

Workshop Session 7

Critical Pedagogy: Octavia E. Butler and Ruthanne Lum McCunn

Video Program Overview

Part I: In Brooklyn, New York, Cathie Wright-Lewis and her students investigate political, social, technological, and environmental issues in Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*. Part II: In Portland, Oregon, Sandra Childs and her students discuss cultural and political issues as they relate to Ruthanne Lum McCunn's novel *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. Lum McCunn reads from her novel and talks with the students.

Theory Overview

Critical pedagogy teaches students to respond to texts not just as literary critics, but as politically aware members of a community. In order to create this kind of classroom, teachers must begin by encouraging students to read and think critically. Once students develop a means of creative political expression, they can begin to consider how they want their thoughts and words to affect others. As students work to guide their own studies, to critique the political ideologies at work in their communities, and to develop creative dialogues with others, they become active participants in the classroom and the larger world.

Workshop Session (On-Site)

Getting Ready—Part I (15 minutes)

Writing novels about the future doesn't give me any special ability to foretell the future. But it does encourage me to use our past and present behaviors as guides to the kind of world we seem to be creating.
—*Octavia E. Butler*

- Discuss the similarities between 2025 and the present as portrayed in Butler's novel.
- What issues does Butler explore that are important to you?
- How would you characterize the author's politics?
- How might you respond to the work's "call to action"?

Watch Part I: Octavia E. Butler (approximately 30 minutes)

Going Further—Part I (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

- What do you think about Part I and the way in which the teacher used critical pedagogy?
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies for use in your classroom?
- What are some possible next steps to this lesson?

Getting Ready—Part II (15 minutes)

- Discuss your reactions to the novel (or chapters), the online materials about Ruthanne Lum McCunn and her work, and foot-binding.
- Explore the ways in which the related texts explore the politics of beauty in Western culture and contemporary America and note the cross-cultural patterns.

Watch Part II: Ruthanne Lum McCunn (approximately 30 minutes)

Going Further—Part II (15 minutes)

Discuss as many questions as time permits. You may want to answer more of the questions in your journals at home and share ideas on Channel-Talk.

- What do you think about Part I and the way in which the teacher used critical pedagogy?
- How might you incorporate or adapt the strategies for use in your classroom?
- What are some possible next steps to this lesson?

Between Sessions (On Your Own)

Homework Assignment

Go to the Web site at www.learner.org/channel/workshops/hslit and:

- Review Workshop Session 7: read the theory overview, teaching strategies, information about the authors and literature, lesson plans, and resources.
- Prepare for Workshop Session 8: preview the theory overview and information about the authors and literature (biographies, synopses of works, Q&As, key references, and resources).

In the Readings following Workshop Session 8 and on the workshop Web site:

- Read: The Last Poets' "On the Subway" (available in the Workshop Session 8 Readings) and if possible, listen to the recording on the workshop Web site of "On the Subway" and "Jones Comin' Down" from The Last Poets' self-titled CD (1970).
 - As you read and/or listen to "On the Subway," consider the following questions:
 - What are some of the political messages in the poem?
 - Which words reveal the time period in which the poem was written?
 - Who is "the man" in the poem? What's happening?
 - What is the poem really about?
 - Bring your notes to the next workshop session.
- Read: Lawson Fusao Inada's poems, "Prologue" and "Instructions to All Persons" from *Legends From Camp* and "Drawing the Line," (available in the Workshop Session 8 Readings) and Executive Order 9066 (available online at http://ipr.ues.gseis.ucla.edu/images/Evacuation_Poster.pdf)
 - Take note of how Inada has infused historical events and documents into his poetry.
 - Bring your notes to the next workshop session.

Ongoing Activities

- In your journal, include thoughts, ideas, or questions you might have as you review the online materials and reflect on the workshop session. Make note of how your participation in the session influenced any experiences in your classroom.
- Online, click on Reflection/Interactive Forum, an activity that you can use to interpret poems using the pedagogical approaches covered in this workshop. Read one of the two poems featured and respond to the *critical pedagogy* questions. Share your answers on the discussion board.
- Share ideas on Channel-Talkhslit@learner.org.

Workshop Session 7 Readings

Bubbe Got Back

Ethnic identity and body image through the rearview mirror

by Ophira Edut

I'm a Jewish chick with a big booty.

There. I said it.

Not that you can really keep something like that a secret. Disengage from a face-to-face conversation, turn at a slight angle, and *wham*, the curve hits their vision and shatters the flat lines of space. Some appreciate the interruption from monotony. Others shift uncomfortably, unnerved by the sudden disappearance of order and control.

Thanks to two decades of hip-hop and the (literal) overexposure of Jennifer Lopez, big butts have now settled comfortably into public discourse. Yet Jews have not embraced the cultural acceptance of thick chicks with round behinds—despite the fact that there are many among our ranks. Sure, we may dance to hip-hop tracks like “Back That Thang Up” or “Baby Got Back.” But is the average Jewish guy *really* sincere when he raises a beer and shouts along, “*You’s a big fine woman / won’t you back that thang up.*” Methinks no.

“You’re a white girl shaped like a black girl,” my friend Anika put it bluntly. “And the African American men in my family love a healthy woman.” We devolved into a Jimmy the Greek–style postulation of my booty’s origins. Was it courtesy of my Middle Eastern father, a dark-complexioned Israeli with a notable “bump” himself? Or did it stretch back to ancient days, when, according to some speculators, the original Hebrews were black?

“I mean, look at those tomb paintings of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt,” offered my friend Dyann, a churchy Pentecostal girl who was raised to believe that the Jews were God’s chosen people, and was eager to make the connection. “They’re shown as brown and black! And where do you think those full lips, and those springy curls come from? From *us*, that’s who.”

Grateful that somebody supported me for draggin’ this wagon, I didn’t protest. She had a point. Indeed, my butt has been a cultural ambassador, a *passport* to insta-credibility in many a multiracial setting. “Look, it’s Heavy Chevy,” I was habitually greeted at the door of my favorite Latin music club. “How much junk you got in that trunk tonight?”

And, wanting to be down, I again kept quiet. In an age when race can still be the elephant that nobody mentions, people quietly size each other up for nonverbal cues of who’s Us and who’s Them. I guess you could say I made it in through the back door. My body engenders a level of trust among some black folks—who, for the record, I’m aware come in a variety of sizes, too. And since among Jews, it has regularly marked me an outsider (“You mean you’re not on a diet?”), it’s a relief to be accepted somewhere.

When it comes to dating, my butt launches me into choppy, racially charged waters. To the average Jewish guy, my body is old world flavor in a new world order. It conjures images, perhaps, of their sturdily built grandmothers, fresh from Ellis Island, stooped over sinks preparing borscht, or wearing babushkas and tilling the barren soil of the Russian steppe. I suspect they’re looking for a sleeker model than my reliable old Chevy. Experience has proven: If I wanted to date only Jewish men, I’d be ass out.

But put me in front of a newly minted immigrant, a middle-aged man with Lolita fantasies, or a sizeable number of black or Latino men in America, and I’m the embodiment of fantasy and cultural ideal: 5 feet 2 inches and 155 pounds with back and a rack. A little roundness to the tum, some thickness to the thighs . . . to these fellas, that’s good eatin’.

Reprinted from *Utne* magazine (Nov-Dec 2000). Subscriptions \$14.97/yr (6 issues) at www.utne.com. Ophira Edut is the editor of *Body Outlaws: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity* (Seal Press 2000). Her Web site, *The Jewess Is Loose*, is at www.ophira.com.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

As a result, my dating scorecard includes one Jewish guy, a handful of non-Jewish white guys, and men of color aplenty. It's not based on preference. Just the question, fueled by self-esteem: Why join a club that doesn't want you as a member?

Yet . . . I'm white, for all intents and purposes. I tan to a deep eggshell color and my melanin meter is on E. But I also have enough loyal black and Latina girlfriends to retain a storehouse of their painful experiences. They've all endured rejection by men of color who expected them to be my antithesis: ethnic girls who look white. A bigger body is still cool, for the most part—but longer hair, lighter skin, and green or hazel eyes receive preference.

Possessing all those traits myself, I get a spontaneous surge of sisterly guilt with each new nonwhite boyfriend. Is it a case of take-the-best-and-leave-the-rest, ethnic in body and white by trait? Does this guy have an "issue" with the women of his culture that he's acting out on me? I've gotten pretty good at filtering out those fools. I once declared a short-lived ban on guys who hadn't dated "their own" women. Hypocrisy registered swiftly and I lifted the embargo, since my own scorecard was mostly devoid of Jews.

But in many ways, my guilt about hurting women of color by dating interracially is there because I owe black women my life. They gave me a vocabulary that allowed me to rise above an all-consuming body hatred replete with obsessive exercise, calorie-cutting, and self-loathing. My black girlfriends called my thickness "healthy" and modeled their own girth with a confidence that shattered everything I'd been taught to believe. Thanks to their influence, I fell into step and gradually came to embrace myself the way I was built. So my house was made of bricks, not twigs? Solid, man.

But home is where it all begins. I was raised by amazing, capable Jewish women who consider body fat the complete *antithesis* of healthy—a no-brainer reason to skip dessert and denounce their bodies publicly. On a recent trip home to Detroit, I found myself shouting at a family Shabbat dinner: *Can we have one fucking meal where we don't talk about dieting?*

It was almost comical: My aunt was suggesting that my 22-year-old sister try some aging celebrity's diet program. My mom was slicing herself a wafer-thin serving of apple pie, muttering that she'd have to jog an extra mile tomorrow, and handing everyone else gargantuan, ice cream-covered slabs. My uncle was protesting the size of his portion, making arrangements to join my mother's morning jog, and reminding his delightfully chubby 8-year-old daughter that she should only eat half of her pie because she didn't want to be fat like her auntie Rozzie. My Israeli father, never known for his tact, added, "Quiet you with this nonsense. You will all cry that you are fat and then you will eat all the day. Just eat the pie, then go be fatsos on a diet tomorrow."

Needless to say, I lost my appetite.

All this posterior postulation leads to a bigger, blunter question: Are Jews white? On one level, the answer is *duh*, of course not; we exist in many colors and nationalities. My own father is regularly mistaken for Mexican in our provincial hometown. But as American racial politics define whiteness, we are peeps of the paler persuasion.

And, dare I say it, the average American Jew is more than okay with that. Caught like "Moishe in the Middle" between the extreme stereotypes of "black" and "white," which side do Jewish folks choose? Let's see, there are the darker people on the six o'clock news getting clubbed by police officers (hello, pogroms) and forced to live in impoverished ghettos (hello, Eastern Europe). Then there are the even-toothed WASPs livin' large on yachts, decked in nautical gear the price of a small apartment (hello, assimilation; good-bye persecution, McCarthyism, immigrant poverty, Holocaust). Who wouldn't want to change his name to Blair and move to Connecticut?

I'm being outrageous here. But I believe Jews with white skin have found a buffer zone in assimilation and the somewhat naive belief that we are average Americans, really no different from our German or Irish neighbors. In many cases, there is great truth to this. Other times, Jews mythologize white America, acting out a cartoonish imitation. A Jewish couple invented the Barbie doll—the ultimate icon of Aryanism—in 1959. Even my own father, despite his Sephardic heritage, dark skin, and strong accent, believes himself to be a white man.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

I'm not trying to form conspiracy theories against my own people. I just believe we suffer when we deny our unique connections to people of color. American Jews have been part of many multiracial coalitions and movements, from civil rights to hip-hop. Some of us are either mistaken for—or (gasp) literally are—black, biracial, Latino, Mizrahi, Middle Eastern, African, and so on. Jews can and do swing both ways. But that seems to be a well-kept secret, perhaps out of fear that once Jews are “racialized” it will spawn another Nazi-style conspiracy that will lead to our demise.

Heaven help us if we admit in public that, you know, a lot of Jews do have kinky hair, or full lips, or prominent noses, or big butts. And slap on a gag order if we dare say that these traits triggered our “Jewdar” (my Semitic equivalent of gaydar) and allowed us to identify someone as a fellow Jew. “Oh come on, Ophi,” I’ve been chastised wearily. “Not *all* Jews have those features.” No kidding, I say, pointing out my own stick-straight hair. But not all black people can be identified on sight as black, either. Isn’t it human nature to seek out reflections of yourself in others, or connections between your group and another?

Well, maybe not. But I imagine that Jews might have a lot less body neurosis and a lot more fun if we took a page from some of our darker brethren and widened the scope of body types we consider beautiful. My God, we might even let ourselves eat the vast amounts of food we prepare. I mean, how many holidays are in a Jewish year, each one requiring an elaborate meal? Likewise, we could teach the rest of the world to make really good matzoh ball soup. It would be a cultural exchange of sorts, our way of saying thank you.

Seems fair enough to me. Perhaps my fellow Jews are, um, a little behind the curve. I guess I’ll just have to sit on this one until they come around.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

My Body Sucks

Alexis

Why do women hate their bodies? Why does Vanity Fair tell me, "be happy with who you are" while Cosmo says "Change yourself to be what he wants"? It is not acceptable that girls go from being strong tree climbers and football players, to worrying about how their hair looks and whether or not their lipstick is smudged.

I am no more immune from this sort of media saturation than any other woman. I like my eyebrows, they arc nicely, and I don't have to pluck them. That's about it. There are lot's of things about my body that I have no control over, but I hate.

I had no control over the scars on my legs from the eczema I used to have, and yet I'm ashamed of my legs. My strong, purposeful legs that have never betrayed me, They keep me balanced. They let me ski and swim and do all the things I love. But I hate them. I hate that they don't climb to my neck while being stick thin.

I remember watching "The World Is Not Enough" and being disgusted by the fact that Bond Girl, Denise Richards, played a nuclear physicist. It wasn't the fact that they gave her a respectable job, it's that she still followed James Bond around like some sort of frightened animal. "What should we do James?" You're the nuclear physicist honey, you figure it out! It was like her cup size was too high for her to have a brain.

My genes determined that I will live my life with small breasts. I can't control my genes, or my breasts, but I'm ashamed of them. I remember when my mom bought both of us some padded push-up bras.

"Alexis you're 36A like me nght?" My mom walked in the door, Victoria's Secret bags in hand.

"Yeah, why?" I sat on the couch glancing through a Seventeen magazine like any normal eighth grade girl.

"I got us miracle bras," my mom tossed me the heavily padded white bra, "that one's for you, it'll make us look bigger, curse those Saety genes!" My mom walked past me and into the kitchen rather happy with herself, and I was pretty happy too!

That's when I started wearing Miracle Bras. I stopped a year ago, mostly just because they're expensive. My breasts are small, and I hate them. I hate that I don't look like a Bond Girl, or some other media created image of beauty

Cosmopolitan's February issue of 1999 included, not twenty pages away from each other, "Fun-fearless-females!" which featured women fighting for whatever cause they saw fit, women like Waris Dine against Female Genital Mutilation and Rosie O'Donnell for gun regulation. A very noble and well written spread it was. A few pages later they have "How to be hip this spring" brimming with useful tips on how to be the life of the party in the upcoming season, from what skimpy clothes to wear to what words to say. So apparently it's okay to be fearless, as long as you wear the right clothes.

Everyday I see women who lay themselves in front of men, who worry about their hair, their make-up, their clothes. I think to myself how pitiful, why can't we just be happy with our natural womanhood? What's wrong with the way we were born? Then I think about my legs, and how they don't look like a model's legs. Then I think about my breasts, and how they don't look like a movie star's breasts. I wonder how, if I know that all of this stuff is unimportant, it can still be so important to me.

Then I remember that none of us are immune to that media beast that tells women and girls we will never look like a woman until we completely change ourselves and our, most definitely, feminine features. I will not give up without a fight. I will tear down the machine that's killing us softly. Every woman in the world needs to stand up and say STOP! Stop poisoning our minds and bodies with this idealized garbage!

"My Body Sucks" by Alexis Young is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Class Anthology 2000* (Portland: Franklin High School, 2000)

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

my jewish nose my jewish nose lisa jervis

I'm a Jew. I'm not even slightly religious. Aside from attending friends' *bat mitzvahs*, I've been to temple maybe twice. I don't know Hebrew; when given the option of religious education, my junior-high self easily chose to sleep in on Sunday mornings. My family skips around the Passover Haggadah to get to the food faster. Before having dated someone from an observant family, I wouldn't have known a *mezuzah* if it bit me on the butt. I was born assimilated.

But still, I'm a Jew—even though my Jewish identity has very little to do with religion, organized or otherwise. I'm an ethnic Jew of a very specific variety: a godless, New York City-raised, neurotic middle-class girl from a solidly liberal Democrat family, who attended largely Jewish, "progressive" schools that thought they were integrated and nonracist. Growing up, almost everyone around me was Jewish; I was stunned when I found out that Jews make up only two percent of the American population. But what being Jewish meant to

me was that on Christmas day my family went out for Chinese food (some years, Indian) and took in the new Woody Allen movie. It also meant that I had a big honkin' nose.

And I still do. By virtue of my class and its sociopolitical trappings, the option of having my nose surgically altered was ever-present. From adolescence on, I've had a standing offer from my mother to get a nose job.

"It's not such a big deal." "Doctors do such individual-looking noses these days, it'll look really natural." "It's not too late, you know," she would say to me for years after I flat-out refused to let someone break my nose, scrape part of it out and reposition it into a smaller, less obtrusive shape. "I'll still pay." As if money were the reason I was resisting.

My mother thought a nose job was a good idea. See, she hadn't wanted one either. But when she was sixteen, her parents demanded that she get that honker "fixed," and they didn't take no for an answer. She insists that she's been glad ever since, although she usually rationalizes that it was good for her social life. (She even briefly dated a guy she met in the surgeon's waiting room: a boxer having his deviated septum corrected.)

Even my father is a believer. He says that without my mother's nose job, my sister and I wouldn't exist, because he never would have gone out with Mom. But I take this with an entire salt lick. My father's a guy who thinks that dressing up means wearing dark sneakers; that pants should be purchased every twenty years, and only if the old ones are literally falling apart at the seams; and that haircuts should cost ten dollars and take as many minutes. The only thing he notices about appearances is to say, "You have some crud . . ." as he picks a piece of lint off your sleeve. But he cared about the nose? Whatever.

Even though my mother was happy with her tidy little surgically altered nose, she wasn't going to put me through the same thing, and

"My Jewish Nose" by Lisa Jervis is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Adios Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity* (Avalon Publishing Group, 1998)

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

for that I am truly grateful. I'm also unspeakably glad that her comments stayed far from the "you'd just be so pretty if you did" angle. ("Yours isn't as big as mine was," she would say. "You don't *need* it.") I know a few people who weren't so lucky. Not that they were dragged kicking and screaming to the doctor's office; no, they were coerced and shamed into it. Seems it was their family's decision more than their own—usually older Jewish female relatives: mothers, grandmothers, aunts.

What's the motivation for that kind of pressure? Can it be that for all the strides made against racism and anti-Semitism, Americans still want to expunge their ethnicity from their looks as much as possible? Were these mothers and grandmothers trying to fit their offspring into a more white, gentile mode? Possibly. Well, definitely. But on purpose? Probably not. Their lust for the button nose is probably more a desire for a typical, "pretty" femininity than for any specific de-ethnicizing. But given the society in which we live, the proximity of white features to the ideal of beauty is no coincidence. I think that anyone who opts for a nose job today (or who pressured her daughter to do so) would say that the reason is to look "better" or "prettier." But when we scratch the surface of what "prettier" means, we find that we might as well be saying "whiter" or "more gentile" (I would add "bland," but that's my personal opinion).

Or perhaps the reason is to become unobtrusive. The stereotypical Jewish woman is loud, pushy—qualities that girls really aren't supposed to have. So is it possible that the nose job is supposed to usher in not only physical femininity but a psychological, traditional femininity as well? Ditch the physical and emotional ties to your ethnicity in one simple procedure: Bob your nose, and become feminine in both mind and body. (This certainly seems to be the way it has worked with someone like Courtney Love, although her issue is class more than ethnicity. But it's undeniable that her new nose comes

on a Versace-shilling, largely silent persona, in stark contrast to her old messy, outspoken self.)

Thankfully, none of the women I know have become meek and submissive from their nose jobs. But *damn*, do they have regrets. One told me it was the biggest mistake of her life; another confessed to wanting her old nose back just a few short years after the surgery. They wish they'd stood up to their families and kept their natural features.

Even though I know plenty of women with their genetically determined schnozzes still intact, women who either refused or never considered surgery, sometimes I still feel like an oddity. From what my mother tells me, nose jobs were as compulsory a rite of passage for her peers as multiple ear-piercings are for mine. Once, when I was still in high school, I went with my mother to a Planned Parenthood fundraiser. It was a cocktail party-type thing in some lovely apartment, with lovely food and drink and a lovely short speech by Wendy Wasserstein. But I was confused: We were at a lefty charity event in Manhattan, and all the women in attendance had little WASP noses. (Most of them were blond, too, but that didn't really register. I guess hair dye is a more universal ritual.)

"Why are there no Jewish women here?" I whispered to my mother. She laughed, but I think she was genuinely shocked. "What do you mean? All of these women are Jewish." And then it hit me: We were wall-to-wall rhinoplasties. And worse, there was no reason to be surprised. These were women my mother's age or older who came of age in the late '50s or before, when anti-Semitism in this country was much more overt than it is today. That kind of surface assimilation was practically the norm for Jews back then, and those honkers were way too, ahem, big a liability on the dating and social scenes. Nose jobs have declined since then. They're no longer in the top five plastic surgery procedures performed, edged out by liposuction and

my jewish nose

lisa jervis 6.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

laser skin resurfacing. (I guess now it's more important to be young and trim than gentile, what with societal forces of youth-and-beauty worship replacing post-World War II fear and hatred . . .)

I don't think it's a coincidence that I didn't consider my nose an ethnic feature growing up in New York. I didn't have to, because almost everyone around me had that feature (and that ethnicity) too. It wasn't until I graduated from college and moved to California that I realized how marked I was by my nose and my vaguely ethnic, certainly Jewish appearance. I also then realized how much I liked being marked that way, being instantly recognizable to anyone who knew how to look. I once met another Jewish woman at a conference in California. In the middle of our conversation, she randomly popped out with, "You're Jewish, right?" I replied, "With this nose and this hair, you gotta ask?" We both laughed. I was right: The question was just a formality, and we both knew it.

Living in California, I'm particularly in need of those little moments of recognition. I know that a Jew living in, say, Tennessee might laugh at me for saying this, but there are no Jews in California. I feel conspicuously Semitic here in a way that I never did anywhere else (not even at my small Ohio liberal arts college - after all, that place was filled with New York Jews). Few of my friends are Jewish, and those random "bagel and lox" references just don't get understood the way I'm used to.

Only once did I feel uneasy about being "identified." At my first job out of college, my boss asked, after I mentioned an upcoming trip to see my family in New York, "So, are your parents just like people in Woody Allen movies?" I wondered if I had a big sign on my forehead reading, "Big Yid Here." His comment brought up all those insecurities American Jews can have about our ethnicity that,

not coincidentally, Woody Allen loves to play on - and overemphasize for comic effect. Am I *that* Jewish? Is it *that* obvious? I felt conspicuous, exposed. But regardless of that incident, I'm glad I have the sign on my face, even if it's located a tad lower than my forehead.

See, I don't have a whole lot of Jewish heritage to hold on to. My family's name was changed - it's not as if "Jervis" is particularly gentile, but it sure is a lot less obvious than "Jersowitz," which my grandfather jettisoned before my father can remember. Temple was never a part of my life - I'm an atheist. I don't know what Purim is about. Hell, it takes me a minute to remember how many candles go in the menorah - and last week I used mine for a candlelight dinner with my husband-to-be, a half-Christian, half-Buddhist Japanese American whose thoughts on God's existence are along the lines of "I don't know, and I don't really care."

But in a larger sense, Judaism is the only identity in which culture and religion are supposedly bound closely: If you're Irish and aren't a practicing Catholic, you can still be fully Irish; being Buddhist doesn't specify a race or an ethnic identity. African Americans can practice any religion, and it doesn't make them any less black. But "Jewish" is a funny ethnicity. Is it a race; is it a set of beliefs? Color doesn't have much to do with it. In fact, the question of whether or not Jews are white can be answered in as many different ways as there are people who have an opinion on the topic.

To me, being a Jew is cultural. But for me it's a culture tied only marginally - even hypothetically - to religion, and mostly to geography (New York Jews are different from California Jews, lemme tell ya) and sensibility/temperament (hyperintellectual, food-lovin', neurotic, worrywartish, perfectionistic). So the question for me is: What happens when Jewish identity becomes untied from religion? I don't know for sure. And that means I'll grab onto anything I need to keep that identity - including my nose.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

THE WONDERFUL TAR BABY STORY

“Didn't the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?” asked the little boy the next evening.

“He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho's you born--Brer Fox did. One day atter Brer Rabbit fool 'im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got 'im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w'at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot 'er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn't hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin' down de road--lippity-clippity, clippity -lippity--dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin' 'long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz 'stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Mawnin'!' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - `nice wedder dis mawnin',' sezee.

“‘Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox he lay low.

“‘How duz yo' sym'tums seem ter segashuate?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee.

“‘Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'.

“‘How you come on, den? Is you deaf?' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,' sezee.

“‘Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘You er stuck up, dat's w'at you is,' says Brer Rabbit, sezee, 'en I'm gwine ter kyore you, dat's w'at I'm a gwine ter do,' sezee.

“‘Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain't sayin' nothin'.

“‘I'm gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter 'spectubble folks ef hit's de las' ack,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. 'Ef you don't take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I'm gwine ter bus' you wide open,' sezee.

“‘Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Brer Rabbit keep on axin' 'im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin' nothin', twel present'y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis', he did, en blip he tuck 'er side er de head. Right dar's whar he broke his merlasses jug. His fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low.

“‘Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,' sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds.

“‘Howdy, Brer Rabbit,' sez Brer Fox, sezee. `You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin',' sezee, en den he rolled on de groun', en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. `I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse,' sez Brer Fox, sezee.”

Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes.

“Did the fox eat the rabbit?” asked the little boy to whom the story had been told.

“Dat's all de fur de tale goes,” replied the old man. “He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin'. You better run 'long.”

“The Wonderful Tar Baby Story” by Joel Chandler Harris is reprinted with permission from the University of Virginia.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

Tar Baby

By Khalilah Joseph

During the Atlantic slave trade, Africans on plantations across the South were treated like animals. They were thought to be less than human, but even within this undignified category, they were further classified by color. It started that far back: When all blacks were nothing, still color was an issue. The lighter you were, the closer to the house you toiled. In those days, there was no beauty in color, and if you had some, you were destined to be working way out in the field. Even today, I see the remnants of the Field nigga. House nigga syndrome.

It happens in a continuous motion through music videos, movies, magazines and daily life. I can watch a video by a given artist and before the end of it, the object of desire will prance across the screen, and, of course, she'll be a honey dipped, barely-brown bombshell.

In the movie *Waiting to Exhale*, a film targeted at African American women, the lightest woman in the movie was the male magnet. And the dark skin sister? It took her the whole movie just to get a date. Women of color are greatly downsized in the movie. Angela Basset could be a battered wife, but could she be a *Pretty Woman* or be the object of an *Indecent Proposal*?

In most magazines you pick up, you can find at least one African American woman, but usually she is a little light-eyed biracial girl who does little to represent women of color. Be gone with those tiny waisted, no-hip-having helpers. Bring on the models who range in color from caramel to dark chocolate. Then give them features-familiar to Negro women. -I'm talking about big booties, child bearing hips, thunder thighs.

As a dark skinned girl, I was ridiculed. I can remember a time when one of my elementary school classes had a career fair. Like many other girls my age, I wanted to be an actress or a model. My classmates made it painfully clear that dark skinned girls are not considered pretty. They couldn't imagine why I would think that I could become a model. They suggested that I be a nurse or a teacher.

I was called names like "tarbaby" or "blackie". As a young girl I couldn't understand why some people of my own race would tease me about something I could not change.

As women of color we have made progress: We are teachers, lawyers, doctors. We are elected to office. Who knows, maybe one day, we dark skinned women will be video hoochies, too.

"Tar Baby" by Joseph Khalilah is reprinted with permission from the publisher of *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word* (Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 2000)

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

A Woman's Silent Journey

Am I fat? Look at my thighs.
Oh God, they're huge, and my hips.
Who's going to like me with this
body? "Someday my prince will
come," Cinderella hums in my ear.
No prince will claim me as his bride.
I'm too ugly.

Stepping on that scale in the
second grade was the beginning of
the end for me. Weighing in at 67
pounds was horrifying. As Tinkerbell
looked into a hand mirror and
realized her hips were too big in
Peter Pan, I realized I was fat,
enormous, and disgusting. At least
that was the image Tinkerbell helped
me paint for myself.

Four years later, I actually
was overweight, and without an
ounce of self-esteem. I was
Seventeen magazine's nightmare
and Disney's newest side-kick.
Finally, after years of waiting, my
belief that I was fat was validated by
jokes and bullying by peers. I silently
dreamed about being the skinny,
blonde girl in cartoons or the
curvaceous model gracing
magazine covers.

A year later I was average in
size, but I still held the self-conscious
behaviors that were initiated in my
seventh year. At this time I began
my dieting lifestyle. The desire to be
thin overtook my body. I kept my
stomach in posture at all times, while
I powdered my nose and applied
lipstick. Instead of concentrating on
having fun, my middle school and
high school years were spent trying
to achieve a perfect face and body.

The summer before my senior
year, I discovered a diet that
worked. It is called decreasing your
food intake to what you need to
survive and nothing more. In three
months I went from 130 pounds to
103 pounds. People began
commenting on how skinny I looked,
and that I resembled a walking
skeleton. The problem was, that I still
looked 130 pounds to myself.

Soon I couldn't control my
weight loss. I would wake up in the
morning and weigh two pounds less
than I had the day before. My hair
became dry, my hands cracked and
bled, and I lost my period for four
months. I came to realize that
something was wrong and began
forcing myself to eat nourishing food.

Workshop Session 7 Readings, cont'd.

I am recovering now, but why is this behavior normal in our society? Why are millions of women starving themselves to death? Has society made being thin this important? So important that women will die for the skinniest body? Why can't we be content with how we look?

The U.S. has an 80 billion dollar diet industry. Companies are profiting off of our feelings of inadequacy. From birth Disney taunts us with fairy tale princesses who would die of anorexia if they existed. They win their men by fluttering eyelashes and innocent giggles (e.g., Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella). The only prerequisite for princesses is beauty. And thus it is the only prerequisite for happiness.

By age eight, Mattel's Barbie takes over where Disney left off. This 42-24-32 woman would fall over if she was an actual person, but girls worship her body and dream about looking like her all the same. How can we let this happen? Eighty percent of all fourth-grade girls are on diets according to a current poll. Why are ten-year-olds thinking about their weight, much less

concerned about it? Could Barbie have something to do with this?

When Barbie gets old Teen magazine places itself in adolescent girls' hands. Tall, thin women cover the pages and tempt girls with products to soothe their every need. What? Jimmy doesn't like you? Well, maybe it's because of that zit or those ten extra pounds, or your dull hair. The list goes on and on. We, as women, are never good enough. Not good enough for men and not good enough for each other. We compare ourselves inwardly, while swearing our hips and thighs are the biggest to have ever walked the earth.

We need to change the way people think about women. We don't need to be sex objects who live to please men. Times have changed and are continually changing. We must no longer be dominated by male fantasies of what a woman should be, because we are all intelligent, wonderful people who have a lot more to offer than a slim body and a pretty face.

Erika Miller

Workshop Session 7 Reading List

Works marked with * are required texts for this workshop that do not appear within the Readings in this guide. Other works are the sources for excerpted materials in the Readings or are recommended for additional study.

* Butler, Octavia E. *Parable of the Sower*. New York: Warner Books, 2000. ISBN 0446675504

Chung, Olivia. "Finding My Eye-dentity," from Nam, Vickie (ed). *Yell-Oh Girls!* New York: HarperCollins/Quill Press, 2001. ISBN 0060959444

Edut, Ophira. "Bubbe Got Back: Ethnic Identity and Body Image Through the Rearview Mirror." *Utne* magazine, November/December 2000. Available online from http://www.utne.com/pub/2000_102/features/1527-1.html. ISSN 8750-0256

Harris, Joel Chandler (as retold by). *The Story of Brer Rabbit and the Wonderful Tar Baby*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990. ISBN 0887082505 (bk. & cass.) <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/remus/tar-baby.html>

Jervis, Lisa. "My Jewish Nose," from Edut, Ophira (ed). *Adios Barbie: Young Women Write About Body Image and Identity*. New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 1998. ISBN 1580050166

Khalilah, Joseph. "Tar Baby," from Christensen, Linda (ed). *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 2000. ISBN 0942961250

* McCunn, Ruthanne Lum. *Thousand Pieces of Gold: A Biographical Novel*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1988. ISBN 0807083178 (pbk.)

Miller, Erika. "A Woman's Silent Journey," from Christensen, Linda (ed). *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up: Teaching About Social Justice and the Power of the Written Word*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, 2000. ISBN 0942961250

Notes
