body out, cuts off the head so that he can put the body in the furnace. Numerous teachers and scholars have talked and written about these two scenes. A common comment is their reference to Bigger's "heinous murder" of Mary Dalton.

To call the accidental murder heinous is to deliberately or unconsciously misread or misrepresent the scene. The murder takes place just as Wright describes it—the murder is accidental. And though the mere thought of cutting someone's head off is gruesome, Mary is already dead when Bigger decapitates her. So why then do teachers and scholars judge Bigger so harshly? The answer is the same for both Blacks and Whites: We want to separate ourselves from him. We want to assure ourselves that we are not like him. We want to assure ourselves that we are not like Bigger because he frightens us. Richard Wright understands this fear, masterfully producing a novel that tests our ability to talk honestly about racism. Most of the criticism I have read on the novel and most discussions of the novel demonstrate that we are not conscientious with ourselves about the ways racism has shaped our consciousness.

My second example comes from Jessie Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*, published in 1931. In this novel with many characters, Judy Strange comes to a small New Jersey town to visit her sister and her niece. We know that Judy is a strong, high-spirited woman who likes to have a good time. We also know that she attempts to help her friend Mrs. Forten strengthen her marriage by having the husband and wife walk her home so that they can be alone on the walk back to their home. It is not until the end of the novel that we learn how or why Mrs. Forten's husband left his wife and followed Judy to Philadelphia where he and Judy conceived a child. At the end of the novel, Judy's sister explains the situation quite clearly and reliably:

Judy never meant to carry on with him [Mr. Forten]; she really liked Mrs. Forten. She used to say she was a fool because she felt sorry for her. [. . .] Only Sylvester Forten wouldn't leave Judy alone. She ran away from him to Philadelphia and he followed her; she couldn't get rid of him [. . .]. But he was frightened when the child came [. . .]. He really died of the shame of it [. . .]. (337-338)

One of my female Ph.D. students at the University of Maryland, who is also a college teacher, wrote in her dissertation that Judy seduced Mrs. Forten's husband, not that he seduced her. Surely my student read the same passage above, but chose to judge Judy harshly because society tends to castigate "loose" women more severely than it does disreputable men.

The teaching of literature, particularly African-American literature, requires that we as teachers strip ourselves bare; it requires that we struggle against our own fears and prejudices. It requires a clarity of vision that has its roots in our commitment to the integrity of a truth that levels all humanity. Both the teacher and the student of African-American literature need not only a strong sense of history, but they each also must reveal and then defeat the fear and dishonesty with the inner self that eclipses healthy relationships between Blacks and Whites. A Black professor of African-American literature unwittingly full of self-hatred is as dangerous a teacher as a racist White professor of African-American literature. For they both fail to grapple with the depth of the text and neither takes us forward in improving the societal ills fostered by racism.

Although in general the Black and the White student of African-American literature had different attitudes toward the class in Nebraska, they both had the same problem: They both have been miseducated. Much talk exists about a multicultural curriculum, and

hybridity is a key word used in literary, intellectual parlance. Scholars, teachers, and administrators have been fighting over how much African-American, Native-American, Latin-American, and Asian-American subjects should be taught in our schools since the 1970s, following student unrest in many of our major universities, such as Berkeley and Cornell. If history books had been written honestly, we would not have this problem. We would not need the word *multicultural*. If European and American history had originally identified Alexander Pushkin and Henri Dumas as Black writers, if history had not deemed Africa—the most culturally and agriculturally rich continent on the planet—the “dark continent,” we would not need to totally reshape Western history and its educational system.

The result of this falsification is that the African-American student, full of self-hatred, is ignorant of his or her rich cultural past, and both the Black and the White American student still think Europeans and Euro-Americans conceived everything great and ingenious on earth. Thus, the White American student who thinks that he or she is politically correct is much like Mary Dalton in Wright’s novel. This student walks into a class on African-American literature and thinks that his or her mere presence means that he or she knows Black people and that he or she can easily understand the subjects discussed. This student, most often, expects that the subject will be as superficial as his or her view of Black people themselves. I found that students, particularly from the Midwest, were not prepared to do battle with the Black subject, to fight with racial issues that they had never thought of before, to conquer the frustration and shame these books stimulated in them. And because most of these students unconsciously, perhaps, thought that Blacks are inferior to Whites, they did not anticipate that the books they were reading might present them with levels of difficulty or complexity new to them in literature.

Any Black professor working in the environment I describe here must decide clearly on the role he or she wants to play in educating White students. If the Black professor fears or identifies with Whites, if job security is more important than honesty and integrity, this professor will devise all sorts of strategies to avoid confrontation with students and to assure that even the poorest of students receive high grades, regardless of the nature of their performances. The students, of course, expect that the professor will pass them because they cannot conceive of receiving a failing grade from a Black professor and in a course that addresses issues that they see as nonacademic.

Because for me teaching is not a career, it has been easy for me to define my role as a Black professor. I fully realize that I am not

just a professor; I am a Black woman professor. I found that these are traits that too many White students in Nebraska did not appreciate. In their evaluations and in their justifications for their grade appeals, they write that I intimidate them, that I do not respect their opinions, and that I monopolize the class with my own ideas. While I have a number of collaborative learning assignments, I continue to be amazed that many of my colleagues have their students take up valuable class time in groups critiquing their own papers. How can people who cannot write help other people who cannot write? And just how much does someone who has only seen Black people for two to four years know about the African-American experience? While I value giving students much class time to respond to questions and to ask their own questions, I am aware that many White students, but not all, do not respect the differences between the lived experiences of their Black peers and Black professors and their own.

It is appropriate during class discussion to ask all students in an African-American literature class that discusses such works as Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* the following questions: Do you know who you are? Do you know your ancestral, political, economic, and educational history? Before my students too quickly answer these questions affirmatively, I ask them to consider more questions: If you have been poorly trained and miseducated, how would you know who you are? If your ancestors enslaved, tortured, and killed Africans and Native-Americans, what is your relationship to this legacy of genocide? When you study European and American history, do you critique the West's obsession with power and money? What do you learn about the Euro-American psyche from studying World War I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the war in Iraq? Why is it that many Nebraskans were in favor of the Gulf War, but were not in favor of Blacks in South Africa using weapons to regain control of their homelands?

African-American literature has historically struck at the core of American contradictions and hypocrisy. Rather than thinking that this literature deals exclusively with Black issues, we must realize that Black literature is universal literature, addressing the interactions between those in power and those who suffer the consequences of that power. White society is the other side of the coin that makes up racism, and thus White society is an essential subject in the tradition of African-American literature. I propose that White students approach African-American literature looking for what they can learn about themselves from reading this litera-

ture. Despite the fact that many contemporary Black women fiction writers do not focus on the interactions between Blacks and Whites, African-American literature, especially African-American poetry since the 1960s, continues to have its foundation in the fact that Europeans and Americans took slave ships into Africa, brought slaves back to Europe and the Americas, and raped the African woman. Thus, the Euro-American and the African-American are literally and literarily inextricably related. As long as young Whites deny their legacy, their relationship to outspoken Black professors can only be adversarial.

If Black and White students do not know the contributions of such figures as Anna Julia Cooper, Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, John Henrik Clarke, Martin R. Delany, Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, Margaret Walker, Arthur P. Davis, Nella Larsen, Lerone Bennet, Jr., Chancellor Williams, Carolyn Fowler, and Ida B. Wells, as well as Nathan and Julia Hare, the students should be angry. These Black intellectuals provide some important answers to the questions raised in African-American literature.

In the introduction to *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower: Intellectuals Confront the African American Experience* (2000), Manning Marable summarizes the Black intellectual tradition that describes what I see as my role as a Black professor in this tradition.

The strong interest of [. . .] black intellectuals in linking their scholarly production to the lived experiences of black people says something about their understanding of the nature of knowledge [. . .]. The classical scholarship in the black intellectual tradition suggests that knowledge exists to serve the social welfare of black people and, by extension, humanity as a whole. (5)