

## *Visible Woman; or, A Semester among the Great Books*

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I have never been the only woman in a class of university students, but I have often been the only black woman and indeed the only black person. The contradictions, the burdens of that identity when one stands at the head of a class of “majority” students have become increasingly apparent to me.

The classroom, the literature classroom in particular, is no longer deemed a space of pure intellectual and aesthetic pursuits, above and beyond the din of the political and ideological. The racialization and other social processes that we all know as Americans are not left at the doorstep of the classroom. Not only do they inform the texts that constitute the object of our study, they are also central to what we as readers know, central to the very processes through which we discern meaning. What I examine here is how—in matters of literature—racial identity in particular is decisive in determining which readings one may or may not propose and how the classroom, academic departments, and institutions of higher learning themselves all participate in racializing even those who, by some very real measures, have attained academic success. These issues were brought into sharp relief several years ago, when I taught a required graduate course, *Western Literary Traditions after 1500*.

That teaching assignment ultimately provided an opportunity to think through important issues, and in this sense it bore fruit for me and for a number of students, but the decision to have me teach that particular course

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had little to do with reconsidering practices of reading and teaching. It was made at a time when no one else in the department had come forward to teach it and when the course I was slated to teach in African literature, my area of specialization, was likely to garner too few enrollments. The ironies of that situation only fueled the silent rage and discomfort that consumed me with each weekly meeting of the seminar, but as is most often the case, no one in particular was to blame; the spontaneous combustion of my classroom was a matter of institutional traditions and collective attitudes.

### IDENTITY AND PEDAGOGY

In its first realization, the course was team-taught by members of my department with diverse and complementary areas of expertise—the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the novel. In the second year, it was taught by a person who had taught it first time around and who could therefore draw on both prior experience and exposure to colleagues' lectures. The third incarnation would be mine. I expressed doubts: of the European literatures that seemed to constitute the West, I knew French literature well but the others less systematically. The chair insisted, however, in the best tradition of liberal pluralism, that like all members of the department I could do what I wanted in my class. Without that proviso, I would surely have refused, because my years of studying and teaching African literatures, not to mention life experience, had made it impossible for me to share the assumptions underlying Western Literary Traditions after 1500. Not only did I see Europe and the United States as porous and heterogeneous, but I saw the West as an imagined community, an invention—albeit of immense persuasion and consequence. At that point, I relished the freedom to do what I wanted and ignored the burden of doing so at a time when my colleagues were all doing what they wanted—because from where the students sat, at least, all my colleagues wanted the same thing. At the very least, they were all to be found in the same location: they worked within paradigms and curriculum modules that placed the West at the center. In hindsight, I see this was a no-win proposition. If I refused, I would be a bad citizen of the department and could retire to its margins; if I accepted and the students were disgruntled, I—and, with me, “the race”—would be viewed as incompetent or politicized, once again fueling anti-affirmative action, antidiversity, and antitheoretical passions.

In the best tradition of humanism, I told myself this was an opportunity to revisit old favorites and to interrogate them anew. I thought moreover of the chance to get to know a range of graduate students, to claim these texts as my terrain too, and to be perceived as part of the mainstream. So having made explicit in the departmental course booklet the direction my

class would follow, I agreed to take on Montaigne, Charlotte Brontë, Melville, Kafka, and company.

The students, however, had little choice, because the course was required and it had not been taught in several semesters. First-year students were told the course was foundational and were encouraged to take it. Those nearing completion of degree work (and whose status thus made the requirement seem unnecessary) were especially resentful that the level of discussion might be general or elementary and that they would lose precious time for their writing.

Twenty-one of America's most intellectually sophisticated students thus took the course, more or less equal numbers of men and women. There were five foreign students in the class. The others were white United States nationals of various ethnic backgrounds. I was the only black person. The students apparently had been forewarned by another colleague—so I was told later by someone in the class—that Professor Julien's course would probably be “ideological.” Black, most of them saw quite clearly, comes with baggage. White, of course, comes with none. With respect to the first observation, at least, we were all in agreement.

I do indeed carry with me into teaching, as into everything I do, a pervasive consciousness of skin color and its privileges or deprivations, a consciousness of the history that produces it, and an awareness that most white Americans—a good many students in Western Literary Traditions, for example—have not yet realized that they too are racialized, that race in this hemisphere is not black baggage but, rather, American baggage.

And so we began. I knew that it was not enough to offer a smorgasbord of diverse cultural texts to one's class, like the bounty of fruits and veggies at summertime farmers' markets or so many ethnic dishes laid out for quick consumption at shopping malls (see Mohanty). Texts have a social history, and when we present them simply as an appetizing array, we level that history.

I structured the course, then, in the only way I—the person in my skin, with my identity derived from both formal education and personal experiences—could teach it: setting antihegemonic texts against their often colonizing, canonical counterparts; offering alternative readings of the latter that might reveal the arbitrariness of views or truths that had come to be regarded as essential and universal; and finally incorporating texts emanating from Western terra firma that interrogated the purported nature of the West or sought to transcend it. I began by interrogating the most recent edition of the anthology, which had been used in previous years for the course, Brian Wilkie and James Hurt's *Literature of the Western World*.

What, you may ask, do Jorge Luis Borges of Argentina, Gabriel García Márquez of Colombia, Athol Fugard of South Africa, Alice Walker of the

United States, Machado de Assis of Brazil, Milan Kundera of the former Czechoslovakia, Ivan Turgenev of Russia, Virginia Woolf of England, and Arthur Rimbaud of France all have in common?

They would all seem to be Western writers.

No selection is unassailable, of course, but my objection had less to do with the presence or absence of particular writers than with what I saw as the implication of the anthology and of Western Literary Traditions. Wilkie and Hurt tell us, "We have tried to represent the great national literatures—French, German, Russian, Spanish, English, American—in a balanced if necessarily noncomprehensive way. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially, we have suggested the riches of literature outside Western Europe and the United States [. . .]" (xi).

That the anthology contains "riches" outside Europe and North America would seem to confirm, as Edouard Glissant states in *Caribbean Discourse*, that "the West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place" (2).<sup>1</sup> For even though the anthology acknowledges in passing particularities and traditions of dissidence, its wide embrace could be read, indeed would be read ultimately, it seemed to me, as sweeping aside these many productive tensions. First, there are the writers born in the Western heartland, as it were, but whose specificity is decidedly off center. Woolf, Walker, and Rimbaud—while born and raised in England, the United States, and France and heirs to all pertinent traditions—are to various extents antagonistic to the invented West. The originality of their literary projects derives precisely from the retrieval of repressed, oppositional, or, at the very least, *other* terms. And while white women, black women, and would-be-blacks,<sup>2</sup> like so many others sprung from Western terra firma, most decidedly have a place in anthologies of grand design—a place that has been an object of struggle—it could be argued that the West has been continually invented on the basis of works that in effect challenge its very premises. Such labeling, moreover, obscures important and original aspects of the work and thought of these "outsiders within" (the term has been theorized by Patricia Hill-Collins).

Second, with regard to a Kundera or Turgenev, my question was this: Even if we were to accept the broad assumption that there is a cultural continuum between Western and Eastern Europe, wouldn't the socioeconomic-political differences between these contiguous spaces (embodied, e.g., in the violent ruptures of recent years) greatly jeopardize this coherent identity?

And finally, with regard to those on the edges of the Western galaxy, the anthology raised other issues. If Fugard is included, why not Wole Soyinka? For Soyinka, through schooling and professional experience, is arguably more immersed than Fugard in British theatrical traditions. Or would the strength of Soyinka's ethnic-national (in our common metonymic shorthand,

racial) traditions work against his being Western? And are such ethnic-national-racial traditions more antagonistic coming from an African (Soyinka but not Fugard) than from an American, say, García Márquez or Derek Walcott (who, I would wager, will be included someday), since the consensus is that to be an American of note is necessarily, despite ethnic or racial traditions or ideological persuasions, to be a product—although precisely for those reasons not a maker—of Western civilization?

Or perhaps, on the contrary, no writer translated into English or using what some would surely consider Western forms would ever be considered beyond reach. And in that case, even Yukio Mishima, the rabid Japanese patriot, could appear in an anthology of literature of the Western world. As Aijaz Ahmad asserts, some non-Western writers do become part of the Western canon. Or, putting the question differently—and this brings us back to Glissant—where does the West end? Indeed, Wilkie and Hurt write that *Literature of the Western World* "was intended to provide the best possible resource for survey courses in *world* literature" (ix; my emphasis).

Two of the interrelated issues the anthology raised for me, then, were the politics of intertextuality and the curve of the Möbius strip where the so-called decentering could also be read as a regathering to the center.

With respect to the question of intertextuality, a Eurocentric press and academy are quick to point out in Latin American, Asian, or African arts the influence, borrowings, and adaptations of genres and media originating in the West. Such hybrid forms emanating from the "margins" are typically read not as appropriations, interrogations, extensions of their predecessors, as they would be if the borrowing operated in the other direction, but as derivations, imitations with local color. They are seen moreover as part of a normal course of events: the less developed world becomes more developed, the rest follows the West (see Julien). The presence of any such forms or media seems to constitute an indisputable paternity and is read as the incontrovertible triumph of Western modernity (despite the ambiguous status of precursor that depends on heirs, as Borges tells us, as much as it may be said to create them and despite the fact therefore that the status of precursor cannot be grounds for pride).<sup>3</sup> All offspring of such couplings thus accrue to the West, and so Fugard is Western, although his work is inconceivable beyond South African shores. García Márquez is Western, although his is so clearly an Amerindian imaginary. Both can appear in *Literature of the Western World*. Thus it is that third world writers are Western once they have succeeded.

At the same time, Chaucer's inspiration from *A Thousand and One Nights* (see Slater) and modernism's inspiration from things African and Asian (see Laude; Blachère) do not generate appropriating impulses on the part of

African or Asian civilizations. Chaucer does not appear in anthologies of Arabic literary traditions, nor does Picasso in volumes of African art.

Thus the decentering that the Wilkie and Hurt anthology might seem to represent suggests instead, as I have said, a regathering to the center, because this form of inclusion nonetheless proposes the West as endpoint. The anthology produces this *effect*, regardless of the intentions of its editors and contributors. In the current historical juncture, there may indeed be no inclusive anthology in which such a reading would not prevail.

Samir Amin, the Egyptian economist, whom I cited in my first class lecture, theorizes this phenomenon in compelling terms. Eurocentrism, he argues, amplifies the uniqueness of European history and attributes inequalities between Europe and other civilizations to inherent, internal weaknesses of those civilizations, that is, to traits that are the opposite of those of the West: “Eurocentrism [. . .] assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solution to the challenges of our time” (vii).

Western Literary Traditions after 1500, I argued to my class, helps legitimate and consolidate the idea of the West vis-à-vis other parts of the world and helps obscure the West’s heterogeneity and internal differences. I paired antihegemonic texts from beyond Europe with canonical texts (Rhys and Brontë, Césaire and Shakespeare), sought out new critical interpretations of these and other canonical texts (Terry Eagleton on Shakespeare, Laura Brown on Swift), and included writers who interrogated the homogeneity of the West (Kafka, Melville, Kingston). In groups of three, students selected authors in whom they were particularly interested, responded to assigned critical materials as well as to materials of their own choosing, and prepared handouts. Each week, then, after I gave an introductory lecture, the relevant group of students led the seminar in a discussion of the questions they found most productive or intriguing.

While most of the class found the readings, my perspectives, and class discussions challenging and rewarding—this was the good news—about one-third gave moderately to highly negative student evaluations, alleging my incompetence, lack of weekly preparation, dogmatism, and politicizing of the material. Several students complained I had “dumped on” Baudelaire or Chopin or Woolf, from the naive perspective that any serious critique of a writer meant that the writer was being repudiated. One student was incensed that Milton had not been included. Another asked indignantly—thereby confirming Glissant’s and Said’s contention—what Maxine Hong Kingston

had to do with the West. More than any other, this comment stunned me: *The Woman Warrior* is a brilliant reflection on origins, ethnicity, and United States identity by a native-born national. This student was articulating in the extreme the common view that ethnicity (read non-Anglo or non-Western European cultural heritage) mitigates against authentic Western identity.<sup>4</sup>

Another student went so far as to say that I had treated the Asian students with condescension. This displacement was most revealing of white student discomfort, since the Asian students remarked on my accessibility to them and respect for them. None of the students ever voiced objections or made queries to me about the choice of texts or the uses of criticism. I would have welcomed such debate; it would have cleared the air and allowed us to learn from one another’s points of view. I suspect the students critical of me would say they could not raise these issues because mine was a politically correct classroom. The term is often used to avoid consciousness. Such issues cannot be spoken, because they are the signs of history, of our racial difference, and confronting race in America is simply too uncomfortable. The following year, a photocopy of a conservative attack on the Duke University English department found its way to my mailbox with no explanation and no signature. The irony was that it finally reached me in Senegal, where I spent a year and a half on a Fulbright. In that setting, the petulance of the attack on Duke and on me, I saw clearly, was the work of insecure minds.

#### AUTHORITY

My experience of teaching that semester created nonetheless an anxiety in me about my adequacy—feeding into the vicious cycle in which, despite one’s qualifications, one begins to doubt oneself. Few scholars have mastered all the canonical texts of Europe, Britain, and the United States. Most of us have the training and experience necessary to teach one or more subsets of those traditions—French symbolism, the novel, the Enlightenment, or Melville. Knowing certain parts of the vast body of canonical European works well does not qualify or disqualify someone to teach all of them any more than knowing other parts does. But I saw that other colleagues with training comparable to mine were routinely perceived as having greater authority to teach Western literary traditions.

I don’t believe it is too much to suggest that whiteness—in addition to providing a certain comfort to students, a sense of shared identity—gives teachers the benefit of the doubt and tends to lend greater credibility to their readings and interpretations, even when they are not specialists. A white male instructor, my experience has shown me more than once, can teach virtually any subject to majority students—regardless of qualifications. If he is

not seen as authentic, he will at the very least be perceived as inherently objective, an unbiased reader and judge. Such authority and credibility may be undermined, of course, to the extent that the instructor in question is perceived to be of “deviant” persuasion: a woman, a feminist, a Marxist, a gay person, or from the working class.<sup>5</sup> To be black and a woman, as I am, and to know African literatures in addition—for at least the one colleague who feared I would be ideological and for a third of the students in my class—somehow renders my American-Western identity suspect (as was Kingston’s) and jeopardizes thoroughly my ability to read and interpret this so-called West, of which I am—as Paul Gilroy argues—among the first born:

The history of blacks in the new world, particularly the experiences of the slave trade and the plantation, [was] a legitimate part of the moral history of the West as a whole. They were not unique events—discrete episodes in the history of a minority—that could be grasped through their exclusive impact on blacks themselves, nor were they aberrations from the spirit of modern culture that were likely to be overcome by inexorable progress towards a secular, rational utopia. The continuing existence of racism belied both these verdicts [. . .]. (70)

I have no stake, then, in denying that my knowledge is racially grounded, is Africa-identified. But can white colleagues and graduate students still refuse to admit their own racial and social grounding? Is whiteness still invisible?<sup>6</sup> The students in *Western Literary Traditions after 1500* who refused to engage with me could not accept my readings, which seemed to be located within the particularities of my very visible racial-gender status, because they were oblivious to the ways in which their own status informed their readings.

If teachers of color who confront *Western Literary Traditions after 1500* or one of its avatars are—like Richard Wright, W. E. B. Du Bois, and so many others—both Western and yet “inevitably critical of the West” (Wright), they will need to consider their pedagogy with great care. But that care will not relieve departments or institutions as a whole of their responsibility. Indeed, the debacle of race and reading I have outlined here has its counterpart in the identity politics governing the job market and hiring practices: race and gender are often still the most decisive factors in what jobs one is or isn’t offered, and this politics works against whites as against people of color, against men as against women, as we all know.

Departments fail their students and their faculties, then, by thrusting onto one person alone, allowing that person to do what he or she wants, the burden of an indispensable collective task, which is to reconceptualize the intellectual and literary history they disseminate or, at the very least, to teach the debate about the issue, as Gerald Graff proposes, since some colleagues

oppose or still do not see the need for a reconceptualization. This rethinking cannot be made to appear unnecessary, accidental, merely dependent on one instructor’s identity and suspect “racial” knowledge, as though a single individual’s identity alone posed the problem and called for its solution.

Institutions cannot discount the power of race and other such categories, their centrality and tenacity in ways of reading within and beyond the classroom. A superficial pluralism (we are all equal and can do exactly as each of us pleases) held hostage to an invisible ethnocentrism results in token hires and token addenda to the curriculum. Such departmental and institutional blindness fuels student resistance to many new faculty members and leads ultimately to anti-intellectualism, a refusal to engage new theories and new perspectives, the true closing of the American mind.

The combination of departmental-institutional inertia and student resistance ghettoizes faculty members of color in fields that correspond to their apparent identities—racial and otherwise—and excludes them from other fields, for which they may be as well trained as any number of their colleagues. The perception of our identity as a minority person, a black woman, or the affirmative-action hire grants us the authority to teach only certain subjects and effectively silences us in regard to subjects that are not seen as ours. Thus in other courses I have taught, *Colonialism and Literature* and *Introduction to African Literatures*, my identity as a black person confers authority and justifies my readings. Here my expertise is virtually unquestioned, although I myself know that it is a far cry from African American to African. Yet in the racialized conditions in which we live and work, my teaching of African literature surely lends support to a tendency to essentialize blackness, because students, like faculty, tend to assume these two areas are the same, as in the frequent confusion between African and African American programs and studies.

The final footnote is this: several semesters later, when I was teaching an introductory course on the figure of the outsider to freshmen, most of them from various rural towns, all of them white, I had occasion to hear a colleague remark that he had no particular difficulty teaching African American literature to white students; he sensed moreover that his whiteness somehow legitimized the field for these students. This was a bitter confirmation: not only could white instructors teach virtually any subject, but whiteness was the ultimate guarantor of impartiality and judicious reading. I thought about the fact that I had initially placed James Baldwin’s “Stranger in the Village” on my syllabus but then skipped it: too hot to handle. I remembered, too, the rich discussions that the teaching assistants under my supervision that semester seemed to be having with their students on this very text. These instructors were of different ethnic and national origins,

but all would be considered white.<sup>7</sup> And I realized that I had spent the entire semester in self-censorship, shifting my objectives downward, feeling that rather than challenge these younger students, as I had the more sophisticated graduate class, I would simply settle for not making them run away.<sup>8</sup>

What accounted for these varied possibilities and impossibilities, if not student and faculty identity and comfort? When a text had as its setting a different, distant place (e.g., Africa or the Caribbean) or time (the eighteenth century), white students were not so resistant, even with me: the discussion of such issues could remain textual, abstract. Likewise within the closed circle of presumed whiteness, where no potential victims of the consequences of this history were present, no fingers could be pointed. Students were again safe: such discussions could remain actual yet aesthetic and theoretical, distinct from any impacts on real human lives, on people who might hold them accountable.

These are the realities I, by virtue of my visibility, am forced to conjugate in the literature classroom. But none of us, at the peril of intellectual honesty first and foremost, can afford to ignore or wish away the unevenness of our shared history and its legacy. We shall confront that history in all its guises and free ourselves, or remain forever its victims.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>This is also a basic premise of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

<sup>2</sup>Rimbaud proclaimed and performed his otherness, writing in *Une saison en enfer* (1873), "My eyes are closed to your light. I am an animal, a nigger" (111; my trans.).

<sup>3</sup>"The fact is that every writer *creates* his precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future" (201).

<sup>4</sup>Of such separatist views on modern identities Paul Gilroy writes: "Where racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships so that these identities appear to be mutually exclusive, occupying the space between them or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination" (2). No wonder, then, that Kingston and I were in deep trouble in Western Literary Traditions after 1500.

<sup>5</sup>The irony, of course, is that while instructors of "deviant" persuasions may be viewed skeptically, writers such as Woolf and Rimbaud write precisely from such locations.

<sup>6</sup>Some years ago I was asked by a colleague to speak to his class on race in Alice Walker's novel and Steven Spielberg's film *The Color Purple*. The class was, to my surprise, taken aback when I began my analysis and discussion with the white woman, Ms. Millie.

<sup>7</sup>I share the view that specific histories produce racial and other identities. A particular incident brought this home to me. I have a French friend, Brigitte, whom I have known for many years. I mentioned her once in conversation with someone in the States, who then asked me if Brigitte was white or black. I thought for a moment. I did not have a ready answer. "Well," I said at last, "I suppose one would say she's white, but for me she's neither." It takes a peculiarly American history to make one black or white. My answer does not mean, of course, that France or other countries have no racial problems; it means that the American significations *black* and *white* are context-specific.

<sup>8</sup>There are, of course, different sets of challenges and perils for the black instructor who teaches black students or who teaches them in predominantly white classes. I recall, for example, a student who was profoundly discouraged by the texts I had chosen for my introductory African literature course, because they did not portray the continent in the positive light he had imagined, and he found them embarrassing before his white classmates.

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