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Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring, 1999), pp. 166-175

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25112459>

Accessed: 24-01-2019 15:12 UTC

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Teaching African-American Literature in Turkey: The Politics of Pedagogy

E . L Â L E D E M I R T Ü R K

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I teach at Bilkent University, the first private university to be founded in Turkey, where I am now an associate professor. The university located in Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, provides students with American-oriented research and teaching standards. It recruits American and European scholars as well as Turkish scholars with publications in journals indexed in the American Humanities and Citations Index. Primarily a research-oriented institution, it provides access to cultural exchange with scholars from different parts of the world.

In fact, we Turks live in a country where we are constantly aware of the image-domination of the Western world, while witnessing Turkish stereotypes in movies or news in Western media as “savage” non-persons. On Turkish TV we are bombarded by an abundance of American movies, some of which advertise either Middle Eastern or Turkish non-personhood. We are made into an audience (passive spectators) watching how we are caught up in the colonialist positionality, imposing its own “construction of reality” (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 15) on and fixating its power relations with us. As Diane G. Sunar maintains, “Another feature of the power relationship relevant to the problem of stereotypes is that the dominant group is able to impose its own ‘construction of real-

ity' on the subordinated group, so that the latter group accepts the stereotype" (1982, 447). In the process, what we lose, as bell hooks suggests, "is our capacity to know what the counter image would be like" (1996, 4). In this context, teaching African-American literature in Turkey lays a heavy responsibility on me as a Turkish teacher and scholar. My students have never questioned cultural imperialistic politics, and have to be made aware that we are not alone in a world which commercializes intricately built-in stereotypes for brainwashing as the Other. We are a part of the world, yet the imperialist ideology locates us apart from it. These students, in other words, have to be called into a process of resisting the Eurocentric outlook on power relations. In the TV serials bought from the West, such as *Top Cops* or *The Young and The Restless*, whiteness clearly represents authority. Racial difference, "America's pre-eminent national narrative" (1996, 1), in Ann DuCille's terms has to be understood in a new way within classroom dynamics.

Teaching African-American literature in Turkey is a serious task for me, especially after taking a graduate course from the late Darwin T. Turner in Fall 1983 as a Ph.D. student in the American Studies Program at the University of Iowa, having had no single course on African-American literature in Turkey or elsewhere. I was not even aware that I was a "racist" in my unconscious adoption of stereotypes. When our white male American professor in Turkey showed us R.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* without giving any background information about African-American history and the Civil War, twenty of us, all Turkish graduate students, watched the movie ending up in total sympathy for the poor white girl and feeling a deep hatred for the ruthless black man. Those who know Prof. Turner could immediately guess what happened after I mentioned this movie since that was all I knew about African-American people. The commodification of the myth of the black rapist made Prof. Turner furious, and he ended by giving me a lecture on why the movie is racist. That was the moment when my process of unlearning the clichés of the dominant Eurocentric culture in America started, which also gave me a deep sense of discomfort. However, I realized by the end of Fall 1983 that the texts disturbed me because I did not like where I stood before I took the class—that is the Eurocentric positionality I tried to inhabit. Hence, I tried to discard the "Eurocentric" vision I had previously held in my reading of the African-American novel.

Divested of this Eurocentric vision, I felt "homeless" in an academic setting, which reinforced the Eurocentric paradigm in the department curriculum. Up until Fall 1997, there was only one African-American literature course, a survey. After some radical revisions of the curriculum that succeeded in transforming the Department of American Culture and Literature into the Department of American Studies (September 1997), I began offering/teaching more African-American literature courses ("African American Novel I, 1850-1920," "African American Novel II, 1920-Present," and "Contemporary African American Women Writers,"). One of my colleagues also incorporated slave narratives in courses like "19th Century Social Texts."

From 1990 to 1997, I offered the African-American literature course dealing with several different novels. The classes offered me the opportunity to see how I could guide my students through the same process of becoming I had experienced in the United States. My 30 students were all Turkish, and none of them had read an African-American text before they enrolled in this course. We focused on Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, and John Edgar Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire*.

Before starting the course, I gave the class three questions to be answered in half an hour, which was followed by a class discussion. The first question asked, "What are some of the stereotypes the West has constructed for the Turks?" Most of the students listed "barbarian, uncivilized/primitive, lazy and fanatic Muslims." The second question asked, "Do these stereotypes affect you as a young Turkish woman/man? If so, why? If not, why not?" Those who responded in the positive were students who used the phrases like, "Yes, I feel disturbed because of being excluded from the world" or "it is not nice to be seen as second-class people by the West." Those who gave negative responses said they were not affected at all, because they knew the stereotypes to be false by their very nature. The majority of the students gave negative responses, and in the class discussion they agreed with each other that it was natural that they were not affected for the simple reason that they were not in the same country with those who stereotype them; a situation unlike that which the African-American people have experienced. The third question addressed a different issue, "We see that the Turkish media has news of foreign tourists who love Turkish rugs, meals, and objects of decoration (i.e., material culture) with absolutely no interest in Turkish cultural values. How do some of the news reflect a stereotypical vision of the people in the West?" In response to this question, students mostly agreed that Eastern cultures represented exotic/mystical "places" to the Western mind. One student said Turkey represented an image of a "cultural market where people came to look as if wandering around in a fair and dealing only with goods instead of sharing something with the people." Class discussion of these responses proved valuable both to the students and to me, for we had to shift "a location of privilege" (hooks, *Teaching* 82) with a new outlook on where African-Americans would locate themselves to shift their paradigms.

At that point I begin the course materials with a class discussion of K. Sue Jewell's article, "Black Male/Female Conflict: Internalization of Negative Definitions Transmitted through Imagery." As Jewell maintains,

Unquestionably, negative definitions have been assigned to Black males and females through the use of imagery either in written form or visually. Similarly, positive definitions have been ascribed to white males and females through the use of imagery. These definitions overwhelmingly affect the formulation of perceptions, role expectations, and actual behaviors exhibited in relationships involving Black males and Black females. (Jewell 1983, 46)

Students see a lot of stereotypic images on Turkish TV, including the "savage" Native Americans killed off by white men, who by sheer fate are always

“forced” into a self-defensive position. But as I remind them, students never stop to think of the stereotyping process that leads to stereotypic self-perceptions in subordinated groups through the abuse of mediatic power in glamorizing colonialism and imperialism. We discuss the importance of understanding what stereotypes—the Black Rapist, Sambo, Black Macho, Uncle Tom, Sapphire, Mammy or Aunt Jemima—mean to the white supremacist patriarchal ideology in terms of their cultural politics designed “to colonize, oppress, and exploit” people (hooks 1995, 16).

I then proceed to discuss the degree to which the “image-making” plays a crucial role in our underrepresentation. We read Malcolm X’s statement on how he reacted to white supremacist “image-making,” “It’s imagery. They use their ability to create images, and then they use these images that they’ve created to mislead the people. To confuse the people and make them accept wrong as right and reject right as wrong. Make the people actually think that the criminal is the victim and the victim is the criminal” (1992, 165). Malcolm X goes on to identify image-making as a tool of a white supremacist ideological stance which enslaves people within the bars of stereotypes,

This is how you imprisoned us. Not just bringing us over here and making us slaves. But the image that you created of our motherland and the image that you created of our people on that continent was a trap, was a prison, was a chain, was the worst form of slavery that has ever been invented by a so-called civilized race and a civilized nation since the beginning of the world. (Malcolm X 1992, 167)

We discuss these two quotations to show students that images are not merely something we watch or read, but something that stays with us. I also provide a very detailed account of the history of slavery, the justifications of the West for slavery—the so-called reality behind the “logic” of enslavement. In fact what I try to do with students is to make them see and unlearn the vision defined by the axiomatics of imperialism, by offering “cultural explanations that question the explanations of culture” (Spivak 1996, 47). If “[w]hat we do toward the texts of the oppressed is very much dependent upon where we are” (Spivak 1990, 57), then we need to define our positionality, where we stand for that matter, for the African-American novelists’ struggle also entails shifting the paradigms of black self as the Cultural Other. Before we discuss the novels in class, I try to create an educational setting in which we can locate the African-American novel within a context that entails a collective effort to invert “the colonizing mind-set” (hooks 1994, 46)—a process of learning which transforms “the banking system of education” (1994, 5) into that of identity-formation.

In this context, teaching Wright’s *Native Son* (see Demitürk 1996, 4-5) to junior students in Turkey has been a highly challenging experience. I begin class discussions by asking specific questions that I hope will lead to understanding Bigger Thomas’s lot. First perceptions begin to change as we journey through the “friendly” attitudes of Mary and Jan that finally lead to the murder

scene. My students have a hard time getting through the cross-cultural barriers, which I try to explain later since I don't want to sum up traditional critical responses to Wright's works and Bigger's character. The main problem becomes students' failure to accept that Bigger was forced into his situation, and had he lived in a different country, he might not have become a "potential murderer." So we keep exchanging examples from different cultural contexts until students realize what Britten failed to realize—the problematic of coming to terms with one's self-image, when one is continuously being located within the racist representational paradigm. In the trial scenes, when Bigger starts opening up his inner world to Max, I believe my students have a clearer picture of Bigger than Max himself. For the first time in class students give up calling Bigger names like racist/murderer, after having read news articles on Richard Nixon in *The Chicago Sunday Tribune*. I guess at that point they realize that Bigger's situation was not just "fictional." It was reality itself. From then on our discussions of Wright's literary technique and Bigger's psychological make-up become meaningful enough to enable us to move towards a deeper level of perception. Both my students and I realize that even though it might be impossible to identify with Bigger (for we Turks belong to a totally different part of the world and therefore we are oppressed under different representational paradigms), we needed to show the courage to admit that the domination of the white image over the black image (or over the Third World) defined the basic power relationship between the sign systems of the oppressor and the oppressed. Hence we had to analyze why and how people like Bigger are so-called criminals, murderers, and violent people. In order to do that we had to be aware of the power of the images that represented us. But at least my students realized, I believe, that the image of the oppressed is constantly controlled and manipulated by images generated by the oppressor, and hence the "rhetoric and the imagery of domination and humiliation" (Pieterse 1992, 223) manipulates the perceptions of the oppressed by the oppressor. In this context my students and I shared a common ground in accepting Michel Fabre's view that Bigger could now be seen as a black man who "reduce[s] the Whites to stereotypes." (1993, 183) Bigger had treated the white image as the Other, which neither Max nor Jan could fully understand, and in doing so he redefined the logic of center and periphery in personal terms in an attempt to alleviate his marginal role in the oppressive definitional framework. This process of shifting the cultural paradigms as the Other is what we need to learn in the Third World in order to understand the power of racist myths in overtaking reality and reducing us to nothingness. I was gratified that these class discussions led students and me to re-positioning ourselves in relation to Bigger, his plight and the reality out there.

Reading Ellison's *Invisible Man* took an entire month. This became a very important novel for students who later admitted they would never forget the novel or what it gave to them. Although it was hard for them to identify with the protagonist/narrator at first, they started seeing part of themselves in him. In the same way that Turks have to learn to survive in the face of Western

degradation of the Turkish or Turkic stereotypes, the survival of the protagonist depended on how he functioned within white image-making dynamics. Keeping an identity that remains salient to us as Turkish people seems to attract students to the protagonist's strategy for survival. In the early stages of the novel, the invisible man defines himself in relational terms, that is in relation to the parameters of the whites' criteria by accepting the whites' social construct of reality. The act of writing of his past, which is the retrospective account of the real experience, turns the novel into a revision of the Eurocentric definition of him as a black man, who can only become visible if he starts to see himself within the realm of Afrocentric "definitional framework." (Baldwin 1980, 108). Since the struggle between whites and blacks over the nature of sight reiterates "the logic of centre and periphery" (Pieterse 1992, 235), his mental odyssey assumes significance as he gains an insight into the white power structure implemented by the white mind. Realizing the real meaning of his grandfather's advice toward the end of the novel, the invisible man has learned the need for becoming his own person. Students embraced the protagonist wholeheartedly and identified with his hard won struggle to become his own person, because that is what they were also fighting for. Refusing to be a subset of the Western image-domination, both students and I shared the protagonist's experience, as he locates himself at the center of it, and no longer on the periphery. In the act of re-creating his personal history, the invisible man revises the black image—his personal iconography, if you will—in an attempt to become his own image-maker. Defining his personal space within the sociocultural geography and offering it as a realm of sharing of images, verifies a true democratic mind nurtured by the Afrocentric definitional framework. My students and I had to face that we Turks were also "socially invisible" to Western eyes, for we were often allowed to exist only as subtext.

Similarly, in Morrison's *Jazz*, Joe and Violet try to develop a positive self-perception. Entering into a dialogue with these characters presents new ways of defining one's identity. One of my students wrote in an essay exam, "black people can solve their problems in the white people's world only by knowing who they are." The solution entailed a complicated process of becoming, and students grasped the importance and complexity of the problem. I had to intervene at certain points to make sure they understood how negative self-perception instigated by white supremacist ideology had come to disrupt the relationship between Joe and Violet. In discussing the problem of identity concerning Joe and Violet, we had talked about the power dynamics that surround them. One student claimed in the exam that Morrison makes us see "the effects of double-consciousness on Joe and Violet." Another student wrote that the solution to the identity problem lies in finding ways to deal with double-consciousness, which Joe and Violet managed to do at the end, "To cope with this double consciousness they hold on to each other."

We talked about how the white conception of beauty affects Joe and Violet. A cosmetics salesman, Joe sells the white standard of beauty—an act that

backs up the Eurocentric concept of beauty as white. Similarly, Violet's job as a hairdresser also fosters her sense of self as a woman who would rather be white and "look good": "the legacy of whiteness as the standard of beauty informs the characters' views of themselves and each other" (Heinze 1993, 35). Victimized by their attempts to live up to the standard of physical beauty, defined by a white male-dominated society, they are disconnected with blackness as a definitive sign of cultural heritage where they have no access to a black "definitional framework." They owe their parentless past to the impact of racial oppression against which Dorcas, the Intruder, has to be pacified. The physical absence and yet the living memory of Dorcas serves as a catalyst for transforming Joe's escape into adultery and murder into the recreation of a familial configuration in the present. The act of reclaiming the lost heritage transforms the "lost history" (Leonard 1993, 37) into the present which does not signify absence any longer.

Joe and Violet's odyssey toward self-affirmation is an issue John Edgar Wideman takes up in his novel. I must confess that teaching Wideman's *Philadelphia Fire* was not an easy task to undertake. The students were moved by the actual event in Philadelphia that constitutes the context against which Cudjoe comes to terms with himself. I remember one student writing in an exam, "Eleven black people are killed for nothing and hundreds of people are made homeless and there is still no black person who can raise his/her voice against this event like vets who have lost their voice in Vietnam War." Student responses were similar to what Wideman represented about the African-American reality, "The narrator is showing us the other side of America." Class discussions centered upon the meaning of African-American identity. We referred to how W.E.B. DuBois defined double-consciousness in relation to the narrator's interpretation of the facts, and the ambiguity the future holds especially for his young son. I remember one student saying in an essay that "the problem of double-consciousness is because of the [American] government's racist way of treating blacks, and then the media and blacks have to see the reality." The distortion of reality became the major topic for class discussion, as we reached Part 3. In Turkey, we have access to CNN and we can see how political events and issues concerning our country are distorted by CNN news. We seem to have a different kind of "double-consciousness" where we try to see the ins and outs of why the media distorts our people's reality, where this power of abusing facts comes from and who benefits from this whole distorted image of who we really are. These issues are very much alive in a country in which we look at Cudjoe's obsession with self-definition. I remember a student writing, "Cudjoe appears as an ambitious person who wants to light a spark in the dark but lacks the communal support to start a fire of his own to wipe out the cruelty of the whites." I read to the students what Wideman says in *Fatheralong*, "the paradigm of race transforms color into a sign of class, culture, and inferiority" (1995, 83). The students have never thought of blackness as a sign of class, for we never associate race or color with social class in Turkey for the simple fact that there are downtrod-

den people who belong to the Turkish hegemonic culture. Hence, that also became part of the issue of what constitutes “difference.” It reminds us of Wideman’s question in *Fatheralong*, “If we’re different, who decides the meaning of that difference?” (1995, x). In fact, this is the question we had responded to in our class discussion on the African-American novel.

During the semester, we had analyzed the white supremacist power dynamics the African-American novelists criticize. In this course, we discussed why Bigger in *Native Son* is confined to the mental slum of the white mind, and how he slowly ceases to be an individual in the public mind, for his blackness defines him as part of a subordinate group. We discussed *Invisible Man* in terms of what makes the protagonist, who is so visible to our eyes as readers in the Third World, invisible in the country where he lives. The question becomes, to whom exactly is he socially invisible and why do people “fail” to see him? We discussed the difference it would make if Dorcas were alive all through *Jazz*, physically visible. How would that affect the struggle for visibility in the case of Joe and Violet? We turned back to the question of “How does one define and determine meaning in one’s life when one must struggle against a white presence that has denied one’s past and one’s real self?” When we reached *Philadelphia Fire*, we discussed how the individual felt empowered by telling his story—“the power to tell a story” (Olander 1996, 3). The power one has over another in controlling his/her situation is what Bigger paid for, because he controlled his situation in a way unacceptable to whites; it is what the Invisible Man struggled for and succeeded in intricate ways at the end; it is what Joe and Violet achieved through communal sharing; and it is finally on what John Edgar Wideman based his narrative possibility.

All through the course, students read the novels as a process of learning about African-American reality through the eyes of African-American novelists. We discussed the distortion of the black image in media in a country where white supremacist ideology had inevitably induced self-hatred in black people. When we had a final discussion of the novels at the end of the semester, we looked at the books as a way to reiterate the distinct self-definition of the black individual who tries to liberate his/her self-image from the controlling function of the white image. In decentering the white image, the characters fought with the internalized image of blackness as a sign of despicable inferiority in a white world where pride is white and submission is black.

Gayatri Spivak maintains, “Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity” (1993, 179). In this context, Turkish students seem to share the problems of the African-American characters’ struggle for forming an identity salient to them. Having spent our formative years in an educational setting based on hearing lectures and memorizing lecture notes for exams, my students and I tried different ways of reading these novels. We discussed the novels within a framework of current events: the hard-to-believe extreme cases of how the black stereotype functioned in the legal attitude toward Rodney King; and how high-tech lynching created a spectacle out of O. J. Simpson, while ironically destroying the social signifiers of the American Dream he had

attained—wealth, success, fame—in a society which produced images of Biggers, Nortons, Bledsoes, Joes, and covert authorities to legalize racial violence in bombing innocent black people in the Philadelphia of the 1980s.

Frankly speaking, my students and I feel dislocated in relation to the alluring image of American society when we read these novels within the socio-cultural and political context that empower their image through their universal advocacy of human rights. As my students and I share the power issue at the center of interracial relations, determined by the semiotics of white supremacy, we relate the situation to our part of the World whose political reality is defined by Western “positional superiority” (Said 1994, 7) over the Third World. In short, my students and I refuse to reduplicate the strategy of the dominant Eurocentric culture where authority silences people. Instead we try to understand why and how the texts respond to the reinforced social invisibility of African-American individuals within a social environment that reinscribes colonialism and domination.

We realize that the failure to share the mode of power appropriated by the white supremacist ideology forces black people to reproduce their self-images and to redefine what the term “power” signifies as an element of action. As Mary Helen Washington claims, “We all know the power that images have to shape and control our lives; we must also begin to realize that we have the power to choose which images we will celebrate” (1974, 18). Revising and controlling our self-images, the African-American characters, my students, and I re-position ourselves within the anti-colonialist discourse. In doing so, we activate our knowledge and power in shifting the paradigms of the Other to re-shape the parameters of African-Americanness—and perhaps of Turkishness as well.

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