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“What Are We Teaching and Why?”
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I have been teaching both graduate and undergraduate courses on Caribbean culture and literature for a number of years now, both in French and in Women’s Studies. I’ll confine my comments today to the undergraduate courses. Both French and Women’s Studies welcomed the introduction of these courses, so the issue of institutional opposition or integration within the curriculum did not arise. We do not have enrollment problems in either program, so increasing enrollment through teaching Francophone subjects was not an issue either, as I know it may be in other schools.

The question I have raised in my title, *What Are We Teaching and Why?*, arises from my very different experiences in teaching in the two programs. Let me start with the Women’s Studies course. Because all of the core courses in Women’s Studies are interdisciplinary, I use an anthology that draws on a broad range of disciplinary perspectives—sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, religion, medicine, law—to bring out the broad range of problems affecting Caribbean societies today. Although my specific interest lies in Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Martinique, it is enlightening to relate the French Caribbean to Anglophone and Hispanophone islands; I focus on the largest Caribbean islands, Jamaica and Cuba. I teach literature, but less for form than for the expression of women’s issues. The literary works by Edwidge Danticat for Haiti, Michelle Cliff for Jamaica, and Zoe Valdes for Cuba are moving testimonies to the complexities of women’s lives; the students and I love discussing them. Jean Rhys’s classic *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a retelling of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* from a Caribbean perspective, exists in two film versions, a commercial one and an academic version produced at the University of West Indies. Comparing the novel and film versions gives the students the opportunity to understand the extent to which film interprets and impacts the aesthetic and social realities it presents. This leads to a consideration of the important social issue of how the identity and cultural survival of people in the Caribbean depend on how they are represented in the first world. We also see other documentary films produced in the Caribbean such as *Miss Amy and Miss May* produced by the Jamaican feminist collective Sistren Research. There are two other literary texts that I may add to this course that worked especially well for me in my French courses. One is Mayotte Capécia’s *I Am a Martinican Woman*, which is now available in translation, although very hard to find in French. Another successful work was Maryse Condé’s *La Migration des coeurs*, especially the first part, which is a retelling of Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* in a Caribbean setting.

I am very satisfied with this course because I understand what I am teaching and why. I am teaching Georgia students, many of whom have given little thought to issues of race and gender, how to understand and deal with those issues in a way that goes beyond their limited experiences in the United States. Two factors contribute to the success of the course. First, I get a mix of Caribbean and African American students who enroll. The dialogues between these two groups and their interactions with white Southern students are dynamic and enlightening. Another factor is that the Women’s Studies program emphasizes diversity. Discussion of the different perspectives held by women of color and women from other national origins is at the heart of the program. Therefore there is a real interest among students in the subject of the course, women of the Caribbean: knowing about them fills a gap in a larger project of understanding women worldwide.

Things are less clear to me regarding the French courses that I have taught. In addition to French majors, we have a lot of minors, who tend to be majoring in practical fields like Business or Journalism in which they perceive that language competence is an advantage. They are almost all white, and they have little interest in or knowledge of the Caribbean, other than as a cruise destination. It is also the case that what I may have to say about race and gender in my course is not really central to the French program. The students come to us to improve their French through speaking and reading. They are interested in “culture,” but typically in the rather superficial sense of what is going on today, not in terms of more probing inquiries into deep-seated social issues. Hence my question, What am I teaching and why? Can I really teach students to appreciate racial differences in France within the confines of a single course in a French program with traditional language and literature objectives? And, further, can I convince them of the importance of France’s colonial past when the French themselves are not? When I taught the course the last time, one of my students had a French friend who was visiting for several weeks and sat in on the course. He didn’t help me in persuading the students that they need to understand France as a multiracial society, probably because his education did not include his country’s history as a colonial power and the enduring legacy of slavery in the French Caribbean. In fact, the French involvement in the slave trade and slavery are not even part of the school curriculum in France.

Since I am not ready yet to describe what would fully satisfy me as a course in French on the French Caribbean, one that would tap into what we as nineteenth-century specialists have to offer, I will use the remaining time to simply describe the plans I have at this point for teaching this course the next time. I no longer expect to match the socially relevant experience that I have had in Women’s Studies; and I suspect that I will have to reconcile myself to achieving the more modest goals of contributing to the knowledge base of French majors, providing a better preparation for those who are going to pursue further studies, and exposing majors and minors to ideas which may be useful to some of them in other courses or in later life.

An important component that I plan to stress is the notion of the past informing the present. I believe that Francophone courses are often being taught in an historical void, despite the fact that Caribbean writers themselves repeatedly call attention to the importance of issues of slavery, race, and colonialism in their works. We as nineteenth-century specialists can provide the historical and literary basis for understanding 20th century Francophone writing. We can expose students to such current ideas in French social history and cultural criticism as memory and collective amnesia; the problematics of pity, horror, and paternalism; the limitations of reason and universalism; the paradoxical republican conjunction of colonialism and abolitionism; assimilation and the erasure of difference through creolisation and *métissage*.

There are a number of primary and secondary sources that I am planning to use in this course. They are not exclusively literary. Perhaps because of my own research interests in slavery studies, I am very taken with Françoise Vergès’s *Abolir l’esclavage: une utopie coloniale; les ambiguïtés d’une politique humanitaire*. Responding to French self-congratulatory celebrations of the 150th anniversary of emancipation in 1998, Vergès, a white critic from the former colony of La Réunion, challenges French amnesia regarding its colonial past, exposes the ambiguity and ambivalence of official statements and policies condemning slavery up to the present time, and deconstructs both utopian abolitionism and the myth of emancipation as true liberation from oppression. Targeting the incompatibility of republican ideology and the discrimination resulting from colonial rule, Vergès refuses to consider the story of Francophone slavery to be a closed

book and forces us to notice its ramifications in our own times. Also in response to the 150th anniversary, a group of black Martinican scholars and literary authors including Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant contributed to the volume *De l'esclavage aux réparations*. Like Vergès, these authors emphasize the importance of fighting against French amnesia, calling attention to the ongoing effects of slavery on subjugated peoples, denouncing new forms of slavery in the twenty-first century, and raising the issue of reparations. With this more engaged approach, it may be possible to engage American students to make connections between the French experience and their own in the United States.

The ongoing effects in French society are also treated in Gisèle Pineau's *Femmes des Antilles*, which I discussed in my recently published article "Guadeloupean Women Remember Slavery." This work, also written on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of emancipation, contains fictionalized slave narratives from the past; summaries of facts and events; actual documents from nineteenth-century records; essays about slavery and its legacy; and testimonial statements by a wide range of contemporary Caribbean women of different races, classes, ages, professions, and nationalities who to address the question of what the legacy of slavery represents for them today. [As a footnote, one of those testimonies is by Firmine Richard, the star of Coline Serreau's film *Romuald et Juliette*, which illustrates in a comic vein the problems of race and gender in contemporary France.] In that article I also discuss how literary works by Simone Schwarz-Bart and Maryse Condé support or depart from Pineau's Caribbean feminist perspective.

Finally, I plan to continue to devote considerable time to Aimé Césaire, as I have done in the French course before. One reason is the pedagogical value that I find in the three video series *Aimé Césaire, Une voix pour l'histoire*, directed by the Martinican film maker Euzhan Palcy. This is an incredibly rich compendium of material on Césaire; on the literature, history, and culture of the French Caribbean; and on France's relations with its former colonies. Rather than *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, I plan next time to consider using works with direct ties to nineteenth-century Caribbean history such as Césaire's play *Le Roi Christophe*. We now have the advantage of Nick Nesbitt's recently published *Voicing Memory: History and Subjectivity in French Caribbean Literature*, which answers many of the questions we as nineteenth-century specialists are likely to have about this play and about Césaire in general.

To conclude, I have tried to share with you some of my successes, challenges, and materials as a nineteenth-century specialist trying to incorporate the French Caribbean in her teaching.