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Lose the Chronology, Lose the Anthology: Clearing the Way for Innovation in American Literature Survey Courses

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Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this.

from "The American Scholar," Ralph Waldo Emerson

U.S. pop culture is just like U.S. serious culture in that its central tension has always set the nobility of individualism against the warmth of communal belonging.

from "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," David Foster Wallace

I quote Emerson to gain your sympathy and respect; I am familiar with one of *the greats*. Most of us who are in the business of teaching American Literature know the call of "The American Scholar" and we hear him talking to us. But do our students "hear" the same voice? What context do we introduce Emerson in? If you were your student, in the context your anthology includes Emerson, would *you* be impressed? I quote Wallace because he, too, is a *great* American author—one not likely to be taught in a survey course. Most anthology publishers don't have the rights to his writings. Also, the survey he would fit into, *American Literature II: Reconstruction to Present* (or something similar), is a crowded field. I want to make it clear that I am not simply reiterating the multiculturalist call for a blowing up of the American Literature canon so much as a reconsideration of how we teach what we feel we *have* to teach. In his book *Professing Literature: An Institutional History*, Gerald Graff claims that we teach in a "field coverage" model that allows us autonomy from our colleagues—we assume each is "covering" what needs to be

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covered—and who on earth has had *that* awkward conversation with a colleague? "You *are* covering, Louisa May Alcott, right?"—and the trade-off is that the assumption suffices; there need be no conversation about curriculum and syllabus, book choices, theories introduced, methods used (even if only to share successes) . . . and, unsurprisingly, there usually is not. But Graff strongly opposes the "if it ain't broke" approach:

The field-coverage principle seems so innocuous as to be hardly worth looking at, and we have lived with it so long that we hardly even see it, but its consequences have been far-reaching. [...] Since the courses in periods and genres did not address one another, teachers tended not to raise the question of what connections or contrasts the different periods and genres might bear on one another, what was meant by a particular periodization or by "period" in general. (7-8)

Graff, of course, is speaking of all literature courses in the academe, but we can certainly make a direct application to how most American Literature survey courses are taught today.

Most American Literature classes I've had, from undergraduate surveys to time-period focused graduate courses, have solidified my belief that something is broken in the model of teaching American Literature. Let me be frank: most of these classes are boring. And this is coming from a guy who *loves* this stuff enough to get his doctorate in it. Most literature courses follow a rough timeline, earliest to latest works, but the scope of time to cover—sometimes *hundreds* of years in British and "world" novel, drama, and poetry classes—necessitates some summarizing, even some jumping back and forth on the timeline, and lots and lots of mostly random eliminations and inclusions. What is more, if an undergraduate is reading *Hamlet*, chances are good she's going to be told all about the set-up of the

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Globe stage, the use of male "actresses," and probably have a chance to watch the production in whole or in part. Not so with American Literature. American Literature, thanks to the narrow compartmentalized focus of faculty and the unquestioned acceptance of time period/anthology-driven model, is often taught as a sort of second-rate American History course, sans the battles and bullets that peak interest in such courses.

The rare professor may take the time to situate Jonathan Edwards in a tiny church with a bored audience for his first delivery of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Rarer still is the professor who might resort to what his colleagues will disparagingly call "theatrics" and actually *deliver* the famous sermon with some brimstone and fire. Why? Because there's simply too much *to cover*—that professor feels the need to not only talk about Edwards that day, but cover every other early sermon because he doesn't have the time to spend *two days* on sermons. And here's the kicker: I wonder if there is a single American Literature classroom comparing Edwards to Martin Luther King, Jr. to Billy Graham to Jeremiah Wright. We either assume our students are cognizant of the relevance of who and what we teach, or we are so "specialized" that we couldn't possibly create discourse outside of our particular time period. Yet, I *know* we know better. I don't know of an Americanist who would argue that the only dialogue Whitman can have is with Longfellow or Whittier or Dickinson. So why on earth do we only teach him with them? Why do we accept the time period model? Is there a *better* model?

Though there are as many "options" to choose from in our field as any other literary field, I'll be damned if we don't march every single undergraduate student from Pilgrims, to Edwards, to Franklin, to Melville, to Stowe, and tie it all up with a quote from Lincoln in the first survey. As if the prospect of covering *everything* from the Civil War to at least the 1950s (and in many cases, up to *today*) didn't offer a much broader field with all sorts of possible themes or dialogues, the second survey is going

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to start students off with Emerson and Whitman (maybe Dickinson), spend an obscene amount of time on the Modernists, read a novel by Hemingway, Steinbeck, or Fitzgerald, and wrap up the last week or so with an "ethnic writers" section wherein we try to cram Amiri Baraka, Lucille Clifton, Sandra Cisneros, Sherman Alexie, and Li-Young Lee into a "bouquet of *others*" so blatantly offensive if we had even a moment to think about it. However, my contention here is that we *don't* think about it. The machine of American Literature provides us two survey classes to cover everything and everyone, not to mention a nagging desire to "fill in the gaps" of our students' historical knowledge, and we have been provided the materials—designed especially for us by our "peers"—to get the job done, the anthology.

How We See Ourselves

The public is existing—living and breathing—within a much larger sphere of information and knowledge and that critical openness to knowledge is something that our work had better address or we are ill-serving our student.

from the short video Rethinking Education

The scope of the debate around who and what to teach in an American Literature survey course is far too small. Our students think in a capacity outside of our familiarity and we spend quite a bit of time *justifying* the methods we know and love and disparaging what is familiar to them. If you need an example of this, simply say "Wikipedia" to any colleague and soon you will be engaged in the same sort of "kids today" sharing of war stories we imagine Harold Bloom has been having with anyone who will listen since the 70s. Two current debates in literary studies, on the surface, seem rather far-reaching and radical: the hemispheric turn and the transatlantic turn.

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Ralph Bauer examines how the "hemispheric turn" (dialogue/inclusion of other "new world" literatures—for example, Spanish and South American—in "early American" studies and anthologies) has done much in the way of presenting the *idea* of de-centralizing the United States in the narrative of literary studies. However, he points out,

The "hemispheric turn" across the subdisciplines of American literary scholarship has so far done little to remedy the apparent segregation of early American studies from American literary studies on later periods, if the bibliographies and tables of contents of prominent recent monographs and collections may serve as an indicator. (218)

Putting Bauer's claim to the test, if we look at the table of contents to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, we see that even the assumption that the early American periods are sufficiently "complicated" by non-white/non-American writers is only justified by the inclusion of a few Native American stories and some writings by Cabeza de Vaca. By the time we get to later periods, though amply populated by that "bouquet of others" mentioned earlier, we have absolutely none of the major South American writers—Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda—or the Spanish writers like Lorca. In effect, the centralization of the United States in the narrative and mythos of literary studies is alive and well.

Another contentious expanding of the current canon concerns a "step backward" in some critics' eyes: the transatlantic "turn" (borrowing Bauer's use of the word). In its most controversial form, it is re-situating "early American literature" as a "British colonial literature" similar to the treatment of Irish and Indian literatures; in its more subtle form, it is the re-affirmation of an older method wherein American writers—say, Longfellow,

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Franklin, and certainly Bradstreet—are placed in conversation not with their North American counterparts, but with writers and poets across the pond. This old/new innovation is taken up at length in *The Teaching of Literatures of Early America*—the subject of a 2002 roundtable in *Pedagogy*. Vincent Carretta, in reviewing Carla Mulford's *Teaching the Literatures of Early America*, takes the opportunity to promote the growing trend of early Americanists considering "crossing the Atlantic"

A transatlantic approach should reduce if not eliminate the turf claims and assumptions currently found in English departments and classes. People who call themselves "eighteenth-century scholars" mean that they study British literature. But why shouldn't that rubric include work produced in English by any of the subjects of the British Crown during the period? (278)

Thomas Hallock adds

A wider range of materials might then unsettle the pat stories that the United States uses to dismiss the past. Teachers must be prepared to address these matters and explain their decisions about the canon. We need to consider not just the what but the why and how when students are reading. (289)

Though the sentiments of Hallock, Carretta, and, by proxy, Mulford, make sense and may even appeal to those who still mourn the move away from traditional British-centered canon, one must wonder how far we can step over the Atlantic (or into South America) before we are unrecognizable as American Literature professors and indistinguishable from "world literature" or "comparative literature" faculty.

The point may be that the vision we have had of ourselves must be altered. What is the role of an American Literature professor? Like it or

not, at our core, we have seen ourselves as the "preservers" of a tradition of literature that has developed almost unilaterally from the Puritans to the postmodernists. Any syllabus of an American Literature survey course will prove this: the march is chronological, the narrative is constant—it all started with Bradford and Winthrop and ended at the latest "writer of color," a demonstration of unity and progress. What is more, it is our duty to introduce our students to as many great works of American Literature as possible because, as we see it, they are not likely to experience William Dean Howells, Zora Neal Hurston, or T.S. Eliot anywhere outside of our classrooms. It is no wonder considerations of "hemispheric" or "transatlantic" *turns* keep American Literary scholars up at night with nightmares of the permanent erasure of Rebecca Harding Davis from all popular memory.

Yet, for all of the fuss over expanding borders in teaching American Literature, there are much larger considerations we would rather avoid—but do so at the peril of our discipline. What we consider "literature" has altered throughout the teaching of American Literature. Over the years we have, rightly, included political and propaganda pieces, journalistic and periodic pieces, private letters, memoirs, and diaries. At the same time, we have excluded religious works (*The Book of Mormon*), fantasy (*The Wizard of Earthsea*), science fiction (*Jurassic Park*), popular romance (*Gone with the Wind*), and children's literature (*Little Women*). The justification, of course, is the historical narrative of our field. Considering works like *Gone with the Wind* and *Little Women*, though, it is a flimsy justification. But if we consider this justification—that a text must somehow align with the historical narrative to be considered "American literature"—what do we do with radio recordings of FDR, films like *Birth of a Nation* or *Forest Gump*, the opera of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, the musical of E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, Captain America and Superman, *The Wonderful World of Disney* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the HBO Mini

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Series *John Adams*, etc.? Make no mistake, today's comic book is yesterday's news article or memoir and, while we debate what exactly is "American" in our field, our students are likely more (or at least equally) concerned with what is "literature." We can try to hold fast to the old model of historicizing literature, but in doing so "we are ill-serving our students."

Robert Sholes, in his essay "The English Curriculum After the Fall"—after offering some thoughts on his popular book *The Rise and Fall of English*—suggests a rather radical (and certainly controversial) perspective on the current state of literature studies

That, then, is the moment of history we are in—a moment in which the texts that have been our main subject matter have lost significant amounts of cultural capital. If we pin our fate to these texts in too narrow a fashion, our departments will shrink as departments of classical studies have shrunk.
(231)

At this point, a reader might wonder if I am proposing a move from the teaching of "real" American Literature (*According to whom, by the way?*) to something along the lines of a social studies class or, worse, a "cultural literacy" course. Rather than call this the red herring it is, I would like to briefly address this dismissive argument by dismantling the notion that what we have taught to this point has been exclusively or even primarily "literature" and suggest that we have engaged in teaching "history through literature" which is not the same thing as teaching literature, and certainly no more or less noble than teaching "culture through literature."

But I'm Not a History Teacher

Russ Castronova, responding to Ed White and Michael Drexler's article in which they speak of a "malaise" among early American literature

scholars who try (and largely fail) to compete with historians, summarizes their point

History, we might say, is a discipline from which we are trying to awake. Suffering under an 'unspoken apprenticeship in the guild of History,' literary critics become other to themselves, toning down the inventiveness of stylistic and formalist analysis while doing their best to appear comfortable in the guise of the historian. (485)

Castronova points out that money—through grants and fellowships and through faculty positions—is scarce in the field of early American literary studies. He points out, by comparison, fields of Black/African American studies, women/feminist studies, queer studies, and even contemporary American literature studies (thanks to its inclusiveness of all of these other fields) enjoy much more monetary recognition. White and Drexler ultimately offer the idea of teaching theory in the early American literature course—a suggestion with which Castronova tacitly agrees.

However, hasn't this already been accomplished in part with the "multicultural" movement of inclusion in the 1990s and the early 2000s? That is, with the introduction of a few Native American and Latino/a texts, have we not *engaged* with Said, Spivak, and others? The answer is "probably not." The project of the multicultural inclusion movement has not been to move away from historicizing. A typical call is one like José L. Torres-Padilla's 2005 *MELUS* article "Death to the Originary Narrative! or Insurgent Multiculturalism and Teaching Multiethnic Literature." Torres-Padilla makes a call for "border crossing" or subverting the current, popular narrative of American literary studies—often invoking images of war and "guerilla" tactics to drive home the idea of "us against them." What he fails to do, however, is offer an alternative—thus living up to that

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analogy of the insurgent guerilla who arrives with the weaponry, but lacks the tools to build something in the place of what he hopes to "bring down":

It is beyond the scope of this essay to produce an alternative literary history of the United States that can challenge the Originary Narrative. In the prevailing postmodernist and poststructuralist critical environment, some would even question the purpose behind such a project. (16)

What happens, then, is the Originary Narrative—continuing its role as Derridean *center* without a viable replacement—is not brought down at all, but it is re-enforced with the idea that all of these other literatures and their narratives orbit around the historical narrative of the United States. We still teach history, just a broader form of it. My own critique of Torres-Padilla compels me, then, to offer something to replace the center, the "historical" approach to teaching American literature. I recommend (a) stepping away from the use of anthologies in teaching American Literature survey courses and in designing curriculum, (b) wider integration of technology and new media in the teaching of American literature with an expansion of "literature" to refer to texts in all sorts of mediums including audio, film, television, graphic novels, etc., and (c) replacing the compartmentalized idea of "time period" specialization with the creation of several ever-changing "themed" courses, none of which aim for or assume *coverage*, but engage the literatures *relevant* to a particular theme or topic.

Are Anthologies Evil?

Why on earth would an Americanist looking for a referent of greed call upon Midas or *Volpone* or Shylock when he has *McTeague* and Lily Bart? Yet, if we consider the situation with another question, the answer is apparent: How many students studying American Literature are likely to come in contact with Frank Norris' or Edith Wharton's novels before

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graduate school? Are these texts too difficult? Any more difficult than reading Franklin or Thoreau? Perhaps they are too long—but aren't *Moby Dick* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* notorious for length? Maybe they are not "as relevant"—again, as what? As "The Raven"? I bring up Norris and Wharton because I know my own sense of wonder at only *just* meeting them in graduate school. Looking at the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (which I am using in this paper as symbolic of all such anthologies because of its prestige in our field, not because I have a particular vendetta against Norton), you'll see that Norris is represented by the short essay "A Plea for Romantic Fiction" and Wharton enjoys a bit better treatment with the inclusion two short stories. In fact, those writers who have the misfortune of not being Transcendentalists or Modernists, with few exceptions, *all* come up short in comparison. But I don't take issue with who or what is included in the Norton or any other anthology. They are providing what we are asking for and, for far too long, the drone of what we ask for can be boiled down to a pissing match between specialists in one field or another vying for a bigger piece of the "representative" pie.

However, the notion that a singular volume (or set of volumes)—or a class built around that volume—could contain everything, or even "the most essential things," that need to be said about American literature is one that is doomed to failure. I defy anyone to find a professor *thrilled* with any particular anthology. There is always, *always* going to be something wanting. This is not to say that the anthology lacks defenders. Paul Lauter says that anthologies should be "taken seriously" and goes so far as to attribute the expanding of the canon *to* anthologies. He supposes, left to their own devices, the literature professor will only select the canonical greats (Lucky, it seems, we have the anthology to keep us on the right track!):

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To observe change, to account for difference and similarity, to comprehend the historical conditions of textual production—all, it seems to me, lead us toward the comprehensive anthology, rather than to separate books by individual authors. (Lauter 20)

Lauter makes a valid point *if* our goal is historicizing "conditions of textual production" but not if he is simply asking for an account of difference and similarity—can we not compare "difference and similarity" between Margaret Fuller and Joan Didion as easily as we can between Fuller and Fanny Fern?

For all of our scholarly work to deconstruct canon, we daily accept it into our pedagogy in the form of the anthology. The "historical conditions" Lauter applauds are constructions of editorial choice, not the big T truths presented in the often impressive "introductory notes" contributed by respected scholars in the field of American literary studies. The inclusion of Baym and Gura means absolutely *nothing* to the average student, but offers a professor a sense of assurance that the choices made have been vetted by those more expert than himself. Yet, the building of the anthology/canon is a guess for most scholars at best and most have not seriously considered alternatives. Those who have questioned anthologies, such as Sean Shesgreen in his fairly scandalous (by academic standards) exposé "Canonizing the Canonizer: A Short History of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*," open themselves up to the ire of an entire academic cadre feeling the need to justify their complacent acceptance of status quo. Shesgreen says that what initiated his research into the formation of the anthology is the fact that nobody had really done it before: "No inquiry has been made into how this formative text came into existence, how it was first produced and later revised, or by what stratagems it has managed to canonize itself as the bible of English

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literature" (*Canonizing* 296). Shesgreen goes on to provide the results of his own inquiry—contested by just about every editor at Norton, including scholarly giants like Stephen Greenblatt—which provides a sort of business background to the formation of the anthology. At best, Shesgreen provides some evidence (skewed however it may be) to the often theoretical question of just *how* an anthology is formed; he doesn't just guess at a "traditionalists club" but goes to some length to prove the existence of just such a club. And if the "traditionalists" are the ones making the selections, odds are those choices will hold close to tradition and change will be glacial. Shesgreen summarizes "an analogy between anthologies and sausages runs true and deep; we all love sausages, but none of us wants to know precisely how they are made" (*Critical Response* 1086).

So why do we accept anthologies as the standard? One argument calls for breadth, but have we not covered how any illusion of "coverage" is simply that, an illusion? Another argument—one I have heard quite often—is cost to the student. The Norton comes in at nearly \$70 for work that is almost all available for free online or on readers like Kindle. Others, like Lauter, assume the need to historicize, but I propose that setting an historical framework cannot and should not take precedence over establishing a framework of relevance. Nick Bromell agrees that "This approach could be called pragmatist because it is more interested in what might become than in what was or is" (283). Bromell steps outside of the traditional pedagogy of looking at older texts in a "historical" view wherein the text is placed in its own historical context and then brought to bear on problems of today; instead, he wants to see how a current social practice can be "freshly imagined and understood." We have no chance of engaging in a pedagogy that causes students to "freshly imagine" texts like *Leaves of Grass*—timeless as it is in *our* eyes—if we continually swarm about the pile of sausage we call our holy anthology. It is high time

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professors get back to the arduous yet infinitely rewarding task of building a syllabus from scratch each semester, not to mention make serious changes to the curriculum which still assumes "coverage" While we are at it, we may want to reconsider our delivery systems.

Your Students Have Met John Adams

There's no opting out of new media.

Mike Wesch

What impressed us as scholars *may* not have the same impression on our students. I remember the first time I read through some of the letters between John and Abigail Adams. For some reason I felt like I had crossed some intimate line and "literature" became an experience. I get the same thrill from reading Robert Lowell and Flannery O'Connor—so this is not a time period or genre specific sensation. I *want* my students to feel this way, too. However, if I take John Adams as a case in point, I can bet some of my students have already met him, and he looked a lot like Paul Giamatti. Do I bemoan the students who, rather than reading through some selected letters in the anthology, decide to watch the HBO mini-series (or part of it) instead? If I do, why? What is the point of the inclusion of those letters in anthologies in the first place? Were the editors not trying to suggest some place setting and history? Isn't it much more entertaining to *watch* John Adams than to read him? And anyone who would care to disagree, I would like to ask "If you could *watch* Emerson or Twain speak right now, would you simply say, 'No thank you, I would rather read them'?" Our students have the resources at their fingertips to recall the plot lines of every single one of Twain's novels in seconds, hear an old and questionable (yet, fascinating) recording of Walt Whitman, and view the actual fascicles of Emily Dickinson, not to mention watch hundreds and

hundreds of adaptations, documentaries, and interviews—yet we stand in front of a classroom for two to three hours flogging words, words, words.

In her book *Teaching Literature*, Elaine Showalter explores a range of techniques—drawn from faculty around the world—to demonstrate ways to "enliven" the English classroom. As one might imagine, she has her supporters and her vehement detractors:

Part of the question [of how to prepare to teach a literature class] is whether we teach from our area of research specialization, and make teaching a subset of research, or whether we make teaching an exploration for us as it is our students. There are advantages and disadvantages to each approach. All of us have had the experience of reading a book the night before class, just one breathless step ahead of the students, and discovering that our teaching suddenly seems electric and the students are lit up with excitement. Teaching new material works, because we are teaching a way of reading, and modeling the way a trained professional thinks about understanding and analyzing literary texts. (45)

We can see the introduction of new media as a "replacement" of the old way of doing things, or we can see the use of new media as an introduction of new *material*—as Showalter points out, this can be something to "electrify" and invigorate the classroom. Some might scoff at the idea that "bells and whistles" will enhance a literature classroom and dismiss this sort of pedagogical practice as *theatrics*, but the reality is that we are not only competing with the normal distractions of the classroom—and these will always be with us—but we are competing with *better* and *sexier* versions of what we are teaching.

Let's take a look at a few examples of how we might utilize some new media in the teaching of American Literature course.

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James Trier, a teacher educator, shares his experience introducing future teachers to the long history of using media texts to enhance teaching literature courses. He shows that the use of radio/audio, film, television, and other "non-literary" texts in teaching has been present (and debated) since the 1920s. He demonstrates contextualizing *On the Road* by offering popular culture references to Beats, recordings of Jack Kerouac reading, and documentaries on other Beat writers. He suggests that current and future teachers "should begin to collect any media texts that they [think] would have some eventual productive potential in teaching English, even if at the time of collecting such texts they did not yet know how they would take them up" (435). He boasts of enormous collections of CDs (already outdated by mp3), videos, and magazine articles of and about the Beats. Most of us have amassed all sorts of media about our favorite writers, but have we considered using these in the classroom? Can a film version of *The House of Mirth* spark enough interest in Wharton to inspire our students to take her up in earnest? Let me put it another way—which is a better introduction, the film of the novel or reading a short story or two by her? Our negative attitudes towards and distrust of new media belie our insistence on "innovation in the classroom." Innovation, for the most part, has meant dipping our toes in the Atlantic or in South America, inviting a woman or an Asian American to the party, or teaching one less Fireside Poet. But the *who* is complicated two-fold by the *how*.

Bridget M. Marshall, in her "Beginnings to Civil War" survey class has students use online research tools "outside of Google and Wikipedia" to develop the overarching class discussion of canon formation. Discussing her goals, Marshall says, "I developed an assignment that asked students to use online archives to work with primary documents from the time period we study during the semester. The ensuing projects proved to be exciting for the students and for me, and helped the entire class to focus our attention on canon formation as a site of ongoing

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conflict and development" (17). I like the premise of Marshall's assignment—a questioning of canon formation and utilization of online resources—but I question her insistence of stepping away from Google and Wikipedia. Marshall goes to length to sort of justify the sources she *does* send her students to, as if to say, "ones that are *academic enough*" but isn't she simply acting as the new canon builder? Marshall also has students access specialized sites, which obviously puts her expertise to use, but this also continues the condescending "shepherding" of students to the *right* sort of information. Perhaps if there is so much distrust of wikis, one solution is to build one. Marshall mentions that she once simply had students choose any text in the class anthology which they had not read as part of the syllabus—in her own words, it "was a disaster" (20), but maybe this premise can work if altered a bit.

Cultural anthropologist and pedagogy sensation (called "the thinker" by *Wired* magazine), Mike Wesch, conducts a similar assignment in his world anthropology class where he places a digital map over his classroom (which is projected on the large screen at the front of the class). Certain regions are marked with a red star and students near that red star form the group of "anthropologists" who will become the experts in that area over the semester. The concept is that his 100 students will collectively be able to find and share more knowledge than he would have been able to do on his own (Wesch, *TEDxNYED*). Consider the possibilities in an American Literature classroom: one group of Puritans, one group of Transcendentalists, one group of Feminists, one group of Deconstructionists, etc. All of a sudden history and theory are not linear, but they fold over and interact, intermingle—and our students can, maybe, enjoy the complex and infinite readings of Cooper, Irving, or the "yet to be anthologized" Dave Eggers or Alice Walker.

In another class, Christopher N. Phillips uses audio resources like Audacity and iTunes U to teach students about 19th Century American

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Poetry, having students record a memorized poem Philips also has his students begin each class period reading a poem to the class, which is not relevant to the use of new technology, but echoes the old/new innovation of those transatlantic turn folks. Philips points out that

Technological tools are only as good as the ideas and people they serve, but my experience (still fairly basic, at that) with audio technology has [shown] me that using it to bring the oral back into the "early American" classroom is a good idea, both for its potential to bring new perspective to literature and for the occasion it provides to reflect on how our time relates to the times of earlier writers and readers—and speakers. (58)

What is impressive about Philips idea here is that it ties back to tradition in a deep and meaningful way, showing that technological advances do not necessarily have to supplant what we are teaching. More often than not, they can enhance and support our current curriculum. Philips also introduces an idea that can only be expanded with the use of web cams and MovieMaker technologies. Rather than only recording a poem, why couldn't a student or a class create a movie around a short story or a poem? A quick *YouTube* search will reveal hundreds of these types of videos being made by high school students around the world. Our undergraduates are coming from classrooms where they were making their own movie of *Moby Dick* and we wonder why their eyes glaze over when we employ the Socratic and ask *again*, "What does this mean?" I am not suggesting one *or* the other, but a mix of both.

I must reiterate what Philips says, these technologies are only as good as our ideas and our abilities. If we want to integrate any of these elements into our pedagogy, just like employing any sort of theory, we'd better bone up on our knowledge because there's nothing worse than a

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professor half-assing it in front of the class and then asking them to do the same. In the case of introducing new technologies and new media into the classroom, perhaps an approach of "less is more" may be prudent. Try, for example, a small scale exercise like Philips' poetry recording or Marshall's primary text search to start out with, then maybe introduce some film clips the next semester, then maybe a comic adaptation the following semester, and so on.

There's a Theme for That

Organizing a course with a "theme" is hardly a new approach of course, but I feel that using this particular one [about "the American Dream"] for American drama is profitable and worthwhile. It allows for the meaningful discussion that several interpretations fuel. Having that deeper understanding of American ideologies translates to other courses. (58)

Timothy J. Viator

Timothy Viator uses a constructive approach to teaching an American drama course—roughly, allowing multiple interpretations of texts exist in discussion without privileging one over the others. He uses the theme of "the American dream" to situate the disparate texts—from "A Raisin in the Sun" to "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"—in an ongoing discussion. Viator says that the use of themes is hardly a new approach, but this is only true when we think in the scale of a single class period or a section or unit during a semester. But what if American Literature was taught on a continual cycle of ever-changing themes that engage student interests? Take Viator's example of "The American Dream"—as a survey style course any instructor could come up with a syllabus that might include standards like Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, but may also include the never-anthologized

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The Rise of Silas Lapham, Suzan-Lori Parks *Topdog/Underdog*, and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, not to mention articles and interviews about and with tycoons like Ford, Carnegie, and Disney, and movies all too apropos like *Citizen Kane* and *The Social Network* (though if one goal is to "enliven" *Citizen Kane* may not be the best choice). That is just one theme. The possibilities are endless.

If the use of themes, rather than chronology, seems familiar it is because this has been the model of constructing many graduate level classes for decades. The professor, assuming what "needs to be covered has been" feels at ease to create a syllabus that she finds personally interesting and exciting. It may be based on her field of expertise or it may be based on a sudden interest in a new theory or author. Whatever the case, the professor cannot wait to explore the new material with those students, just as Showalter suggests. However, no graduate professor makes the assumption of coverage with full assurance—in fact, the unspoken (except by a particularly biting few) rule is that, if you haven't learned it yet, you will go out and educate yourself to catch up because the class isn't going to wait for you.

Surprisingly, I've never seen this fail. I begin graduate courses with peers who have never *heard of* Emerson only to have them quoting him weeks later. The graduate student rises to the occasion. Certainly there are differences between graduate students and undergraduates, but I wonder how many of those differences are based on how we treat the undergraduates. We mechanically march them through a curriculum we couldn't care to question, cram as many names and texts at them as we possibly can (as if by sheer volume they will retain more), and do not trust them to create their own connections. We buy into the grumbling we read daily on *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*, viewing all undergraduate classrooms as the same without acknowledging that if a student is in an American Literature survey course, he or she has at least

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"some" interest in the topic (even if that interest is she didn't want to read British writers). These students, just like graduates, come looking for a challenge. Is that challenge going to be, "Can you make it through American History 2.0?" or do we have something better to offer? Paraphrasing Emerson – the pedagogy of an older period will not fit this.

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