

## Interview with Professor Alexis De Veaux

By Kamaria Busby

Alexis De Veaux is a black feminist writer, as well as an associate professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Global Gender Studies department at University at Buffalo. She obtained her Ph.D. in American Studies from UB in 1992, with a focus in Women's Studies. Prior to joining academia De Veaux was a freelance writer, and her venture into academia did not supplant her identity as a writer. De Veaux states, "I never stopped writing. Being a writer is my primary identification. I don't identify as an academic. I am a writer working in the academy." De Veaux has published a vast body of work that spreads across a range of literary forms. De Veaux's numerous works include: "Circles" (1972), a play which was subsequently produced by a Los Angeles TV station in 1976; *Don't Explain: A Song of Billie Holiday* (1980), a biography of the singer written in prose; *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (1987), a children's book for which she won the American Library Association Coretta Scott King Award and the Lorraine Hansberry Award for Excellence in Children's Literature; "Sister Love" an essay which appears in *Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing* (1995); and her most recent book, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (2004), to which De Veaux devoted 10 years of research and writing.

De Veaux was born in 1948 in Harlem, NY, a time and place which greatly shaped her sense of self. It was in Harlem that she began writing, taking part in workshops at the Frederick Douglass Creative Arts Center. She was significantly influenced by all that was happening in Harlem during her time living there and in an indirect way it impacted her future identity as a feminist. She observed, "I think Harlem had everything to do with my sense of myself and of the world. Everything was still alive in Harlem when I was a kid. I had a sense of the particular

historic realities that were shaping and that had shaped Harlem, and therefore they shaped me. Harlem was where I understood not only that the Harlem Renaissance had happened, but also where I came of age as a writer myself. Harlem was the site of my introduction to other black writers, particularly black women writers, because they walked the streets of Harlem, they were friends of friends of mine. So I grew up admiring these women who were very much alive and palpable for me, people like Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison who was an editor for a long time at Random House, and Marie Brown who was and remains a literary agent.

“In a sort of back door kind of way it did [make me a feminist], because the Black Arts Movement as I knew it to be, which was central to the Harlem cultural scene of the 1970s, particularly, was actually very much a masculinist movement, transferred from the Black Power Movement of the ‘60s, so the focus was on what *men* had to say about art, culture, etcetera; and black women were expected to be, and were, at the back of the bus as second class citizens. So, in that kind of back door way, Harlem made me a black feminist, because it invited me to consider the ways in which gender issues were being pushed to the back of the bus so that racial issues could be first. We were expected to understand that because we were black people, we had to have solidarity around race and that we could not have these conversations around gender. Harlem made me aware of my blackness, it made me aware of my femaleness, and it also made me aware of my sexuality. None of those movements—the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement—made an open space for people who would identify as anything called queer, and in many ways that is still the case today.”

De Veaux looks back on other black lesbian writers who have influenced her and countless others, and strives towards breaking the bounds of what it means to be a black lesbian writer, that is, what it is that people think that a woman who is black, lesbian, or both can write

about and in what discourses their work appears in.

“I think that my work is both a bridge to black lesbian writers who have come before me, like Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, and Ann Allen Shockley, in terms of looking back and building upon it, and also out into new venues of what it means to be black and lesbian in American society. These ways in which these identifications get defined and therefore confined I find problematic. So what I have been trying to do in my work is *push* the notion of a black lesbian aesthetic outward to not engage the world in a way that says you can only be this, because you are that—because you are black you can only be this, because you’re a lesbian you can only be that. I have therefore written children’s books, I have written plays, I have written articles, I have written biographies, I have engaged as a writer who is also a lesbian, who is black.”

At the age of about 40, De Veaux decided to return to school to earn her Ph.D. in American Studies. De Veaux stresses that she kept her identity as a writer and throughout school “continued to freelance...[and] to operate and function as writer”. She discusses her drive to show that what she brings to the academic institution as a black woman is “not confined to the space of blackness”. As a black feminist woman in academia she has experienced a range of reactions and obstacles, but it is evident that what her students gain from her teaching is of the most importance to her.

“I have intellectual children out there in the world—I have Ph.D.s, I have Masters’, I have undergraduates—who I’m very proud of and who are apparently very proud of me. So, I have experienced a range of feelings of isolation, of difference, of invisibility, of struggle, and at the same time, in spite of all of those things, I believe I have the power, because I’m still here, after twenty-odd years, I’m still here. And I teach what I know is powerful for my students, and I teach in ways that I believe are powerful for my students. I get who I am, and I believe that my

students ultimately get me.

“I hope that [students] get the enduring realities of what it means to be black and a black diasporic female. People have begun to talk about us, and have talked about us for the last two decades as marginal; when in fact, black women, people of color, black people, are *not* marginal to any discourse. Black diasporic women’s literatures is an area of expertise for me, so of course like any other professor, I am teaching out of my expertise. I’m also teaching out of my passion, because what I want my students to come away with, particularly, is a sense of the centrality of black women’s literary production, black women’s intellectual production, to larger discourses about what it means to be human, what it means to live in one’s time, what it means to be able to transgress time, what it means to be central to the project of social justice. I really want black diasporic females to come away with a sense of the significance of their lives and not simply the narrative of oppression that we have dealt with.”

De Veaux leaves us with advice for current and future feminists, whether within academia or not. “I think we have to speak our truths and we have to speak truth to power. The struggles are not over. We are not in a post-civil rights, post-racial, post-feminist, we’re not in “post-” anything. These issues have become much more complex, much more sophisticated, and they’re not over. So I think that we have to study the past clearly, to be grounded in those studies we have to know the present, and we have to be smart about how we imagine the future. And how we imagine ourselves as central to the future. So my advice to you and other young women who are coming up, who are beginning to identify as or have identified themselves as something called women of color or black or diasporic and perhaps even feminist, my advice to you is go for it, go for it, this your life, you have all the power and passion that that requires to be alive and to breathe, and why not. Go for it, anything you want, go for it.”