

FOREWORD

BLACK PEDAGOGY IN CONTEXT

In 1967, I was among the students of the last class that graduated from our predominately Black, totally segregated high school in Valdosta, Georgia. Though I wanted to attend Tuskegee, my mother forced me to apply to Valdosta State College (now Valdosta State University). Not only was I the only Black student in all of my classes, the college had no Black professors at the time and the English curriculum offered no courses in any “minority” ethnic literature. Graduating with a bachelor’s degree in English in 1970, I was the recipient of a Ford Foundation Fellowship to pursue a master’s degree in English at the University of Georgia and continued after receiving that degree to chase a PhD. Founded in 1785, the university was centuries away from any discussion of the inclusion of Black students. When I graduated with my PhD in English, of course, I still had not experienced a Black professor, nor a class with a Black subject of any kind. Before I graduated, two Black women entered as graduate students in English. Yet, we never ended up in the same class, nor interestingly did we hang in the same circles. I was among a cohort of fairly rambunctious, very talented white friends, many of whom were LGBTQIA students, who loved to party, drink wine, dance, smoke marijuana, and talk much trash about books, politics, professors, and family.

Having been quite sheltered on the southside, in the Black community of Valdosta, I was unbelievably now very innocent and naïve regarding racism. I still am not quite sure how my parents managed to see little differences between Blacks and whites as we indeed had experiences I later

recognized as racist. Only one of these experiences occurred in one of my PhD. classrooms at UGA. Students had to explicate a poem in my British literature class. My poem was William Butler Yeats's "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markievicz," in which I mispronounced the word *gazebo*, saying "gaze bo." The professor and the all-white class laughed, as the professor pronounced the word correctly for me. The word and its image were completely new to me. This incident remains indelibly cemented in my memory. I recount this story to all my students—both undergraduate and graduate—who discuss their dislike for poetry, explaining that I had no entree into William Butler Yeats's poetry, his Irish culture and politics, admitting that I, too, did not "feel" poetry until I read Sonia Sanchez, who was the second Black writer to save my life. My first intervention occurred when my American literature professor handed me a copy of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, an act and a text that changed my life indelibly. The highly creative pedagogical techniques and the shared ethnic and sexual identities of the creative writers-scholars in *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature* would have cautioned my British literature professor about the potential emotional harm he might have inflicted on a less determined, insecure student. Because the classroom is a shared space in which all are vulnerable, not only is it imperative that professors remain sensitive to the intellectual and emotional strengths and weaknesses students bring to this space, but self-care and self-awareness play an essential role in the professors' pedagogical success.

Channeling Aricka Foreman's "Black Fugitive Pedagogies," I, too, wonder what I would be doing and more significantly what the nature of my psychical, psychological, physiological life would be in the academy without Richard Wright's intervention. Reflecting courageous, sensitive, revelatory, eloquent, and deeply-caring, profound interrogation, *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature* addresses the complications, joys, transformations, and excitement of processes to engage Black students in the classroom. Yet, this text was not conceived in a literary, historical vacuum. Its presence reflects at least ninety-four years of Black struggle to break the intellectual chains that stifle Black creative expression and to dismantle what has become the normalization of mediocre pedagogy that represses the joy of learning. The essays collected here, some implicitly and others explicitly, anticipate the readers' contextualization of the historical journey taken by African-American authors and political activists to rupture this normalization in higher education. The gifted writers in this volume demonstrate the influence of both canonical and noncanonical writers in their remarkably convincing illustrations of their innovative Black pedagogy. My goal in the comments offered below is to provide a glimpse of the historical literary context that serves as foundation for these

imaginative texts and to simultaneously interweave my commentary into the body of that contextualization.

The merger of pedagogy and Black literary letters requires a full appreciation of how the contributors seamlessly enfold Black literary history into their challenge of Eurocentric ways of being and of knowing. This appreciation, perhaps, begins with the contributors' lessons learned from the literary public's treatment of Phillis Wheatley's genius, as beautifully explored in June Jordan's "The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry in America: Something like a Sonnet for Phillis Wheatley." This public denunciation of Wheatley's genius and of her humanity echoes throughout this collection in essays that address the "presumed ignorance" of Black professors and writers. W. E. B. Du Bois, of course, understood the pervasiveness of this racist, elitist position quite well. His contention that all art is propaganda in his "Criteria of Negro Art" rebukes the common notion of the inferiority of Black language and Black subjects, expressed by the likes of William Dean Howells in his "Review of Paul Laurence Dunbar's *Majors and Minors*," though Du Bois does not mention Howells specifically. Interestingly, though neither appreciated the work of the other, both Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright unflinchingly proposed the need for Black expressive agency that gained momentum in the conferences at Fisk University and exploded into the literary and political activity of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" defines and illustrates those aspects of Black music, religion, club life (jooks), imitation, folklore, language, dance, art, dress, and drama that reflect a communal, African ancestral heritage while Richard Wright admonished Black writers for their fear of portraying the negative aspects of Black humanity in his "Blueprint for Negro Writing." These calls for originality in Black letters preceded the still somewhat overlooked, essential conferences that took place at Fisk University, documented in *The Negro Writer and His Roots: Selected Papers from the First Conference of Negro Writers, March 1959*, edited by the conference planning committee: John O. Killens, chairman; William Branch; John Henrik Clarke; Julian Mayfield; Lofton Mitchell; and Sarah Wright. The writers at this conference, with subjects such as "The Negro Writer and His Relationship to His Roots," "Reclaiming the Lost African Heritage," "Integration and Race Literature," "The Negro Writer and His Materials," "Roadblocks to the Development of Negro Writers," and "Opportunities for Development of Negro Talent," emerged as elders of the Black Arts Movement.

Although Black literary letters provide numerous investigations of BAM, no one text is more appropriate for a reliable succinct explanation of BAM's purpose than Amiri Baraka's "The Black Arts Movement," the first essay collected in *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Move-*

ment Reader. Quite recognized as a prime mover of the movement, Baraka informs us, “As the whole society heated up with struggle and rebellion and revolution, I suppose the most politically sensitive of us began to pull away from the bourgeois rubric that art and politics were separate and exclusive entities.”¹ With essays written sixty-eight years apart, Baraka comes full circle, echoing Du Bois. Baraka writes, “Except that whatever else the most sensitive of us was doing, what remained is what was the deepest hunger in our souls, the urge to democracy, to self-determination, the understanding that no matter how much we might be ‘recognized’ or ‘accepted’ or even lionized as artists, we were still somehow burdened with the disorienting realization of alienation.”² Using Black theater, music, jazz, and blues as vernacular references, Baraka called for Black self-determination, self-respect, and self-defense. The goal of BAM was “to create a true Afro American Art,” “to create a mass art,” and “to create a revolutionary art.” He adds, “But this broad credo came under attack fundamentally because we had initially cloaked our call to battle in the starkest terms of cultural nationalism and Hate Whitey Language.”³ While Toi Derricotte’s “Race in the Creative Writing Classroom,” James Baldwin’s “A Talk to Teachers,” and Gabrielle Civil’s “Pony, Swim, or Freeze” address how racism makes the classroom a “destructive site,” their tones are neither nationalistic nor revengeful, echoing their lack of internalization of the self-hatred previously dramatized rather frequently in African-American letters.

BAM did not limit its activities to bars, street corners, literary salons, and parks. Some members of the movement also advocated for and worked with prison reform. Rhodessa Jones’s invaluable Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women exemplifies the same dedication, commitment, sacrifice, creativity, and risks as BAM’s efforts to transform the lives of prison inmates. Baraka, Askia Touré, and Sanchez also activated their commitment to Black self-determination when they accepted teaching positions at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). The acceptance of these teaching positions reflected their operationalizing their BAM credo. What all three had in common was the understanding that Black studies had to be communal, respect an African intellectual foundation, and be transformative.⁴ While BAM’s most obvious internal weaknesses are its homophobia and sexism, I propose that had it not been for the dramatic—and for some traumatic—intervention BAM forced on American political, cultural, and literary history, it is reasonable to propose that the academy may not now be experiencing the pedagogical innovations offered in *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature*, which represents a transformative moment in the American academy.

Through its engagement with pedagogy and the fomentation of organizations such as CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), SNCC (Student Non-

violent Coordinating Committee), OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture), CAP (Congress of African People); voluminous journals; as well as an impressive number of Black artists groups and institutions, BAM played a pivotal role in opening the academy's doors to Black graduate applicants. Even so, we must not dismiss the current low numbers of Black PhDs, particularly female PhDs as well as the sparsity of Black women in senior professorial positions today. Despite these minimal numbers, most of the male and female contributors to this text are or have been affiliated with an institution of higher education.

Yet, given the intellectual, sophisticated language skills reflected in the selections collected here, it is clear that the contributors have not been confined to or stifled by an intellectual theoretical arena. Emanating from the pages is a pleasant aroma steeped with the knowledge and defiance of contemporary Eurocentric theory and its jargon, which privileges individualism and voicelessness. The voices collected here are communal and loud. Approached theoretically, this text configures and defines the act of Black pedagogy, placing it outside of the individualistic praxis of Eurocentric theories and framing it inside a Black, cultural, communal, ancestral foundation. Heeding her student's admonition, Mecca Jamilah Sullivan informs of the power inherent in a language, embodying a culture's values and its worldview irrespective of the participants' awareness.

In order to develop a theory, we must start at the inside of a culture's literary history (its representations of literature, history, features of its language, content, ideologies, myths, etc.). If we begin from the outside, Eurocentric theory produces a hybrid that robs language of its value and joy. The language then becomes nihilistic and pessimistic. If we look at the history of African-American literary criticism, we find a set of general principles that clarify the following assumptions: African-American literature is defiant; as joyful as it is sad; challenging; value-laden; probing; communal; intellectually and psychically nourishing; and inventive with its roots in oral performances, ritual drama, proverbs, riddles, puns, folktales, oral narratives, songs, and chants. African oral literature finds representation in African-American literature from its inception to the present. Thus, African-American literature is characterized by continuity and survival. Therefore, a theory of this literature and the pedagogy that delivers this theory, whether implicitly or explicitly, would aptly reflect the means of survival inherent in that literature without compromising or collapsing the relationship among language, identity, and culture.

The nature and history of the watermelon provide a provocative template through which we can theorize the value of *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature*. Like millions of African-Americans, the watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*), a flowering plant that grows com-

monly, is a native of West Africa. It is speculated that the plant originated in the Nile Valley as early as the second millennium BC; seeds from the fruit were found in Pharaoh Tutankhamun's tomb. Introduced to Spain by the Moors, the plant appeared in North America in Florida around 1576 and was cultivated in the Mississippi valley in the seventeenth century by Native Americans. In addition to its ability to survive through centuries, the watermelon has multiple identities in the sense that it exists in numerous varieties that feature red, pink, orange, yellow, or white flesh. Primarily water, the fruit provides juice as well as seeds and a rind that can be eaten by stewing, pickling, and stir-frying.

Like the African slave, the watermelon is a cultivar, selected for desirable characteristics that are maintained during propagation. It is quite valuable for its reproductive traits; new plants can be grown from seeds, cuttings, and other parts of the plant. Watermelons can be produced through sexual or asexual propagation. With sexual propagation, another plant is produced through a genetic recombination of seeds and spores; the offspring may have characteristics different from its original source—its parents. Asexual propagation, on the other hand, requires tissue culture or grafting. Asexually propagated plants derive from a single parent with no exchange of genetic material. This predominately results in plants that are identical to the parent. They are referred to as clones.⁵ It is this distinction, this process, of how and what material is passed on in the case of the watermelon that shares a relationship with the legacy of the African slave and that illuminates the creativity of the contributors in this collection.

I am proposing that African-American literature, Black studies, Black performance studies, and pedagogical strategies designed to impart Black knowledge should be mindful of the possibility of being cloned. Following the initial impact of BAM, a small group of Black academicians cloned Black uniqueness, melting it into the mold of Eurocentric theory. The essays in this collection resist that cloning, manifesting the myriad ways in which current Black creativity enhances BAM's legacy and transforming the ways we address poetry, language, pedagogy, value, intimacy, and humor as seeds and spores with different characteristics that echo the parent, an African source. Like the watermelon, we were selected for our strength, and as American citizens, we have made indelible contributions to music, food, dance, technology, science, dramaturgy, and the visual and literary arts.

Black lesbian poet, novelist, and essayist Alexis De Veaux perfectly exemplifies my contention here with her novel *Yabo*, which appropriately fulfills BAM's call that we "fight in the super structure, in the realm of ideas, philosophies, the arts, academia, the class struggle between oppressed and oppressor. To recreate and maintain our voice as a truly self conscious [*sic*], self determining [*sic*] entity, to interpret and focus our whole lives and his-

tory. And create those organizations and institutions that will finally educate, employ, entertain and liberate us!”⁶ A powerfully innovative work that liberates Black creativity from Western constrictions, *Yabo* defies the cloning that undermines the original African parent. I cite below the prelude:

There was a time in which we knew these things.
 When we did not doubt. Ask your grandparents.
 Or, if you are among the truly fortunate, ask your great-
 Grandparents. They know.
 They know about the technologies of knowledge.
 Not these technologies.
 These that make of our prayers, lies; not these
 That make us live without grace.
 A child can also know the living grace. A certain child.
 That child may be here only briefly, to us. But in that time with
 us, that child is not alive only here.
 The child, a certain child, only visits our here.
 because the child lives in time’s grace, visits here but
 knows other heres.⁷

Like De Veaux’s *Yabo*, the selections in this collection represent the epistemological distance traveled since the publication of Du Bois’s “Criteria,” Hurston’s “Characteristics,” the conference at Fisk, and BAM’s high moments of collective activity. Just as De Veaux spiritually reminds us that we have forgotten the natures of our history, of our multiple selves, the essays to follow enfold sexuality, health, poetry, language, creativity, the importance of ancestors, activism, and incarceration, answering Hortense Spillers’s question: “What to do with these visions of history?”

This text responds to that question with a two-fold response: we teach the multiple visions, and we introduce pedagogy that reflects the multiple experiences of students, assuring that they are not cloned. Although oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism are the seeds and spores that impact students’ lives, effective pedagogy for Black students and other students of color requires creative strategies, demonstrated in this collection, that operationalize respect, dignity, challenge, sincere encouragement, faith in improvement, disciplined empathy, and love. The intended goal is that fruitful varieties of students will cultivate a connection to the cornucopian, honest, caring, and often risky creative expressions collected here to arm themselves personally and intellectually to recognize quickly and defy the multiple guises of exploitation and disillusionment.

Some white readers of this collection will ask why this text excludes them, addressing only Black and other students of color. This anticipation

reminds me of experiences in two of my classes the past academic year. Although the short story class I was assigned to teach had the typical Eurocentric course description that included only European and American white writers, I wrote my specific class description using Black writers exclusively. We began with stories by Hughes and Hurston and then moved to those by Wright and Baldwin. Very quickly as the semester began, I learned that all the students thought the class was going to be easy because it was, after all, a short story class. When I began answering students' questions in response to Baldwin and Wright, the students' postures, eyes, and silence mimicked a flock of deer caught in a headlight. A class of forty students—with two Southeast Asians, two Puerto Ricans, two Blacks, and thirty-four whites—froze. They had not expected reading Black writers, and they had not expected that class discussions would require them to respond honestly to the stories. The white students had never considered that they are as much the subjects of Baldwin's and Wright's essays as the Black students. The Black students were not comfortable discussing Wright's and Baldwin's straightforward responses to racism in an environment in which they were a minority. Class discussions made all students quite nervous. The more I explained that Black history is white American history, the more uncomfortable they became. Only after the class's first individual conferences with me did the students—almost all of them, regardless of ethnicity—relax to become a little less afraid of me, one of only three Black professors in my department at the time. Lauren K. Alleyne in her essay "You Is Kind, You Is Smart, You Is Important: The Black Female Professor as 'the Help'" is definitely correct: I feel the weight of history in the classroom and so do the students.

While I am extremely conscious of the need to include diverse cultures in courses so that students can experience how texts respond to each other, I devise syllabi that exclusively feature Black writers because neither the undergraduate nor graduate curriculum in my department requires a course in African-American subjects. In response to a survey course on American literature, a white professor in the department complained to the dean about the "inappropriateness" of my syllabus. Of course, implicit in his attitude is the notion that a syllabus with exclusively white writers or with one or two Black writers would be what he sees as "appropriate." He perceives my syllabus as being too Black and has never considered that the department curriculum is too white. He is far from understanding how African-American literature addresses American society, while the history of American literature for centuries has privileged exclusively the concerns of white citizens. *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature* provides indispensable pedagogical strategies for teachers and support for addressing departmental and administrative roadblocks.

These kinds of reactions from colleagues, particularly when experienced over long periods of time, could easily stimulate physical and emotional pain, which is described by Omi Osun Joni L. Jones and Sharon Bridgforth in “What the Body Knows: A Theatrical Jazz-Inflected Pedagogy.” Yet, this essay provides alternatives to pain, one of which I have been using in my classes. When teaching Diane McKinney-Whetstone’s *Tumbling*, I found that the students had considerable trouble enjoying descriptions of the music, the humor, the language, and the characters’ experiences in a nightclub where the female protagonist sings. Determined to get them to feel the novel, or as Jones and Bridgforth assert, to “encourage a distinctive engagement with the printed text,” I played Koko Taylor’s “Wang Dang Doodle,” asking students to come to the front of the class and dance with me. A slightly older student came forward and began to swing me around, using the steps that I identified with my high-school days. It was clear that both he and I enjoyed the feelings provoked by the music. This exercise warmed the students’ discussion of the text, but did not provoke any of the others to join us. Jones and Bridgforth offer nontraditional ways for both faculty and students to break the confines of pedagogy that stifles passion, encouraging that we make the connection between intellect and body.

With knowledge, history, culture, and pedagogy so tightly entwined, *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature* moves us forward with humility, its lessons conjoined with a tour de force of models for teaching that echo the seriousness and ingenuity the African griot employed to lay the moral and intellectual foundations for future generations of critical thinkers and leaders. Perhaps, a final reflection engages the editors’ inclusion of excerpts from Douglas Kearney’s *Too Fly on the Wall: Negrotique Workshop Tactics for Black Study*. This hilariously emerges as double-voiced, speaking differently to those inside and outside a Black vernacular. A lasting memory of this piece is its humor. Although Kearney may not identify with my comparison, *Too Fly on the Wall* echoes not the peculiarity of Black vernacular speech, but its distinctiveness found in folktales, toasts, as well as in the performances of such comedians as George Wallace, Moms Mabley, Whoopi Goldberg, Eddie Murphy, Bernie Mac, John Witherspoon, and Richard Pryor—comedians par excellence. Like Kearney, all of these comedians can propose the same question that Chris Tucker asks in *Rush Hour*: “Do you understand the words coming outta my mouf?” This question and Kearney’s delightful contribution premise how language codes find their source in culture. Since language embodies our students’ hopes, fears, and dreams, how we shape our communication skills lies at the core of our success. *Teaching Black: The Craft of Teaching on Black Life and Literature* proves to be an effective study guide that limns the roadway for teaching Black people and others who are subjugated, especial-

ly at a period in American history when racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and classism have become increasingly targeted for dismantling.

JOYCE A. JOYCE

NOTES

1. Amiri Baraka, "The Black Arts Movement," *SOS—Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, edited by John H. Bracey Jr., Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, 11–19 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).
2. Baraka, "Black Arts Movement," 12.
3. Baraka, "Black Arts Movement," 17.
4. See interviews in Joyce A. Joyce, *Black Studies as Human Studies: Critical Essays and Interviews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 135–61.
5. "Citrus lanatus," ScienceDirect.com, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/Citrullus+lanatus>; Mark Straus, "The 5,000-Year Secret History of the Watermelon," *National Geographic*, August 21, 2015, www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/150821-watermelon-fruit-history-agriculture.
6. Baraka, "Black Arts Movement," 19.
7. Alexis De Veaux, *Yabo* (Washington, DC: RedBone Press, 2014).