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BY YAKINI B. KEMP

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It is 9:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in late March. I am finishing the necessary command that the text messaging and cell phone conversations be put to an end and that all the little electronic devils be shut off for the duration of my women's literature class. A four-foot, eleven-inch-tall, very pregnant student who has been absent and on bed rest for a month, comes forward and gives an insightful and spirited presentation on Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." During my office hours a week and half later, that student informs me that she had an emergency caesarean nine days earlier. Proudly, she shows me photos of her four-pound baby boy with her, with his father, who is also a journalism major, and with her parents, who traveled from Miami; the baby is still in the neonatal unit of Tallahassee Memorial Hospital. She says that she has read *Nectar in a Sieve*, *The Farming of Bones*, *The Bride Price*, and *Woman at Point*

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Zero, the novels the class covered during times she was absent. She also kept up with the other essays and short stories on the syllabus because as a graduating senior, she wanted nothing to stop her from finishing May 1st. From her perspective, it was even fortuitous that the baby came two months early, for now she would be able to march at graduation. While her birthing drama played out, the young woman had also decided that she would write her documented essay on Saadawi's novella *Woman at Point Zero* because she had never read a novel by an Egyptian woman. The tragic story of Firdaus was very compelling for the student; moreover, she found it fascinating that the narrative was based on the real life of a condemned woman whom Saadawi had interviewed in a women's prison. I found this new mother's interest in such a grueling narrative interesting. Because she had missed so much of the actual class discussion, she had not been privy to the latest mood of somberness in the class. From Edna's fatal swim out to sea in *The Awakening*, to Maxine Hong Kingston's previously unknown aunt's suicide/infanticide in the family's well, to Rukmani's desperate struggle for life as an Indian peasant, to the unwavering barrage of pain, loss, and death witnessed by Amabelle in *The Farming of Bones*, to sweet little Akunna's death in childbirth in *The Bride Price*, to the actual and lovely almost whispered words of Audre Lorde's near the final frames of the documentary *A Litany for Survival*, to Firdaus' gruesome life story in *Woman at Point Zero*, the twenty women and two men in the class were getting very weary and rather suspect of the chronicles of literary and real women's lives. Several students had serious personal issues to deal with also: one of the men in the class was re-enrolled in the course after being abruptly snatched from his courses last Spring and sent to Kuwait on active duty. Another student skipped the whole January discussion of *The Awakening* (which she had read before) because her mother had died of sickle cell anemia in December; she came back just

in time for a Virginia Wolff short story where a woman's accidental death turns out to be a suicide. Interspersed with the serious class presentations on works by noted women scholars and critics, the novels were creating an identity of their own. When students began to question whether literary women writers ever wrote stories that had "happy endings," the necessity to turn the discussion into an analysis of the construction of identity was demanded.

Upon further examination of the narratives presented during the course of the semester, we found that each author presented the woman's lot within the historical, economic, and political context of her society, filtered through the gendered, racial, and class perspective of the writer herself. Of course this is true of all the writers we teach and study. Furthermore, in every narrative, a significant persona triumphed physically or spiritually through a woman's active assertion. Because the writers sought truth, that elusive abstraction, the texts did not display immediate happy endings.

It is 12:30 p.m. the same day. In the discussion of *Reservation Blues*, by Sherman Alexie, after students learn about the legend of Robert Johnson meeting the devil at the crossroads, a student all the way in the back of the class, who rarely speaks out, says that he thinks that the Indians on the reservation in the novel remind him of the people in his Miami neighborhood. The novel chronicles the rise and fall of the first all-Indian rock and roll band on the Coeur D'Alene Indian reservation. It opens with the appearance of Robert Johnson on the reservation, some three decades after his death. I ponder how most of my students who read *Reservation Blues* have little knowledge of American Indians or Native American culture beyond popular media assertions. And ironically, they do not know, as Alexie himself states, that he "grew up being influenced just as much by the Brady Bunch as by his own Spokane Indian culture" (*60 Minutes II*).

The question of identity and identity construction then becomes an intellectual one about syncretism and cultural amalgamation. I find the example of Sherman Alexie's work instructive; he is one of the most interesting, provocative, and brilliant writers in the U.S. today. Although all his works are masculine centered—even the stories that are ostensibly about women, such as "Indian Country"—Alexie writes over and over about identity: Indian identity, American identity, warrior identity, writer identity, human identity. Like his character Thomas Builds the Fire, who is ultimately tried for the crime of being "an Indian in the 20th century," Alexie brings to the forefront the problem of owning identity within a people whose culture has been represented as co-opted and defeated.

Teaching, reading, and analyzing literature as a career, as a hobby, as a love, I sometimes overlook the interplay that the text conveys with the reader.

It is 2:00 p.m. The tall, lithe, runner-shaped student informs me that he needs to leave class immediately after the discussion of his assigned story, Ngugi's "Minutes of Glory," because the coaches have announced spring football practice a week earlier than expected. I stare at the thin, ebony-chiseled youth incredulously. "You are a football player?" I ask. "I am a kicker," he says with a distinctly northern accent. "A walk on," he adds smiling. I tell him that leaving class early is "his business," not mine. He must make his own decisions about his course work. He stays the entire class period. We discuss Ngugi's story and Ama Ata Aidoo's "In the Cutting of a Drink," both about cultural clashes resulting from societal transition as rural African women go to the city, where limited employment opportunity and patriarchal strictures lead them to become barmaids/prostitutes; the stories also chronicle perspectives of women's individual and social identity. Ngugi's story ends with the arrest of the exploited barmaid, Beatrice, who stole from her one client and re-created herself with a wig and Western cosmetics;

Mansa's brother from the countryside in Aidoo's story finds his estranged sister in the city, a barmaid/prostitute who proffers the empty mantra, "All work is work is work." This rings negatively with the brother and the family in the village as he recounts the shocking tale. With my students, Mansa and Beatrice's stories spark lively discussion. The students want to discuss the barmaid/prostitute as a comparative postmodern construction of the black female "on the pole" or the modern image of black women in hip-hop videos whom they call the "video ho." Very few believe that "work is work." In fact, there is an active belief among the young women in the class that somehow the representative identity of the black women that they see in the prominent videos undermines their identity in the larger U.S. society. I direct them back to the text of the narratives, and I ask whether there is a "message" in each of the texts. At this point, I have not discussed Ngugi and Aidoo as political writers, as writers who chronicle individual lives while demonstrating a much greater social spectrum. It is not long before Beatrice and Mansa are identified in their U.S. persona by the students. I am not even sure that this was my intended goal for the class discussion. Nevertheless, I learn that the relationship between identity, the text, and the message are all fluid. Both Ngugi and Aidoo's works have profound implications for readers and writers of the African Diaspora. The "identity politics" found within their works still offer inspiration.

In his discussion of "the dialectics of diaspora identification," Paul Gilroy states:

The problematic intellectual heritage of Euro American modernity still determines the manner in which nationality is understood within black political discourse. In particular, it conditions the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural, and stable identity. This identity is the premise of a thinking 'racial' self that is both socialized and unified by its connection with other kindred souls encountered usually, though not always within the fortified frontiers of those

discrete ethnic cultures which also happen to coincide with the contours of a sovereign nation-state that guarantees their continuity. (121-22)

So how does consciousness of this “thinking ‘racial’ self” and “national identity” interplay with the U.S. student who is also of African descent, but also Haitian, Cuban, Panamanian, Mexican, Korean, American Indian, or one who is simply Southern, Northern, Western, a New Yorker, a Californian? When she reads Danticat’s narrative of the massacre of Haitians by Dominicans or reads of the corrupt politicians’ exploitation and manipulation of the poor in Marquez or Allende, what prevailing identity takes foreground, and how does that identity filter the text or the message in the text? Many times the process or the relationship is more complex than we suspect. Sometimes the professor’s own assumptions about identity or her own stereotyping displays naivete, as I discover in my Caribbean literature course. This is my salient example: I ask a student who is half Mexican/half African American to read in Spanish “The Ballad of the Two Grandfathers” by the famous Cuban poet after the class has discussed the English translation of the poem. I do not speak or read Spanish. The student, a native Floridian from Orlando, stumbles through the poem, mumbling something about the unfamiliarity of the words. To my knowledge, Guillén wrote standard Spanish. What I learn after the weak reading is that my student *speaks* the Spanish of her mother and her relatives; she has never taken a Spanish course and does not read any works in Spanish. I learn a lesson about language, identity, and culture. The same student tells us that when she fails at a task or disappoints her mother’s relatives, they blame it on her black blood. Of course, that is another issue altogether in identity politics.

Being here in Nashville, a century after W. E. B. Du Bois identified the concept of “double consciousness,” it is fitting that we as scholars, teachers, and humanists ac-

knowledge the complex notions of identity and the vast interplay that identity construction demands. In her cogent discussion of *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Carol Boyce Davies attempts to demonstrate that black women (and men) “negotiate a variety of identities, theoretical positions and textualities without falling prey to schisms and dualistic or binary thinking that dismisses one dynamic to privilege another” (57). I suggest that on a somewhat basic cognitive level our students either do the same thing or have the ability to display this objectivity. I doubt that we view our mission as purveyors of identity politics or as identity text messengers. Yet in every discussion of a narrative, be it from any century, in any language, the interplay of identity construction and the message of the text form the conscious social idea which the student can—and does—receive, reject, or ignore. We always hope for engagement. I have always loved the line in Toni Morrison’s *Sula* where Sula defiantly tells her grandmother, Eva Peace, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). Although Sula is being insolent and is rejecting the honored tradition of motherhood, the wonderful notion of the young woman creating her own identity, her own self, is still marvelous. So I would like to end with an elevation of Sula’s statement from what may be perceived as a negative textual context. As many postmodern writers, critics, and humanists demonstrate in their analyses of diasporic literatures, identity construction in the individual, national, and political context is about the making of the Self. For us it is a question of identity and of survival.

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