



# Identity in the Classroom

## Teaching Voices from the Gaps

Shunned in mainstream academic literary discourses as a “hot air balloon” that can conveniently be turned into meaning anything, identity remains a more resilient term when it comes to marginalized writers’ voices, such as the voices of the women of color writers featured on the Voices from the Gaps site: identity becomes a starting point for political awareness and analysis of what it means in this day and age to be a woman of color -- and to write.

In “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” Zora Neale Hurston eloquently describes the moment she becomes aware of being colored:

*But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the riverboat in Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl. I found it out in certain ways. In my heart as well as I the mirror, I was now a fast brown—warranted not to rub or run (Hurston 1426).*

Her individual name, Zora, becomes invisible next to the label of racial otherness imposed by the white society around her. In the society outside of her hometown Eatonville, Hurston will always be labeled “colored,” whether she herself agrees with that assignment, actively claims this identity, or tries to disengage from or ignore it.

Identity, Hurston thus shows us, is always relational, dependent on those involved in an interaction, set in relation to one another: “I do not always feel colored. [. . .] I feel most colored when I am thrown against a white background. [. . .] Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, and overswept, but through it all, I remain myself. When covered by the water, I am; and the ebb but reveals me again.” (1426) The lingering, resisting sense of self remains through all the names, perceptions, and constructions Hurston is subjected to. Her color never fades but the way she feels about it arises from the interactions with her surroundings, her “background.”

What Hurston shows in “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” is how we create, construe, project a sense of self in the social interactions we find ourselves in. Yet, at the same time, we are always subject to someone else’s perceptions, constructions, and names. What identity comes to mean, then, arises out of a particular set of social circumstances at any given time, out of which differences are deemed important enough to be named by either oneself or by others. For writers like Hurston, the moment of being called on as different, of being named, leads to a growing self awareness of what it means to be called “colored” in a white dominated society, and of how blackness can be performed in her social surroundings.



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The questions of what it means to be different, to have that difference be marginalized in a white dominated society, and what it means to be a woman of color who writes, have lost none of their poignancy in the decades since Zora Neale Hurston's writing about becoming black. Teaching a class on women writers of color, designed to create web pages for the Voices from the Gaps site, inevitably leads to thinking about these issues of identity: how do we define and name the identities of the women writers featured on the site? What is a person "of color"? How do the writers themselves name and draw on their identities in their work?

Rather than addressing these inevitable questions in a purely academic way, striving for an elusive objectivity and uninvolved distance, students and teachers alike become involved in finding answers: the writers in question speak to and about a society that students, teachers, and guest speakers are all part of in varying ways. Hence the meaning the writers give to color, the meanings they see society as a whole ascribing to color, affect every person in the classroom. What do we do with the knowledge, then, that what we study is not separate from our own lives, from how we think of our own identities? Do we, in addition to considering the writers' identities, self-reflexively turn to examine our own identities? If we did, which consequences would arise from claiming identities as platforms to speak and write from in the classroom, from assigning them to others by grouping them according to "ethnic identity" on the site? Who gets to decide if a claim is valid, a categorization correct? Whose identity matters, to whom, and why?

Teaching a class about women writers of color as a white woman from Austria at an American university where, in most classrooms, most of the students are white, brought both advantages and disadvantages with it: as an outsider to U.S. culture, but prepared with the knowledge of an outsider who studied this culture from abroad before living in it, entering the discourse on race, color, or ethnicity in the U.S. poses a challenge in its own right. Generally speaking, some students in each class decide from day one that I, the outsider, have no authority to tell them anything about their culture or its writers. Fortunately, that did not happen in summer 2002 when I was teaching the class with Voices from the Gaps.

But the question of authority becomes more pressing still in a class devoted to women of color writers. As a white woman teaching this class, I do not want to pretend I am the expert on the lives and experiences of women of color, I do not want to speak for "them" -- as if they were some homogenous group -- and I do not want to talk about this heterogeneous group of women writers as if they had no voices of their own. Instead, I defined my role in the classroom as that of someone providing background information on historical moments and literary movements, critical stances on race, authenticity, issues of representation, and questions of audience, in order to create a space where we could explore, read, and interpret the works of women writers of color together, and allow their voices to emerge and be heard in the classroom.



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Since the students read most of the primary texts in small groups devoted to a single author's work, most of the readings we did together were critical essays belonging to a meta-discourse on race, ethnicity, and gender written by women of color. Talking about issues of race and color in mostly white classrooms tends to produce some hostility and anxiety on the part of white students who have not yet been exposed to the ideas and emotions some writers of color express. Students, in general, seem to want to like the writers whose work they are studying. What are they to do if a writer of color is verbally attacking and blaming the culture they belong to, if they start feeling responsible for the criticized cultural practices, come to identify with them, and, as a result, get defensive?

*For every person who came here to find freedom  
there are bones rattling in our Mother  
The ravage of suburbia covers our burial grounds  
our spiritual places, our homes [ . . . ]  
Down the long tunnel of death my grandmothers cry No  
Give no solace to our destroyers  
Into the cold night I send these burning words  
Never forget  
america is our hitler*

*(Chrystos 13).*

When confronted with the pain and rage of a writer like Chrystos, the presence of a white teacher can be reassuring for white students: if they feel responsible or even blamed, their teacher shares this guilt and responsibility. So part of teaching critical race theory as a white woman entails showing the students how not to get stuck in guilt, defensiveness, or confused hostility, but hearing and engaging with the writers' ideas and emotions in a way that does not render the students' own identities invisible. Students of color, on the other hand, seem reassured by seeing a white teacher engage seriously with issues like racism in the classroom, validating their experiences and giving them space in an academic setting.

However, I also wanted to make sure that I was not the only person of authority the students would see in the classroom. Therefore, two guest speakers, Joanna Kadi and Juliana Pegues, joined the class to discuss their work in general as well as specific texts the students had read prior to each visit.



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Engaging with the guest speakers allowed the students to move past merely responding to the professed authorial anger and instead, through conversation, find out how U.S. culture looks from the margins, and why that perspective can inspire anger at times. Meeting women of color writers in the classroom made it possible, for however short a time, to bridge the gaps in experience and reflection between students and writers.

One noticeable consequence of the guest speakers' visits was that students increasingly began to name their own identities in class discussions: statements started to be carefully introduced with phrases like "as a white woman," "as a biracial man," or "as a Hmong woman," drawing attention to each perspective, each identity. We were no longer distanced observers but willing to recognize our involvement in the racial dynamics of the U.S. and to acknowledge how our identities are partly shaped by the social relations we find ourselves in. In order to have students become still more active in arguing about identity and race, and in figuring out what a person of color is as well as what it means to be a person of color in the U.S., I asked my students to consider the case of Marjorie Agosin.

Marjorie Agosin, a Jewish Chilean writer featured on the Voices from the Gaps site since July 2002, was included on the site because she was awarded a prize for Latin American literature. However, if her Eastern European parents, Jewish and white, had emigrated to the U.S. rather than to Chile, Agosin would not be considered fit for the Voices from the Gaps site. Her growing up in Chile, though, qualified her for the site in the eyes of the Voices editorial board.

When I asked my students to tell me if they considered Marjorie Agosin a person of color, without having the opportunity to ask the author herself how she identifies, it soon became apparent that we had to specify what we meant by "of color:" was her lifelong exposure to Latin American culture enough to make her a woman of color even though her parents are white? Her cultural identity would marginalize her in U.S. culture, but are all Latinas necessarily "of color"? One of my students, a Korean adoptee with white parents, complicated our discussion even more: if it was only cultural exposure that we counted on in shaping a person's identity, being "of color" or not, her own cultural identity had to be white, she argued. But clearly, she identified as Asian American and pointed out that she could never pass as anything but that. Is it physical appearance then that determines whether someone can count as a person of color or is it their cultural background, I asked my students to decide.



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It was not an easy question for any of us to grapple with. The guest speakers, my students of color, and my white students debated with great openness and open-mindedness about the stakes involved in this deceptively simple question: what is a person of color? A third of my students identified as people of color, a percentage unusually high for most classes I have taught at the University of Minnesota. In the classroom, it was invaluable to hear different perspectives from people of color because it preempted the danger of putting a token student of color in the role of the “authentic insider” (Narayan 142ff. ) speaking for his or her people.

Appearance, we soon agreed, seemed an inept criterion for determining who could count as “of color:” how many women of color who could pass as white have protested against having their identities dictated by surface physical appearances? After all, when we talk about race, we talk about social constructs, not only the meanings given to physical appearances but cultural identities. What is a cultural identity, though? Are you simply born into a culture and, after growing up with its customs and traditions, you claim it as an identity? Or does it take more than that, for instance active participation and self-conscious cultural agency, to lay claim to a cultural identity?

More questions that lead to more debate. Since the available information on Marjorie Agosin was limited, we started arguing in more general terms. One of my students who is racially mixed talked about being called upon in high school to speak for the non-white culture that is supposedly “his,” a culture he felt no connection to at that point in time. For him, awareness of a cultural identity is something he acquired, something outside his immediate sense of self that he started to become more curious about and wanted to have a connection to. Is cultural identity a matter of choice, then?

The visits of the guest speakers, both self-identified women of mixed race, raised still more questions for my students: why, if they had a white and non-white culture to choose from, would they choose to identify as women of color, my students asked. If they could pass as white in the eyes of some of my students, why insist on being women of color? From the experiences narrated and analyzed in their work we found not only evidence for their growing up in a non-white cultural setting, with traditions, food, and music that marks them as different from the mainstream culture surrounding them, we also encountered how these writers, again and again, had to confront stereotypes about their difference, their family’s cultural practices or the way they looked. Being marked as different inspired them to speak up for changing the negatively stereotyped ways this difference was represented in mainstream U.S. culture. Thus their identifying with these cultural backgrounds could be seen as a matter of choice in part, but still clearly a choice that arises from and is inseparable from their experiences with and within a community of color.



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My students finally reached a point where they agreed that the factors of growing up in a culture of color, choosing to be actively involved in this culture, and physical appearance, determine, in various combinations, what makes a person of color. Still, this consensus did not allow us to reach an agreement in the puzzling case of Marjorie Agosin: between considering her cultural background, personal and communal cultural practices, and appearance, my white students, on the whole, tended to be more in favor of including Agosin on the Voices from the Gaps site than my students of color. White students argued that they could not decide who should count, that if she claimed to be a person of color because of her growing up Latin American, they could not contest that claim. Instead, most of my students of color were very skeptical if growing up in Chile but with Eastern European white Jewish parents really made Agosin a person of color. They were concerned about maintaining a space, even a virtual space, for women writers of color exclusively, a space for which Agosin, a white Latina, did not qualify in their eyes.

These discussions reminded me, a student and teacher of multicultural literatures of the U.S., just how complex and multi-faceted the discourse on color and culture can get. My students' interest and involvement in the class also revealed to me just how much need there is to talk about differences in cultural identity and their political, literary, and social consequences. Students are not only confronted with sometimes conflicting takes on cultural identity in the classroom, which is why they need the tools to think critically and engage actively with questions of identity, color, and cultural difference. Teaching this class has taught me how important open-minded, direct conversations about these controversial issues are: there is no way not to be involved in them, so why not be at least aware of what is going on

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by Christina Schmid