

Masani Alexis De Veaux

I was born one of eight children on September 24, 1948, and raised in Harlem, New York City. My mother was on welfare at the time and my father was in prison in upstate New York for the better part of my early childhood. I attended elementary and junior high schools in Harlem. Later, when we moved to the South Bronx, I attended and graduated from Walton High School which was located in a White working-class community in the North Bronx. Although my paternal grandmother was licensed as a teacher in North Carolina, when she migrated north in the 1930s, the only job she could secure was one as a maid. My maternal grandfather worked for the New York City Transit Authority laying tiles. This photograph was taken of me in an



apartment in the East Village, New York City, circa 1969. I was twenty-one years old then and just beginning to imagine myself as a writer (at the time of this photograph, I was only writing poetry). Shortly after this photo was taken, I started work on my first book, *Spirits in the Street* (Doubleday, 1973).

Masani Alexis De Veaux is a poet, essayist, playwright, and political activist whose work is nationally and internationally known. In addition to the experimental novel *Spirits in the Street*, her works include two award winning children's books, *Na-Ni* (Harper and Row, 1973), *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (Harper and Row, 1987), and *Don't Explain*, a biography of jazz great Billie Holiday. Her plays have been produced on television, Off Broadway, Off-Off Broadway, in regional theaters and include: *Circles* (1972); *The Tapestry* (1976); *A Season to Unravel* (1979); the highly acclaimed *No* (1981); and *Elbow Rooms* (1987).

She worked as a writer, contributing editor, and editor-at-large with *Essence* magazine for twelve years. In this capacity, she examined a global spectrum of social and political issues important to African-American Women, Third-World Women, and Women of Color. As an activist, she has traveled extensively in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe, Japan, and throughout the United States, working with various Third World Women's and Women of Color organizations, and is an active sponsor of MADRE, an international organization based in New York City, and a Board member of the St. Croix-based SISA: Sisterhood in Support of Sisters in South Africa. Presently, she is an assistant professor of Women's Studies and a faculty member of the American Studies Department in the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Indigenous Voice

Even *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* will tell you that language be more than spoken words which can only be symbols that form, express, and communicate thoughts and feelings. In the dictionary's definition language be "any method of communicating ideas, as by a system of signs, symbols, gestures or the like." Question: how come all the dictionary "examples" of language refer to White/western cultural concepts? As in: "the English language," "the language of algebra," "Shakespeare," "Miltonic language," and "bad language." Answer: the dictionary was written by White people talking Standard White English. So language is really who's talking. And who's talking to who. Where they come from. What color they be. What education they got. Whether they be female or male. What they think about the world inside and outside of them. What they history is. Language be the gravel on the forked road that divides how I speak from how my fourth grade school teacher speaks: *The Teacher assigns a list of vocabulary words to use in sentences, for homework. The next day, she calls on me to use the word "galore" in a sentence. She re-explains to the class that the definition of the word means "too much or in abundance." I proudly stand and read from my homework a sentence I have heard my mother often say: "Yall got garbagè de lore all round this house." My White, female Teacher informs me that there is no such word as "de lore." I am embarrassed and confused. It is a word I have heard my mother use so many times so many ways. I sit down at my desk feeling like a fool. I am an excellent student who prides herself on using words. On knowing how to spell and read and write. And I have a bunch of commendations and gold stars to prove it. When I go home, I tell my mother what The Teacher say. My mother is visibly angry. She bangs the food she is cooking into the pots on the stove. She is tired of hearing what The Teacher say to me. And she is tired of me repeating that shit. "Your teacha don't know nothin' bout what I know so she can't tell me how to talk you hear what I say?" she says. I am nine years old when I realize that the language I speak at home is different from the language I am taught in school. And that the disdain on my teacher's face for the way my mother speaks, the*

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Black Female Language she teaches me, tells me that this language is considered "ignorant," "slang," and "inferior." As such, it is to be outbred-cauterized from my consciousness—if I expect to "make it" in White (meaning educated and cultured) society. If I expect to be successful by White middle-class standards of speaking. Whether the person I am speaking to—and being judged by—is White or Black, female or male.

The denigration of my mother's English—and by extension, Black language—as ignorant and inferior, is at the core of the cultural racism, and generations of language oppression abusively heaped upon us as speakers.

The language my mother taught me traces the cartography of our mutual, though differently experienced, racial, sexual, and class realities as African American women. It charts our speech and silence, through a landscape hostile to our self-defined survival. The class and culturally-specific ways we speak to and about each other record the lessons and strategies of our shared knowledge of what we know we know. When my mother told me "you was born with three strikes against you," she was telling me what life had taught her: Black women in our class were struck out of the game at the moment our lives began.

When I speak the language my mother spoke to me, I speak the history upon which I walk verbally, and write by hand. I remember: *As children, whenever we back talked to my mother or expressed any independent thinking, as in "I thought it was okay to do what I wanted, stead of what you told me to do," my mother always responded, "You thought like Nellie thought." Which, more often than not, was followed by the punishment of a beating designed to beat that trait out of you. I never knew who this Nellie was. And for years, for years, I wondered what was Nellie's relationship to my mother? How come she was always calling on this Nellie I never saw, to put us in our place? And then one day, while reading Angela Davis's book, Women, Race, and Class, I discovered Nellie. An enslaved young woman who was viciously whipped by an overseer. Her crime? Talking back and thinking for herself.*

Thinking like Nellie, meaning thinking for yourself and speaking up to "authority," was a punishable offense. And speaking your own words, defining who you are or will be, is unacceptable behavior for Black women. So learn to live by that rule, daughter, my mother tried to instill in me. Learn it from her, for my own sake, or from "them" later. Learn what you need to survive.

But to survive, Black and female and a writer, in this class-privileged society, I needed to resist. Loudly. Ground my words as a poet and writer in a tongue rooted in my mother's, but defined by own growing up in Harlem, in the fifties and sixties. One of eight children. Raised by a woman who once did "piecework" in a dress factory downtown. My grandmother, a licensed teacher but confined to earning her living as a maid. My grandfather, aunt, and uncles, working at non-professional jobs. Working all the time, just to survive.

I turned to the voices of other Black women writers. Finding community in their works, I was affirmed in my belief that I needed a language defined by my own standards. My own history. One which I must be prepared, once I spoke it or wrote it, to take the consequences of: Early in 1980, I was approached by Glenda Dickerson, a Black woman well known as a director in New York City's Black theater community. Glenda wanted to direct and stage a play based on my poems and stories. After several meetings hashing over which poems and which stories and editing the script, we still lacked a title for the piece. In the middle of one meeting, Glenda asked me to meditate on my childhood with my mother. "Try to remember," she said, "anything that stands out in your mind." I told Glenda the story of me and the broom. *One day when I was a little girl, maybe six or seven years old, my mother instructed me to get the broom and sweep the floor. Since I didn't want to because I was busy playing, imagining myself somewhere else other than the one room six of us lived in at the time, I told my mother, "No." Of course I got a beating for that, but now that I look back on it, it was the first time I publicly resisted the circumvention of my imagination and creativity, by what was expected of me as a girl.*

So *NO* became the title of the play that became a word-of-mouth success. Largely attended by a mixture of lesbian and heterosexual women of color from varying class backgrounds, it was originally scheduled for a two-weekend run the following year. It played for eleven straight weeks to sell-out audiences at the Henry Street Settlement House's New Federal Theater, on the Lower East Side. The New Federal Theater had a history of showcasing plays about the lives of working-class Black people.

Ironically, the words that created the play's uniqueness—the autobiographical words of the young girl sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend; the mother-daughter dialogue that pits a mother's middle-class aspirations against her daughter's working-class rooted analysis; the poems

and stories of Black women balancing life in a heterosexist Black community, and a racist and sexist White world—were the very words some of the play's critics wanted to silence, their reviews a sad reminder of my mother's warnings.

But speaking up for myself, speaking my own language as I do, defixing my sentences in the grammars of being Black and female, is rooted in the language I grew up listening to; and in the working-class environment I come from. So living in Harlem shaped my tongue. It shaped the sound of language re-created daily. In conversations at home. On the street. Out of the mouths of leaders. Shaped the language I speak as a woman. Shaped my days as a writer-turned-graduate student at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

Harlem shaped me for the stance I took while earning my master's degree; and when researching and writing my dissertation. For I wanted it written in my own voice. Not in the "scholar-ese" of a White, male-dominated, academic, abstract language. Devoid of my class, racial, sexual realities. I wanted it written in the multiple languages I have learned to speak. Reflective of, and incorporating, my mother's tongue. Wanted it written within the frames of my own intelligence, creativity, and aesthetic. My own history. Wanted to celebrate and validate language spoken by women in my family—in an arena where the existence of our language has been systematically denigrated and denied.

I wanted to; and I did. When my proposal to meet a departmental language requirement by writing a critical essay exploring Black women's language forms was questioned, I argued that the study of Black language was as legitimate as the study of any other language; and worthy of serious academic pursuit. When members of my dissertation committee suggested good ideas housed in language that imposed their syntax over my indigenous own, I took in the best of their ideas. Threw away their dry husks of class-privileged language. Held fast to my right to speak as a scholar, in the syntax of my own tongue. Refused to deny the language of, and connections to, my community.

I have my Ph.D. now. And I am proud of that accomplishment. Proud that I have been honored with time to think critically; to reflect upon my history and the history of Black women. Upon the indigenous voice I speak, teach, and create with. And although I can speak "scholar-ese" when it suits me, I speak like a Black woman all the time.

Adventures of the Dread Sisters

We crossing The Brooklyn Bridge. Traffic is slow going. Bumper to bumper. And cars everywhere. Taxis blowing horns. It's Saturday morning. Everybody making it to Manhattan. Us too. We got to get there soon. Before the snow. Threatening to cover the city. Any minute now. We going to the RALLY AGAINST GOVERNMENT TRUCKS HAULING NUCLEAR WASTE THROUGH HARLEM. Every day for a week they been saying on the radio

don't worry folks
don't worry
don't worry it's safe

I might be only 15 but even I know ain't nothing safe. Not on no city street. Anything could happen. So I don't believe nothing the government says. Personally, I'm through with the government. Too many people ain't got jobs. And whole families be living in the streets. I'm for get rid of the government, give life back to the people.

We stuck on this bridge. We got 25 minutes to get uptown.

Is that soot or snow I see
falling up ahead

Hope it ain't snow
The windshield wipers don't work
too tough
Nigeria says

Nigeria and me we call ourselves The Dread Sisters. We're not real sisters. She's not my real mother neither. But she raised me. So we are definite family. We even look alike. Both of us short and got big eyes. Both of us got dreadlocks. Just like the Africans in the pictures in Nigeria's books.

We got twenty minutes before the rally start. We slow dragging our wheels over the bridge's skin. Our blue Pinto crammed between two screaming-

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yellow taxis. The East River below us. The gray sky above. Manhattan coming slowly nearer. I stare at Nigeria out the corner of my eye. She sucking her teeth. Mashing on the brakes. She hate to be late. She catch me staring. Winks. Locks her eyes back on the road.

My sister Toni and me been living with Nigeria ever since we was little. She adopted us. Then moved us to a house on Adelphi Street. Got a backyard and a attic. Got my own room and so do Toni. Got a home. Nigeria be like our mother and father. And for my money, I wouldn't have it no other way. But Toni ain't like me and Nigeria. Toni be liking boys. She don't like books. She like to straighten her hair cause she in high school. Toni be the last person to get up before noon on a Saturday. Don't care whether it's a life and death thing like a rally or not. The whole planet could blow up i wouldn't wake Toni up.

Nigeria
What
I don't want to die in no nuclear war
Ain't gonna be no nuclear war pumpkin

she says in her Colored and Progressive Peoples' Campaign office-voice

God won't allow it
People who make bombs
don't believe in God

I fires back at her. And she don't say nothing but roll down her window. December hit us slap in the face.

Nigeria got a profile like a African sculpture. She be looking carved outta black wood. Her lips be chiseled. And she got a mole above her right cheek. Like somebody dotted her eyebrow. Ain't nothing moving on this bridge.

It's what you believe that counts

she finally says

never play the game by the enemy's
rules fight back
Whether it's bullets or bombs
do the unexpected