

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review
Teaching While Black

Reviewed by Eben Wood



"THERE IS NO TRUTH IN RECRUITING" BY JESSE PURCELL. THIS IMAGE IS FROM CELEBRATE PEOPLE'S HISTORY/IRAQ VETERANS AGAINST THE WAR: TEN YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE, A PORTFOLIO THAT CELEBRATED IVAW'S FIRST TEN YEARS AND WAS PRODUCED BY JUSTSEEDS, IVAW, BOOKLYN, REPETITIVE PRESS, AND THE CIVILIAN SOLDIER ALLIANCE.

Henry, Matthew E. *Teaching While Black* (Charlotte, NC, Main Street Rag Publishing Company, 2020).

At the onset of the “novel coronavirus” pandemic, as public schools, colleges, and universities were closed and “remote learning” replaced the face-to-face, collectively shared experience of the classroom, the nature of that classroom became more visible in its absence, as a crisis of presence. For radical educators—I teach in a two-year college of The City University of New York, a system already devastated by years of fiscal austerity—it was a moment, still ongoing, to reflect on the practices of a socialist, antiracist, and feminist pedagogy. How “unprecedented” was this moment in history, when both the form of the classroom as we imagined and practiced it, as well as the content of the texts or other materials we teach, have always challenged us to consider the place of the classroom in society, and what, how, and why we teach in the first place?

I began this review of Matthew E. Henry’s excellent first poetry collection, *Teaching While Black*, before the May 25 murder of 46-year-old George Floyd by Minneapolis police, reigniting national and global outrage at police violence and systemic racism. Floyd’s last words, “I can’t breathe,” were the same as those spoken in 2014 by Eric Garner when he was killed by NYPD officers on Staten Island, demonstrating first the shared suffering of those individuals and second the pervasive structures of racism and violence in the U.S. Those words also demonstrated all too painfully the cyclical nature of situations in which racism’s deep structures become visible. The resulting protests in communities across the country, along with the excessive use of force by which a clearly racist “law and order” was defended in the name of public safety, have only heightened the sense that this moment in history is both “unprecedented” and all too familiar.

Many of the issues, and the cyclical history in which they are displayed in one situation before being overtaken by the next, each identical and unique in a signifying chain, are anticipated by *Teaching While Black*. The issues of classroom roles, racial as well as class and gender positioning, and the policing of social spaces that are so visible at this historical moment are raised immediately by the collection’s title as well as by MEH’s choice of epigraphs to frame the poems that follow. The first is drawn from Toni Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, which explores the intergenerational and personal effects of systemic racism on a specific

community and individuals linked by shared experiences of race, class, and gender violence.

The passage chosen by MEH is narrated by nine-year-old Claudia MacTeer at the novel’s end. She’s reflecting—and in doing so drawing a kind of lesson from the narrative that precedes this moment—on the cycles of time that have trapped and doomed her older foster sister Pecola Breedlove, a child made ancient by brutal experience. It’s equally Claudia’s attempt to understand the nature of the social spaces that make up the Black community of Lorrain, Ohio, spaces divided internally by the white, capitalist, patriarchal society that contains and exploits that community: “when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late.”

As the epigraph reflects, Claudia understands all too well the failure to understand, that what is learned through experience can itself be a repetition of the conditions by which the experiences of particular individuals or groups are created. *Teaching While Black*, a slim, searing collection, shares some of *The Bluest Eye*’s despair at America’s cyclical re-affirmations of racial inequalities. MEH’s poems are essential reading at this moment, not overtaken by the events of recent weeks but precisely articulating their condition. These poems are especially important, I think, for those of us who seek in our classrooms and pedagogies both to identify and to overturn the received social codes that those spaces and practices represent. Not the least of which, of course, are blithe liberal

affirmations of patience and progress. Certainly most teachers that I know—especially those of us who work with student populations for whom those structural inequalities are a daily, lived reality, inequalities that are all-too-often replicated by the institutions in which we work—share moments of despair that the experiences, ideas, and language that students bear into the classroom are overwhelmingly obdurate, that “it’s too late” to effectively transform those things from negation to liberation. By their repetition, even as teachers and students grapple critically with them, these codes become the naturalized matter of our lives, matter that seems to possess, like the land Claudia described, a will of its own.

Faced with the brutalizing, repetitive facts of our lives, the press of our flesh against matter that rebounds with silence or violence, we may defer to the received codes by



TEACHING WHILE BLACK BY MATTHEW E. HENRY
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which we experience our past, our present, and our future. The victims of that disembodied will have already been stripped of self-determination, of their right to live. That so many people blame the victim, wrongly, indicates what has already happened, overtaken by history and the media images that seek to contain it: the tendency can be to acquiesce to the authority of something that seems beyond our individual or collective reach, disembodied and relentless. It is an imperative of the radical tradition and of radical education that we recognize what it is that we acquiesce to: not some brute facticity of matter but the history that positions us within it. Both as educators who have ourselves been and continue to be students, reflecting the real process of solidarity with our students and against our prior positioning in roles of subjection or authority, this is our challenge. Not, that is, to provide an alibi for those positions through acquiescence, but to recognize in them the impetus to resist and transform them. It is this breaking and reframing of historical cycles, cycles replicated in and through personal experience, that MEH invokes with his second epigraph, by Pakistani political scientist and activist Ayesha Siddiqi: "Be the person you needed when you were younger."

The proof of this imperative unfolds in the poems that follow, from "my third grade teacher," which opens the collection, to the complex work that closes out its third and final section, "when asked what I learned in elementary school being bussed from Mattapan to Wellesley." The same teacher is evoked in both poems, less an individual persona than the disembodied force of white authority. This circular structure from past through the present and back doesn't become the trap of bad history that Claudia both sees and rejects in the tragedy of Pecola and of Lorraine, but a dialectical pedagogy: poetry as site of encounter, conflict, reflection, and resolution. Not the resolution of despair, of acquiescing to a status quo, but the will or resolve to understand and change it. The collection read as a whole provides the radical context for the specific situations, moments of teaching and learning, that compose it.

As teachers in the radical tradition, we work to address the mediations of our own classrooms and the institutions and social relations that they reflect. MEH suggests this in the opening poem when its title, "my third grade teacher," becomes the opening line, breaking through the mediation of a formal title, which seems to sit outside the poem and determine its meaning, to the content of the work itself. This was the teacher who "explained skin, / the undercurrents / of blood and how / my face lacked / the ability to bruise / or blush." Its nature assigned to it by negation, by what it lacks, by the voice of authority, the speaker's body is a foreign or alienated object to itself. Formally this is reflected by the diminution of the capital "I," the subject of the sentence that continues from that moment of subjection: "i tried / to show her a patch / darker than the rest." The skin, a zone between subject and object, internal and external, private and public, resembles the land of Claudia's reflections. Instead of that alienated, obdurate matter and the acquiescence it seems to demand, history isn't "out there," distant and untouchable or inexorable, but as present and intimate as the skin. Not what protects or nurtures the self, an empowering of history and identity, but

what divides the self internally and displays the meanings that society in the form of the teacher has projected upon it.

But here, and this is the crucial point, the acquiescence isn't to the codes that the teacher unreflectingly imposes on the speaker's third-grade self, with the assumption that he will passively accept them. His skin, of course, isn't one, indifferent thing but the very site of contestation that will inform that speaker's experience and education from that point on and that runs through the rest of poems to follow. When the speaker attempts to call the teacher's attention to his own self-awareness and power to signify his own body, to the "patch / darker than the rest," whether or not—as seems to be implied—that patch is a bruise, the scar of past experience, or simply the fact that his skin isn't one thing but many, the teacher simply repeats and reaffirms her own acquiescence to her normative codes: "she nodded, explained / it was harder to see / on my skin."

From his title through the epigraphs and opening poem, MEH invokes and overturns the cliché of a "teaching moment." In our vernacular, such moments represent a situation or encounter in which the matter-of-fact obduracy of the familiar appears open to self-reflection or raised awareness. In the classroom itself, as all educators experience at some point or many points in their careers, it's a moment in which the intent of a lesson prepared in advance is disrupted, an unexpected response or disruption or conflict. Rather than acquiesce to that disruption as such, to ignore it or place it outside the intended lesson, we can create with and around it a reflective space for our students as well as ourselves. This moment can, of course, simply reaffirm our authority, invested in us by the institution, and reinforce the acquiescence of students to that authority. But crucial to the situations explored by MEH is what happens when he, as a Black teacher, encounters the white privilege of the students and of the institutions in which he works. These are poems very much of this moment in U.S. and global history, of Trump and MAGA and American power politics, even as they reach through the immediacy and intimacy of the situations he describes. The poems articulate a pedagogy *in* the classroom but also *of* it, a site of conflict and contestation by which it is opened to the larger systems through which both he and his students have passed to arrive there.

In these moments, the speaker encounters the students as "them." He also encounters himself, his intermediary position between them, the classroom and institution, and his own identity. As he states at the conclusion of "the surprising thing," in which he reflects on the fact that he's "only been called 'nigger' once by a student—at least / in my presence," he wonders whether he's "doing something wrong, if it's my fault it happened / only that one time." As a teacher of literature, through and beyond his advanced education and the materials both canonical and anti-canonical of his discipline, has he not also engaged racism, red-lining, mass incarceration, stop and frisk in ways that require his largely white, privileged students to recognize their own "complicity / through complacency"?

In the complacency of "them," the speaker despairs at simpler, deeper contradictions beyond the literary analysis

that those privileged students have been well prepared to perform: “the subtle things give me pause,” he says. The most obvious surfaces, that is, that like the skin itself conceal deeper or more enduring social conflicts, the marks and scars of history. That his students are comfortable with the subjectivities of literary characters that they encounter in Shakespeare, for instance, but are completely unmoved by those they encounter in works by Chinua Achebe, Zora Neale Hurston, or Toni Morrison. These Black characters or heroes are “wholly ‘other’ / their stories inscrutable—lives they ‘can’t relate to.’” This is a contradiction that the speaker turns on himself, reflecting on his position as a Black educator in a privileged institution: “here i stand: still employed—picking cotton / from fresh aspirin bottles after every utterance / which slices a peace from my soul—and asking questions / that make them cringe.” At the margins of these teaching moments, all too often, there are only blank stares and silences.

Teaching While Black arrives at the darkest promise of its title in the poem “an open letter to the school resource officer who almost shot me in my class.” Here the situation is recalled through an epistolary address to the officer, a traumatized veteran of the war in Afghanistan who is able to read that situation only by acquiescing to the codes of his race and class conditioning. The letter takes the form of questions to the officer, an interrogation not of the individual but the situation itself. The walls of the classroom separated the officer from the speaker and his students, but the situation includes all of them when the distinction between inside and outside the classroom and individual teaching moment is broken. From the outside, the officer sees only the speaker’s brown arms and unkempt beard, and not his professional dress and position of authority. The speaker asks, was it his own appearance, along with the unfamiliar language of the lesson unfolding inside the classroom, that “triggered / rules of engagement normally absent halls so affluent?” The “mostly white faces” in the classroom are oblivious to the “drama” playing out in front of them as the officer enters, unholstering his firearm. Except, that is, for “the two / who share my skin” and “saw everything. made eye contact. / held it for two solid seconds.” The silent exchange of glances is an unspoken language, framing the distinction between the authority of racial codes that unite the officer and the white students despite their class differences, on the one hand, and the shared, traumatic history of racist violence that unite the few students of color and the teacher.

In the final poem, “when asked what i learned in elementary school being bussed from Mattapan to Wellesley,” the speaker explicitly links the situation described in the opening poem to a situation in his adult, professional life. Like Claudia, he has learned by his failure to learn, or rather to acquiesce to, the codes of that earlier lesson, a failure that allows him to understand the otherness of the students as well as his own otherness, reciprocally, to them. Confronted with his white students’ sense of entitlement and the complacency it entails, he considers “what they think is appropriate.” They have internalized the lesson the speaker was meant to have learned very differently in his recollected third-grade experience, that Black bodies belong to them and their codes of knowledge

as power, “under skin our teacher said / doesn’t bruise because she can’t see the blood- / screams beneath.”

In a lifetime of situations, a collective and national history of such situations, the speaker struggles to reconcile the progress and privilege of his own education with the immediate negation of that progress in the scenes of subjection he describes. Framed by the pathologies by which his students have been taught to “read” race as something other than their own privilege, pathologies that frame out his own stable and apparently middle-class upbringing, the speaker “learned to master // Simon-says skills; to be a chameleon, to code-switch; / to bite my tongue instead of theirs; to make excuses / for them, yet allow awkwardness to pant circles around heads / asking what I prefer to be called (*Colored? Negro? African / American? Black?*) never landing on my name. I learned to execute...”

This is a telling and ironic term in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder. What the speaker learned to execute, in the context of the poem and its situation, was “an affirmative action of elementary arithmetic,” that “history is an art / painted in primary colors,” those of white supremacy and privilege and fragility. The “darker shades / are plucked out, passed over,” unified into a “single story (slavery, / civil rights, poverty) muting a talented tenth.” The speaker has learned, ultimately, the lesson “that I should be grateful.” Bussed into a majority white school in a more affluent community of suburban Boston, the speaker was confirmed in his otherness, enduring the cultural appropriations of his white classmates who referred to each other as “my brothah” and “my sistah,” perversely “hoping / for the day they can reclaim ‘my nig...’” With the commodification of hip-hop culture and the fluidity of “post-racial,” social media-fueled cultural appropriation, that day has clearly since arrived. Fighting for the space of his own identity, rendered both invisible and at the same time judged by his own teachers as incapable of “owning” his own voice and body and intellect, of the art that he makes, the speaker closes with a melancholy memory: his daily retreat “down checkered halls to my seat / beside the school secretary, she who understood / the intersection of round pegs and square holes; / to enjoy solitary confinement recess; to admire the ants / who rebuild their lives after every collapsing storm / or malicious white sneaker. i learned // that they think i can’t swim.”

It is with the skin that the flesh presses, that we swim in and press against. “Pressing the flesh” means to place palm against palm, meeting the other. But a handshake is more than a physical action, it reflects a code of behavior, the language of gestures between people that both connects and separates. This language, with its grammar and syntax, its meanings both explicit and implied, governs these encounters. Such gestures exert force even in their absence, as the canceling of physical contact or even proximity in the current pandemic demonstrates. The COVID pandemic has required us—many, seemingly for the first time—to become self-conscious about such encounters, about the ways that bodies meet, touching even at a distance, negating even by affirming. About the ways that we approach and depart the other, and what happens in the situations between.

Masked and gloved, or with the consciousness that we ought to be, our every gesture is mediated. In unmasking these encounters, probing them for what lesson they seem to hold or even what a “teaching moment” really means in the structural repetition of racist violence, and acknowledging the feelings of helplessness and despair as well as anger that can accompany them, Matthew E. Henry’s poems have arrived not too late but right on time.



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