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KaaVonia Hinton

“Sturdy Black Bridges”¹: Discussing Race, Class, and Gender

Employing black feminist theory to analyze works of adolescent literature allows teachers to initiate discussions of race, class, and gender. Using this theory also offers “a culturally specific lens” for “reading and teaching literature about parallel cultures, especially African American,” according to teacher educator KaaVonia Hinton.

Over the last ten years, several informative texts have suggested the use of literary theory in the English language arts classroom (see Appleman; Hinton-Johnson; Lee; Moore; Soter) and have discussed a number of complex theories (e.g., deconstruction, New Criticism, signifying, and so forth) in accessible ways. The authors have suggested that teachers use theory to help students realize the multiple meanings of a literary work and, in some cases, have reinforced the validity of young adult literature by illustrating that it can endure critical scrutiny (see Hinton-Johnson; Moore; Soter). However, except for Lee, who focuses primarily on African American literary theory and African American literature, and Moore, who uses multicultural literature and de-

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votes a chapter of his book to African American literary theory, few scholars seem to discuss or encourage the use of African American literary theory, particularly black² feminist literary theory, in middle and secondary classrooms.

Because critics have discussed both cultural criticism and feminism, readers may assume that black feminism is un-

questionably a part of the discussion, but that is not the case. Soter, for example, has an insightful chapter on “traditional” feminism; however, “traditional” feminism generalizes women’s experiences, and it does not take into consideration race and class, key issues in

black feminism. Similarly, when Moore considers African American literary theory, his primary focus is on the black male’s text. Reading about cultural criticism and feminism from these perspectives brings to mind a pivotal black feminist text, Hull, Scott, and Smith’s *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.

I would like to add black feminist literary theory to the conversation. As I have argued elsewhere, black feminist literary theory is a useful theory for reading African American young adult literature (AAYA) and YA literature in general (Hinton-Johnson 4). Though words such as *black* and *feminist* may suggest the identity of the person who uses the theory, this is not the intent. Any critic, regardless of race or sex, can critique a work using a black feminist perspective. In this article, I discuss significant aspects of black feminist literary theory that have proven useful to me, a teacher of aspiring and practicing teachers. Whether I am teaching children’s literature, young adult literature, or approaches to teaching literature, I have found that black feminist literary theory offers tools that teachers can use to initiate discussions around issues of race, class, gender, inequity, and social action that surface in texts. It also provides us with a culturally specific lens we can apply when reading and teaching literature about parallel cultures, especially African American.

What Is Black Feminist Theory?

In the early eighteenth century, black women formed clubs united around issues that were important to

them. From those clubs sprang black feminist literary criticism. Black feminist criticism is an ideology, a process of inquiry by which scholars and critics read, analyze, and theorize about literary works by black women writers and texts in general, regardless of the race, ethnicity, or gender of the author. It is also a way of critiquing and challenging notions of “womanhood,” “whiteness,” “blackness,” and “Americanness” (Smith xv). However, its most basic efforts seek to pose questions about race and gender issues (Smith xxiii).

While several celebrated black women writers published novels that shook the male-dominated African American literary canon of writers such as Baldwin, Ellison, and Wright, the decade of the 1970s also seems to mark the beginning of a rigorous effort to rediscover the literary works of African American female writers (Smith xviii). Critics focused on finding lost works by black women writers from Lucy Terry to the author some call the literary foremother, Zora Neale Hurston. Scholars were primarily concerned with tracing the literary tradition. Though many black women writers knew who their paternal literary ancestors were, they did not know their literary foremothers. Once those lost or forgotten works by black women were found, most black feminist critics summarized the works and discussed intertextual themes among the literary pieces (Washington 7). In addition to critically examining the black literary canon, black feminists argue that the national canon is exclusive.

Black feminist theory is sometimes referred to in the plural form, *black feminisms*, as theorists operate under various definitions of the theoretical approach. Yet, there continues to be some agreement on a few basic tenets of the theory; for example, women of color may experience the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender. A black feminist reading requires a careful look at marginalized groups, as critics analyze depictions of marginalized people who

1. redefine, revise, reverse, and resist stereotypes, beauty standards, notions of motherhood, womanhood, education, and epistemology;
2. exercise subjectivity and voice by telling their own stories;
3. recognize the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, as marginalized people are often multiply oppressed;

4. find strength in community, sisterhood, and brotherhood through an understanding of the importance of relationships; and
5. advocate social action and political intent in an effort to improve social conditions (Hinton-Johnson 145).

These tenets are evident in a number of works by women writers of color, from Zora Neale Hurston to An Na.

Introducing Black Feminist Theory to Teachers

I use a black feminist theoretical approach to teaching literature long before I formally introduce the concept to students. In my classes, the required reading lists include an array of voices and points of view. I hope to suggest that a discussion of Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is just as valid and insightful as a debate about Dorris’s *Morning Girl* or Woodson’s *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. When discussing Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, we get into small groups and discuss Esperanza’s character. We ask, How does she (1) define and value herself; (2) resist race, class, and gender oppression; (3) negotiate and define family and motherhood; and (4) use language as a form of resistance? Taking up these questions allows us to see

I ask students to form groups, choose a theory, and become experts on that theory in preparation for leading class discussions about the theory and a novel that lends itself to that particular lens.

Esperanza’s worldview more clearly as we discover evidence that reveals how she is marginalized by race, class, and gender. Specifically, we look for signs that indicate the ideologies that may inform the text and our responses to them. Outside the text, we look first at the author and then at ourselves. We listen to Cisneros’s introduction to the book, available on an audio version of *The House on Mango Street*, which students say enhances their understanding of both the book and the author’s perspective.

Later in the semester, we study black feminist theory directly, along with other theories (e.g., feminist theory, new historicism, deconstruction, and so forth). I ask students to form groups, choose a theory, and become experts on that theory in preparation for leading class discussions about the theory

and a novel that lends itself to that particular lens. Often we use suggested texts and theories found in books by Moore and Soter. The first time I asked students to become discussion leaders, only one student signed up to discuss black feminist theory. The student, a white male I will call Anthony, helped us learn a great deal about black feminist theory.³

I asked the class to read from key black feminist texts: Alice Walker’s “Womanist” and “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” both from *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, and Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory.” Walker insists that present-day black women writers owe their freedom to create to the existence of numerous unknown African/black female artists. Walker argues that despite the intermingling of oppression based on race, class, and gender, some black women still found ways to express their creativity.

In “The Race for Theory,” Christian argues that “people of color have always theorized,” though not in the same way that white Westerners do (349). According to Christian, black people theorize “in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and

proverbs, [and] in the play with language” (349). Further, Christian argues that now that texts by women writers of color are being recognized and taught, there is a move toward abandoning literary texts in exchange for theoretical readings. Christian views this “race for theory” as another attempt to silence the voices of women writers and as an opportunity

for academic elitism to flex its muscles. She argues that it is too easy for theory to become “prescriptive, exclusive, elitist,” and hegemonic (354).

Though students agree that all of the assigned readings are interesting, the focus of our discussion immediately turns to “Womanist.” We discuss why Walker might have felt the need to define and “re-name” feminism/black feminism, whether or not she is actually renaming it or speaking about an entirely different ideology altogether, and the similarities and differences between what Walker describes and “traditional” feminism. We spend a great deal of time on the differences, creating a chart that we hope will illuminate the distinctions between feminism and

womanism/black feminism. Students immediately recognize that womanism/black feminism seems to focus on black women’s love of self and community and their recognition of multiple oppressions in a way that differs from feminism. We talk about the waves of feminism, and I fill them in on what black feminists were doing during the waves. Anthony leads us in a reader-response discussion of *Dessa Rose* by Shelley Anne Williams. As many of the students have never heard of the novel, I mention Morrison’s *Beloved*, which was published a year after *Dessa Rose*, and they immediately turn to a discussion of similarities between the two texts. For example, both novels are neoslave narratives inspired by actual court cases. We discuss black feminist themes in *Dessa*: the mule-of-the-world image, sisterhood, reimagining female slaves’ positions, reimagining black and white relationships, motherhood, voice, subjectivity, multiple oppressions, and so forth. Before long, Anthony has an extensive chart on the board labeled Aspects/Elements/Tenets of Black Feminism.

Then, Anthony asks us to get into small groups and discuss from a black feminist perspective the novels we have read for previous class meetings. We begin with *The House on Mango Street* and work our way through them all: *Morning Girl*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *My Brother Sam Is Dead*, *Where the Lilies Bloom*, *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, and *Homecoming*. Anthony ends our discussion of black feminist theory by asking us to discuss other texts (films, novels, stories, and so on) that might lend themselves to a black feminist reading. We focus our discussion on Disney movies, short stories, and popular films directed by blacks and Latinos. We realize that Anthony’s goal is to illustrate that black feminist theory can be used to read various texts.

A Bridge to Discussions about Race, Class, and Gender

Recently in my YA literature class we discussed censorship. A student raised his hand and said, “Yeah, let’s go back to that self-censorship thing. What about when teachers teach stuff like *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and never mention race?” A few students chimed in and said, “Yeah!” I looked at the forty students before me, noting only one brown face in the crowd. These students will probably receive teaching certificates within the next year. They rec-

Students immediately recognize that womanism/black feminism seems to focus on black women’s love of self and community and their recognition of multiple oppressions in a way that differs from feminism.

ognize the need to have candid, critical conversations with students about race, class, and gender but are not sure how to do it. The students have a valid point: Why are we teachers reluctant to have discussions about race, class, and gender even when understanding these issues is a significant part of “getting” the text?

We live in a society that has, as Willis argues, an educational system that has traditionally been evasive about the reality of race, class, and gender inequity while simultaneously advocating democracy. How do I help students feel comfortable having these conversations with their classmates and me and then feel comfortable having these conversations in their own classrooms? While many teachers feel comfortable discussing gender and class, few feel free to discuss race. Ladson-Billings states that discussions of race have been “pitted against other subjectivities—particularly class and gender—to render it ‘undiscussable’ as a difference or a site of struggle” (249).

Though Green defines the English classroom as “a natural site” for holding discussions on race, class, and gender, she acknowledges that these conversations rarely take place (269). This comes as no surprise, for as Morrison writes in *Playing in the Dark*, “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse” (9). This can be problematic because avoiding discussions about race is, according to Morrison, “a racial act” (46). Rothenberg says that if educators avoid discussing issues around race, class, and gender, there will be little hope of coming close to working toward a just and equitable society.

Because conversations about race, class, and gender can be frightening and difficult for some to participate in, black feminist literary theory can be used as a bridge to support such discourse. Stover says bridges “help us connect one point to another across ravines, water, and other natural obstacles in efficient, safe ways” (79). Further, she explains that bridges can take many forms: the teacher, questions, simulations and creative dramatics, props, YA literature, and media. Though all of these examples of bridges can be used in conjunction with black feminist theory, I will end by focusing on questions—“rope bridges”—one might pose when using black feminist theory as a bridge to discussions about race, class, and gender.

When discussing *A Step from Heaven* by An Na, I asked students to raise questions, but I also gave them a list of questions to use in their small-group

discussions. The following questions were included on the list:

1. How are the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender at work in the lives of the characters?
2. How do characters resist race, class, and gender oppression?
3. How do characters express a philosophy of liberation by assisting and encouraging themselves and others in efforts to prevail over multiple oppressions (racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth)?

During our large-group discussions, students made personal connections to issues of race, class, and gender by reflecting on cross-cultural friendships, discussing their lack of knowledge of immigration laws, and empathizing with Young Ju’s frustrations brought on by the intensity of shame, poverty, and gender inequity. In addition to discussing and analyzing how the characters in *A Step from Heaven* negotiate the issues invoked by the questions above, students also questioned and discussed their beliefs about these issues. Thus, black feminist literary theory served as a sturdy bridge to make meaning of issues concerning race, class, and gender presented in the text.

The students have a valid point: Why are we teachers reluctant to have discussions about race, class, and gender even when understanding these issues is a significant part of “getting” the text?

Notes

1. I borrow this portion of the title from the critical work, *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature*, edited by Roseann P. Bell, Bettye J. Parker, and Beverly Guy-Sheftall.

2. I use both *black* and *African American*. *African American* refers to blacks in the United States while the term *black* refers to blacks of the United States, the Caribbean, and Central and South America.

3. The students who choose this theory have most often been white because I have never had more than one black student (black females in both cases) in any class that studied black feminist theory.

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Charles Weingartner in *EJ*

Grammatically Correct Statements Distort Reality

Nixon, Agnew, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell, et al., all uttered statements that were "grammatically correct." That is not what was wrong with them. What was wrong with them was that they were psychopathic distortions of reality. All of these men were well schooled. They would all probably score well on standardized reading tests. Those concerned merely with "grammatical correctness" and reading scores would find nothing "wrong" with any of their "communication skills." What was wrong with their language was far more important than these trivial cosmetic considerations. And their language was a product of their standards of judgment, which, it is increasingly apparent, produced the most appalling consequences, for them and for all of us.

Charles Weingartner. "Mutterings: What Are We Doing Here?" *EJ* 64.4 (1975): 13.