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## A Semester in the Life: Reflections of a Faculty Member

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## Featured Faculty

### A SEMESTER IN THE LIFE: REFLECTIONS OF A FACULTY MEMBER



*Theresa Tensuan, Assistant Professor of English at Haverford College, used her Contemporary Women Writers class as a context in which to explore culturally responsive pedagogical practices. She worked with a Student Consultant, Zanny Alter, an undergraduate student not enrolled in the course, to identify and develop pedagogical approaches that would make the course more responsive to the diverse students enrolled. The following are the first three of ten entries from the weekly blog she kept during the semester in which she participated in a faculty pedagogy seminar supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Teaching and Learning Institute. The faculty pedagogy seminars aim to open up spaces and offer support for faculty to reflect upon their teaching in informal but ongoing ways.*

#### **Facilitating Inclusive Discussion: Whose Voices Are Authorized? (1.28.08)**

For the second class meeting of Contemporary Women Writers, the students were asked to read Karen Russell's short story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" and to come up with three questions along with a paragraph that begins to answer one of their questions about the story. Russell is a ridiculously young and fiercely talented writer — this is the title story of a collection that was published before she got her MFA from Columbia at 25. The story is narrated by the daughter of werewolves who has been sent, along with her sisters, to the nuns at St. Lucy's to be educated and afforded the opportunities of human culture.

The story brings up several of the themes I want to introduce in the class over the course of the semester: What does the situation of liminal figures reflect about the investments of "mainstream" culture? What role does language and literature play in processes of social formation? How might moments of transition or transformation for a character speak to the possibilities for social change, or intransigence?

To begin discussion of the book, I did the time-honored new critical strategy of asking a volunteer to read the title, epigraph, and first paragraph aloud, which opened up a conversation that focused on the language that the narrator was using: one student spoke to the sense of exuberance that came through the narrator's description of herself and her sisters joyously marking their territory in the dorms and menacing the songbirds in the fountain; another noted that the nuns suffered in the first description of "their tiny faces pinched with displeasure"; students began to address the fantastical elements of the story, cued by the epigraph which is an outtake from a work entitled "The Jesuit Handbook on Lycanthropic Culture Shock." After this initial discussion, I asked students to call out the questions they had come up with, which I put on the board in my nearly illegible handwriting, among them were:

Is lycanthropy a real disorder?

Why are the parents referred to as a unit, rather than through proper names?

Is there any significance to the names the girls are given?  
What is up with the setting?  
Why are wolves the “other” here?  
Why do the girls seem to be most at home in church?  
Why is it a Jesuit handbook?

The last question was offered by a student who herself had been educated at a Jesuit high school; thinking that this would be a good opportunity to begin to explore the story’s riff off of conversion narratives and what I read as an implicit critique of missionary drives toward rehabilitation through education, I asked her to talk a bit about the Jesuit order and its educational mission. She began with St. Ignatius and told an interesting story about how his dissolute lifestyle included the reading of “romance novels” until he was given a Bible and was catalyzed to devote himself to a life of contemplation and critical self-reflection. This led another student to ask where the Jesuits stood during Counter-Reformation, which led me to muse aloud about what kinds of narratives do and do not enter into the official mission statement of a religious order.

At this point, I realized that what I thought was going to be a nice, informative aside was becoming a real digression and that I don’t know enough about either the Jesuits or the Counter-reformation to have my facts in order, much less try to say anything of real significance, so even as I was itching to talk about authorized and unauthorized narratives, the specific importance of conversion narratives in American autobiographical traditions, etc. I was realizing that the three of us were having what was feeling like an internal discussion and I was afraid of losing the other 20 people in the classroom so I said, “Let’s bracket this for now, and we can come back to some of these issues,” which we didn’t in the course of this particular conversation because we were already at the 65 minute mark of a 90 minute course.

Here, I’m working through the question of how one maintains a balance — particularly in an introductory emphasis course — between explicitly setting forth foundational issues, concerns, and terms and engaging in conversations that I think animate key questions, but might leave some folks behind — I’ll glance around the room, and not know if a student is deeply absorbed in thought or if her eyes are glazed over in boredom — fearing that it might be the latter, I’ll drop a line of inquiry to pick up another that could engage a wider swath of students. Here, I’m looking forward to having my student consultant give some feedback on when to slow down and linger and when I’m stating the obvious.

Tangential to this line of thought, and speaking to some of the issues that we have as common concerns: while listening to speakers at the MLK symposium at Haverford over the weekend, I was struck by the variety of rhetorical and discursive approaches they brought to the community — i.e. hearing the cadences of a black Baptist minister in a space usually reserved for chemistry lectures made me think about what kinds of voices and critical approaches are most common, and implicitly authorized, in the space of the classroom.

## Conversation versus Coverage: What's the Right Balance? (2.4.08)

At the beginning of class today, in an effort to introduce Zanny, the Student Consultant for the class, in a manner that didn't highlight her "outsider" status, I had students introduce themselves to her by telling her why they were taking the course, letting them know that it is completely legitimate to confess that you are a second semester senior and you need one last humanities credit, or that you were desperate for a fourth course and this one fit your schedule, or that you take any course that has Toni Morrison on the syllabus because you love, love, love her work, or that you are forcing yourself to take a course that has Toni Morrison on the syllabus because you can't figure out what the fuss is about.

This followed a long introduction on my part, speaking to the collective focus of this TLI seminar regarding culturally responsive classrooms; I fessed up to the fact that I have formulated the course's syllabus to push back against the canonical bent of my department's core courses, did not fess up the fact that I'm also trying to attend to a persistent critique that pops up in student evaluations, most often in aforesaid core courses, that I could do a better job of managing class discussions. Perhaps since I was too cowardly re. directly addressing the latter, methinks that I got a bit too "meta" for the first 10 minutes of class conversation, but in the reflections that were posted by two students after class (first round of the assignment catalyzed by the accommodation for the student in the course who has visual and hearing impairments) one did pick up on the importance I was trying to place on creating diversity in the curriculum as well as in the student body and faculty composition.

After these introductions we returned to our conversation on Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. I had told them in advance that I wanted to think about how the different families are represented in the work, as a means of exploring why the Breedlove family is scapegoated by other members of the community and of focusing on the ways in which Pecola gets cast as a kind of blank slate on which others project their anxieties and desires, which for me brings up crucial questions about processes of interpretation.

My plan was that we would spend about 20 minutes working on another close reading of the opening of the narrative that comes from Claudia MacTeer's point of view; the outside reading for the class was two short reviews, one from the New York Times, the other from the New Yorker, that appeared when *The Bluest Eye* was first published in 1973; Haskel Frankel, the reviewer for the New York Times gives a generally positive review of the work but takes Morrison to task for what he sees as overly convoluted moments in her writing, such as the opening line that begins with the words "Nuns go by quiet as lust..."

The students went to town with this, thinking actively about the different ways in which these words could be animated in relation to themes and tensions in the novel:

- The representation of sensuality and sexuality in relation to repression and violence
- Morrison's use of language to wrench open our accustomed means of thinking about an issue or situation
- The characterization of women's roles throughout the novel, a conversation that turned specifically around the question of what constitutes proper maternal behavior

- The novel's representation of economic hardships faced by the characters, and of the social distinctions that are marked between characters

At 3:15, I told myself that I would let this series of close readings go on for another five minutes and then bring it to the “larger” discussion about how the novel represents the constitution and maintenance of social hierarchies, but students kept wanting to speak, elaborating on what other students had said or bringing in insights of their own – I let them run with this since it is still early in the semester and I want as many folks to get their voices in circulation, then I realized that it was 3:50 and I had effectively gotten through about 20% of my lesson plan and so more or less cut the class conversation off at its knees in order to speak to the issues that I had intended to highlight and give them a starting point for next week's discussion (focus on the girls' discussions around menstruation, which Frieda calls “ministratin”; their mini assignment is to bring in a slang term for menstruation, that becomes a mini lesson on the formative power of language).

It is the kind of class discussion which I think students enjoy because it is lively – far ranging, with a lot of voices in the mix (though since I was trying to get some key points up on the blackboard, I lost track of who actually spoke – I'd say about 60% of the class, but that may be highballing it – would be useful to get a sense from Zanny about who actually spoke and who didn't).

I did feel that I should have stepped in about half an hour earlier than I did to begin to “get the conversation on track,” though doing so might have taken away from some the nuance and texture that folks brought in as they began to build different interpretations of this opening moment.

The two students who were assigned the task of writing a 20-minute reflection on the class conversation took different tacks, both of which were illuminating to me:

One took a bird's eye perspective, summing up the shape of the conversation by focusing on the themes that arose in and through folks' responses to the opening. The second took this as an opportunity to speak directly to the moments that she found most intriguing (the novel's characterization of “motherlove” in relation to social conventions about what constitutes love, the situation of a trinity of prostitutes as the most emancipated characters in the novel) which opened up new avenues of insight and inquiry.

So after feeling that I went over-meta at the outset, my question at the end is whether I didn't get meta enough at key points in class conversation – I'll spend part of the opening of tomorrow's class focusing on what I saw as key issues arising from folks' comments as a means of situating the conversation that I meant to have last Thursday. My sense was that I just more or less let the floodgates open in this last conversation and could have been a wee bit more judicious about (here my ignorance makes me fail in the metaphor – turn to Wikipedia) setting the fish-belly flap sluice gate.

## **Insiders and Outsiders: Discerning and Deciding How to Address Differences (2.11.08)**

First, a coda re. my reflections last week about “insiders/outsiders” in the Contemporary Women Writers Class: Zanny, the Student Consultant, remarked at the outset of her notes that the students who were sitting in the “outer circle” (the room is set up with tables in a large rectangle that comfortably seat 16 or so students, the rest are lined up against the wall facing the blackboard) were composed primarily of Bryn Mawr students and students of color, which was one of those whiplash moments where I had to compel myself to think back through how students arranged themselves in the classroom and how the conversation circled and moved. When we spoke about this during our meeting before Thursday’s class, Zanny noted that this might be a function of the schedule [of the bus that shuttles between the two campuses] – that the seats at the table may already be filled by the time that the majority of the Bryn Mawr students make it to the building, and the fact that in one of the Venn diagrams of the class, the overlap between students of color and Bryn Mawr students is quite substantive.

Let’s do the math: of a group of 24, 8 are BMC students, including 5 of the 8 students of color in the class as a whole. I haven’t asked students how they identify racially — as far as I can determine, there are four African Americans, two (or three) Asian Americans, and (one or) two Latina(s). Several of the most vocal students in the class are students of color, and who/who does not speak in class is one of the basic ways in which I figure who is/is actively engaged (keeping in mind that there are students who do soak things in and work through their critical analyses in other contexts and frameworks). Zanny’s insight highlights for me the fact that for some students the layout of the room means that they are sometimes addressing people’s backs; this is probably working hand in glove with another issue I’m trying to address in the classroom, which is that students usually address me rather than one another. Zanny noted that this might be a byproduct of the fact that when someone speaks, I often give a quick reflection on what they’ve said before calling on the next person – this effectively establishes me as the hub of conversation. For Tuesday’s class I think that I’ll say at the outset that we’re going to try a slightly different style of classroom conversation, that rather than me calling on people, folks should respond directly to one another’s comments – metaphor here might be that of functioning as an air traffic controller, rather than as a symphony conductor. This will force me to contend with my control issues, but I will try to peel my sticky fingers off of the baton.

Key moment from class on Thursday: this was the last full day that we’re spending on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, and the beginning of the class was focused on a quick writing exercise (prompt: write about sex education class, an exercise that unfolded into a discussion of the ways in which social expectations around sexuality are constructed and codified. Much fun was had at the expense of folks’ 8th grade gym/health/religion teachers who often fumbled the responsibilities of conveying basic information to their charges, a moment as which I as a teacher can feel a karmic wheel beginning to turn), then moved into small group work in which students were asked to choose and discuss what they saw as an emblematic passage re. the character Cholly Breedlove, and ended with the groups reporting back in, a conversation which touched upon issues of social and individual acts of violence/violation, the representative of masculinity in the novel, the novel’s reconfiguration of dichotomies such as good/evil, black white, etc. The segue between Act I and Act II was to be a close reading of a moment in the novel, one of my favorite passages in the book, in which the novel recounts the first encounter between Cholly

and Pauline, a moment in which Pauline's impaired foot, which has always cast her as outside the circle of her family, becomes eroticized both in the language of the passage and Cholly's response to it. I wanted to draw this out for the class as an example of the way in which the novel recast conventional means of looking at the world, the mini-lesson being about the ways in which, via disabilities studies, we are beginning to become more aware of the difference between an impairment and a social context in which said impairment configures an individual as "disabled" (i.e. steps instead of ramps, transmission of knowledge via printed text rather than by other sensory means, etc.) As I was skimming through these notes as the students were in their 7 minute writing exercise, it suddenly struck me that the student with hearing and visual impairments who was sitting next to me (as she does each class, in order to be able to catch as much as possible of my lectures and comments) would become even more highly visible and I ended up skipping that part of the lesson plan.

I realized that I very rarely feel shy about bringing up issues of gendered or racialized difference in my own classroom, and since my some of my own work deals directly with issues that have been foregrounded through disabilities studies, I feel like those theoretical frameworks are close at hand. My issue here was that I didn't want the student to feel that she was somehow the object lesson for the day, though I wonder if – no, I really do believe that – everyone would have been well served to have the theoretical framework, foundation, and language at hand, and that I basically wimped out. So the karmic wheel completes a full circuit in the space of a 85 minute class period....not to mention the fact that I may have just about 2 or 3 years before having to have those sex education conversations at my own dinner table.