Sister Seer and Scribe: Teaching Wanda Coleman's and Elizabeth Alexander's Poetic Conversations with Sylvia Plath
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As a significant mid twentieth-century American woman poet, how has Plath served as a poetic ancestor for contemporary African American women poets? Literary criticism to date on race and Plath might suggest that she provides no poetic inspiration or model for black writers, and thus lead one to teach her poetry as part of an exclusively white genealogy of women’s poetry. Plath’s participation in “racialist discourse,” whereby her poems depict an unacknowledged “Africanist presence” (Pereira), and her “writing white,” in which her poems maintain “whiteness as an unmarked and dominant force” (Curry), seemingly discredit Plath as a poet engaged in or even aware of African American culture, and, by extension, would appear to eliminate her as being of interest to Black poets.

Yet, to teach Plath in a predominantly white poetic genealogy would miss that the work of two contemporary African American poets, Wanda Coleman and Elizabeth Alexander, opens a vista of poetic, cultural, and political influences in which Plath functions as a precursor figure. Not especially interested in Plath’s technique – although admiring of it – Coleman and Alexander, in their poems “The African Beneath the American” (2003) and “‘The female seer will burn upon this pyre’” (2001), honor Plath as an American female poetic ancestor and sister visionary. Furthermore, interviews with each poet confirm their respect for Plath and their identification of her as a key female poetic forbear. Coleman pays homage to Plath’s poetic voice and positions herself as a fellow seer in a lineage of poetic rage; Alexander esteems Plath’s professional ambitions in a period dominated by domestic constructions of femininity and positions herself as a beneficiary of Plath’s attempted combining of domesticity with poetry. Both poets decry the loss of Plath’s voice and vision and claim her as an American poetic ancestor.

How might one bring these two poems into the classroom in relation to Plath?
Let’s begin with Coleman’s “The African beneath the American” from Ostinato Vamps (2003):
I speak like Plath after the oven did its job
these lines etched in slave-charred flesh
spoken crisply from noose-thickened lips
not a portrait, but a seared rendering
song forced through the throat that fights closing
gasps too painful to contain sentiment
like a smashed stolen grail under centuries of tarnish.
i write on my body. messages for seers.
nakedness as unconventional as foreign as
armed combat with enemies on these shores.
i strive because i must. i love out of spite. i pledge
my allegiance to a standard of ashes, embers and soot.
this is my anthem, a strident jig in the night
to that music beyond jazz.

In teaching this poem, I begin with the simile in the first line, which establishes a likeness between Coleman and Plath as poets. The blood jet fueling Plath’s poetry is thus linked to Coleman’s poetic voice, to how, why and about which she speaks as a poet. The simile also suggests that Coleman sees herself as picking up where Plath’s poetry ended by referencing her death, placing her as someone who is able to speak like her after death.

The death imagery using the detail of Plath’s suicide by gas oven springboards into next stanza, in which the death referenced in line one becomes a lynching, distinguishing Coleman’s poetic voice from Plath’s as one borne of African American experience and history. The references to “slave-charred flesh” and “noose-thickened
lips” connote the common lynching tactics of burning and hanging. I have found throughout my classroom experience that most of my students – black and white, graduate and undergraduate -- are not familiar with the details of lynching, and that it requires some explanation. A book I use quite effectively is *Without Sanctuary*, which contains hundreds of photographs and an excellent historical Introduction. I would make sure to include this information whether the poems were taught as part of a course on African American literature, poetry, Plath, or women writers, because without it Coleman’s interpretation of Plath through African American experience and history would be lost. With it, Coleman’s link between African Americans and Plath as victims of violence becomes salient.

The voice “speaks crisply,” continuing the burning flesh image, yet also connoting crisp poetic form in the reference to “lines etched” in stanza two. Coleman’s poetic thereby is tied both to written poetic form and also oral and lived performance in the emphasis on “speaks.” Thus, Coleman bridges two traditions in these lines, the poetic formalism of Plath and the oral tradition that is part of African American culture.

The third stanza continues the lynching metaphor for Coleman’s poetic voice, shifting toward the question of aesthetics in relation to trauma. The stanza emphasizes at its beginning, this is “not a portrait,” meaning not a formal, posed, static aesthetic object. The three lines exhibit a tension between artistic expression and horrific experience. While there is a song, it is a “seared rendering,” referencing burned flesh in both words, and suggesting all that might be possible in art created under such circumstances is a basic presentation or portrayal rather than a more complicated aesthetic or form. The throat of the speaker “fights closing gasps” so that even speaking is a feat. The final line rejects sentiment as having no place in Coleman’s poetic; instead, the poet’s voice is oppositional and enraged. The poetic articulated here pays homage to elements of Plath’s aesthetic: while far less interested in the formalism of Plath’s earlier work, these lines align Coleman and Plath in a shared poetic interest linking trauma and poetic voice. Coleman’s poems, like many of Plath’s, are often shocking, bluntly direct, and violent. They share a poetics of rage.

I often make much of the center of a poem (or a collection) in teaching poetry, and this poem offers such an opportunity, with a single line stanza lying at its center.
Oftentimes, it demonstrates to students how form can be employed to focus and centralize theme. In this poem, the solo line in the center enables the poem to sum up the value of the poetry created in this poetic. It is imagined as a grail that has been “stolen” and “smashed”, hidden under the “tarnished” history of the United States of America. Much of *Ostinato Vamps*’ theme (the Coleman collection in which this poem appears) revolves around recovering black contributions to America. As Coleman writes: “In this book, I’m taking back the rhythms that were stolen from my people. Our society has suppressed the spirit of African Americans, yet when I look around me and in the media, everybody is walking, talking and signing like black people!” (*Ostinato Vamps* press release, University of Pittsburgh Press). So recovering, as the poem’s title states, the African beneath the American is the grail quest of this poem, finding a Black Wanda Coleman in a white American Sylvia Plath.

Establishing the center of the poem is useful, too, because the poem pivots after this center line, turning in the last two-line stanzas toward an emphasis on prophecy linking Plath’s and Coleman’s voices. The “I” of the poem becomes an “i,” suggesting a different key for the speaker, one less ego-identified and consistently constituted, and instead more of a fluid conduit, mediatable, as a prophet might be who is, in effect, a messenger. (As my co-panelist as the Plath conference at Oxford University, Maria Johnston, pointed out, the repition of “I” is also a Plath trademark in her later poems.) The repetitions of “i” suggest an act of poetic self-definition. Coleman asserts that of out the pain of the previous stanza’s traumas comes prophecy, “messages for seers.” It is a decidedly American prophecy, although the enemy is not abroad as much as on the same soil, at home. Importantly, the poetic self that emerges is grounded in the body. Ultimately, Coleman avows allegiance to the remains of Plath’s oven from the first line of the poem and the lynching of Africa Americans following that line, to the “ashes, embers and soot” of trauma (words echoing Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus”). This pledge becomes an anthem, a song – echoing the clenched song imaged in the lynching stanzas – and, ultimately a jig, a lively affirmation. Coleman stridently pledges her poetic to the African within the American.

One additional formal issue in the poem could be introduced, giving students a chance to play with the form and thematics of the sonnet. Coleman’s *jazz* sonnets in the
Retro Rogue Anthology in *Mercuriochrome* (2001), the volume preceding *Ostinato Vamps*, establish her project of revisionist sonnet-making; this fourteen-line poem could be considered a follow up sonnet to that sequence in her previous volume. Rather than an octave/sestet division, the shift after line 7 period parallels the traditional sonnet shift from articulation of the problem in the octave to a movement toward resolution in the sestet. This supports reading that solo line in the middle as central to the poem. The last two lines work together like a couplet, although also not: the period preceding the last two lines sets them off, and the two final lines function as a syntactic unit. The final line is set alone to parallel the opening line of poem, and shows the movement of the poem from death to transcendence, the eternal, through poetic prophecy. If “The African beneath the American” is a revisionist jazz sonnet, the poem pays oblique homage to Plath’s formalism while also not adhering to the form, instead improvising upon it like jazz, referenced in the final line. Coleman has stated in interviews that any influence upon her poetry from African American culture should be viewed as exclusively from Black music, especially the blues and jazz, as it wasn’t until her adulthood that literary influences came into play. Lastly, this poem gives students an example of the thematic breadth of sonnets, as here the focus upon love and tensions in that love and desire takes on cultural and historical dimensions, and also functions as a commentary upon art, and philosophical questions.

Elizabeth Alexander’s poem, “‘The female seer will burn upon this pyre’”, from her collection, *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001), similarly positions Plath as an important poetic precursor for the poet:

Sylvia Plath is setting my hair
on rollers made from orange-juice cans.
The hairdo is shaped like a pyre.

My locks are improbably long.
A pyramid of lemons somehow balances on the rickety table
where we sit, in the rented kitchen
which smells of singed naps and bergamot.
Sylvia Plath is surprisingly adept

at rolling my unruly hair.
She knows how to pull it tight.

Her flat, American belly,
her breasts in a twin sweater set,
stack of typed poems on her desk,
envelopes stamped to go by the door,

a freshly baked poppyseed cake,
kitchen safety matches, black-eyed Susans
in a cobalt jelly jar. She speaks a word,

“immolate,” then a single sentence
of prophecy. The hairdo done,
the nursery tidy, the floor swept clean

of burnt hair and bumblebee husks.

Alexander is less suspicious of sentiment than Coleman; this poem paints a picture of an intimate kinship between Plath and Alexander with emotional resonances. It would help students to know the context of this poem, as it appears in a collection by Alexander with many poems based on the poet’s dreams, several of which reference other writers, including Toni Morrison and Yusef Komunyakaa. This poem is thus part of a collection of poems in which Alexander maps her deepest literary and cultural influences.
Additionally, the collection is insistently domestic in its themes: Alexander’s marriage and two pregnancies are often referenced throughout the collection.

With this poem, it’s important to discuss the occasion or setting of the poem within an African American cultural context. Alexander sets the poem in a kitchen, and focused on the act of hair care, which resonates within African American culture as a scene of intimacy, community and caring. Some students might need to know that kitchen carries another meaning in Black discourse, meaning the lower back part of one’s hair, near the nape of the neck. It’s often seen as a troubling part of hair care, yet also one closest to blackness. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s essay “In the Kitchen,” from Colored People (1994) would be a useful reading for students. He writes, “If there ever was one part of our African past that resisted assimilation, it was the kitchen. . . . The kitchen was permanent, irredeemable, invincible kink. Unassimilably African.” (42). Like Coleman, Alexander affirms an African American cultural and historical context for her appreciation of Plath. That the Plath figure in the poem is “surprisingly adept” at black hair care conveys a weird dream world in which unlikely things happen, such as the Alexander figure’s hair being “improbably long.” As a white female, Plath most likely wouldn’t be in this kitchen black hair care situation or know about one’s “kitchen,” yet the poem’s scene places her there and thus affirms Plath as a “sister” in spirit if not in ethnicity. Some students will need to be given these cultural allusions, just as they would for the references to lynching in the Coleman poem.

Alexander’s poem offers an opportunity to talk with students about how form can parallel and reinforce theme. More a formalist than Coleman, Alexander exercises tight control over the 3-line stanza structure and line lengths, paralleling Plath’s poetic control and the tight control behind Plath’s juggling of career and family. A shared aesthetic appreciation for “few words” thus stands out when set off to the right. The tight control that makes the Plath figure a good hair roller – “She knows how to pull it tight” – is evidenced in the list of domestic and professional finished chores in the second half of the poem. The neatly presented female body, typed poems, ready-to-go submissions and letters, baked goods, practical kitchen tools, and flowers all convey Plath’s accomplishments with admiration while at the same time conveying the pressures of perfection under which she always worked.
The references to Plath’s suicide, in the matches (not used for the oven), the nursery (where the children were sleeping), and the bumblebee husks (the lifeless remains of the bees from her late bee poems) underlay the domestic scene with a sadness that points out the costs of such domestic and professional perfection. If students have already read Plath’s poem “Edge,” this poem provides a commentary on the costs of the perfection imagined there. The imbalance that ultimately prevails is anticipated in the opening lines of the poem in the “pyramid of lemons [that] somehow / balances on the rickety table,” and the “rented kitchen,” connoting impermanence.

Alexander’s choice of “pyramid” for the lemons echoes the image in stanza one of the orange can roller hairdo as shaped like a “pyre,” evoking Plath’s death and of course her poem “Lady Lazarus,” tying it to the tensions that destabilized her pyramidal balancing act of family and poetry. In fact, reading Plath and Alexander side-by-side in a women’s studies or women writers class gives two very different perspectives on domesticity and femininity, and yet similar views on poetry and art.

The poem ends by suggesting Plath’s suicide was a sacrifice in the word “immolate” and withholds the sentence of prophecy she then utters. A useful question to ask students is, What is the prophecy? The title, which is in quotation marks, is most likely the line of prophecy the Plath figure speaks. In that line, Plath functions for Alexander as both a poetic forbear and also a seer whose sacrifice then enabled the next generation of female poets such as Alexander to escape a similar fate.

Students always enjoy hearing directly from the poet, and interviews are one way to bring the poet into the classroom. Interviews also usually make difficult ideas more accessible. In that spirit, I will close by sharing with you two clips from my work-in-progress, “Into a Light Both Beautiful and Unseen”: Interviews With Contemporary African American Poets (under contract with University of Georgia Press). Both Coleman and Alexander speak about Plath:

Coleman interview (2006):

MP: One poem that caught my eye is “The African beneath the American” —why Plath?
WC: Why not Plath? The poem is in *Ostinato Vamps*, and in it I take a rhetorical stance, drawing my declarative line, evermore, in the literary sand. I encountered her work in the late 60s, early 70s and count her among my many influences (*Ariel, The Bell Jar*).

MP: What does Plath represent to you?

WC: In the poem, I evoke Plath’s spirit. I conjure. Plath represents the throttled potential of American feminism. She is the bittersweet nurturing darkness that defies a brutal burning light. The searing emotional content snatches the reader into her text, becomes visceral, a power few poets command. At my best, my writings have that same quality. I did consider adding Plath to Retro Rogue Gallery [a *Merchurochrome* grouping of poems writing back to a mostly-white anthology edited by Mark Strand]. But at that time, such an act felt too much like sacrilege.

Alexander interview (2005):

MP: One poem that surprised me in *Antebellum Dream Book* was the one on Plath, “‘The female seer will burn upon this pyre’,” because I can’t think of but one black woman poet who’s written back to Plath. There seems to be this source of kinship in it in the poem between Plath and your persona in the poem: she’s setting your hair, she shares a word and a prophecy with you but then she’s also distinguished by the flat American belly and all that perfection of the domestic scene, like things are a little too perfect. The title suggests that there’s a common ground here between two female seers, women with prophetic dimensions in their work. So, what do you think about Plath’s work?

EA: Plath’s been very important to me, more as a figure than as a poet. It’s the life. I read the *Bell Jar* when I was thirteen or fourteen. I thought it was fascinating, a young woman coming of age. She was complicated and intense and I found her fascinating. In my apprentice year in Boston I remember reading her journals and letters to her mother. I felt total identification with Plath’s ambition. The poems typed to go by the door, that sense of duty, of self-laceration and perfectionist standards, I definitely had and have all of that. It’s a kind of ferocity about ambition. I think Plath said I want to be a “this” and I have a vision of what it is to be a “this.” I, too, have been expected to achieve; my poem that
deals with that perhaps the most explicitly is “Blues,” about the radio always tuned to the station that says line up your summer job months in advance, follow your duty to the race, your people, and all of that. I understood Plath’s high expectations, and I also understood the joy of that.

MP: Perfection is a very rewarding goal if you can achieve it and again and again and again.

EA: And I never experienced it. It’s funny, you mentioned the “flat American belly,” and I think all of that discipline; for me, somehow the body was less disciplined space. I think of hers being such an anorexic one even though I know that she was not, but I think of it as being an anorexic mentality and that was not my issue. I do certainly admire her poems. Are they absolutely in my bones and in my blood the way some other people’s are? No. But I’ve read her carefully. And she was a fiercely dedicated professional woman poet, so I think that was really important to me. And maybe also there was also something about the example of her craziness and the inability to sustain the domestic that makes the poem be an act of counter-definition, a “That’s not me. I won’t go down that road.”
Works Cited


