Marginalized Frameworks and Minority Voices: Teaching Literary Theory in Early American Literature Courses
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Early American Literature as a survey course for undergraduate students is challenging both pedagogically and philosophically. With the proliferation of literary theories in the mid-to-late 20th century that aim to describe the experiences and oppressions of marginalized peoples, early American literature's perceived value is problematized as a stalwart of a hegemonic master narrative. It is difficult to promote the value of analyzing and criticizing the literature to contemporary students when much of it is exclusive—that is to say, patriarchal, colonial, Euro-centric, and hierarchal. Still, it is undeniable that the study of early American literature is relevant to understanding the foundational ideologies of American culture and writing. How, then, can professors of early American literature mediate the chasm between perceptions of antiquated texts and their social relevance?

Pedagogically, the literature can be best approached by understanding its relevance to the students. To an extent, no longer should practitioners of literary analysis and theory demand a New Critical, aesthetic appreciation of the literature in their students. Charging students to "like" early American literature is faulty because it is simultaneously inconsistent with how popular literature is appreciated today and because of the aforementioned exclusivity. This is not to say that professors should eliminate a practice of aesthetic appreciation in the teaching of the literature; just that nuanced approaches must be used to meet the demands of relevancy by contemporary students. In her article, "Combining Personal and Textual Experience: A Reader-Response Approach to Teaching American Literature," Patricia Prandini Buckler argues that a Reader Response focus ultimately leads students toward a critical awareness of the text itself. They first identify their own experience in relationship to the text, then examine the subject matter, and finally engage with the text itself, ultimately resulting in "higher critical faculties … asking questions about form and style, meaning and significance" (44).

For early American literature, this is especially relevant. My design for bridging the chasm between the literature and my contemporary community college students is to
structure the course around two essential themes: (1) that there is a discernable and relevant connection between early American thought and contemporary structures of American society and culture, and (2) literary theory can be used to underscore minority voices within the master narrative. These two strategies complement the literature itself, creating a dynamic classroom where the inherent value garnered from such a study becomes clear to contemporary undergraduate students. This is even more viable to community college students, who are apt to identify with marginalized voices and can see the relevance of situating early American literature in contemporary frameworks with an effort to promote social, democratic citizenship.

In setting up my early American literature classes, I set some ground rules concerning our use of the texts. I explain that my goal is to "teach myself out of your lives." In other words, I want their experience with the literature to be a formative practice wherein a comprehension of texts as cultural artifacts establishes a preference to critical thinking over textual knowledge. If the students are able to identify correlations between past texts and current culture, they will be able to use any text as an analytical tool to comprehend and criticize any culture, no longer needing the classroom for this activity and, thus, eliminating the need for a perceived figurehead to help explain what the text is "about." This dilution of the professor's "power" is advantageous both to the establishment of a student's sense of critical ability and to set up the discourse of examining and frustrating the prescribed master narrative latent in early American literature.

I tend to be direct with my students. Beyond the perfunctory syllabus review of the first day, I urge my students not to "like" the texts. In other words, I ask them to strive not to enjoy what they read—a task that would prove difficult even to most professional contemporary critics—but to recognize how the texts are relevant to study, particularly in how they teach us about our own culture and circumstances. I claim that even "bad" literature (texts for which we do not have an aesthetic appreciation or that manifest distinct prejudicial rhetoric) can teach us about the culture in which they were produced and the culture in which they are consumed: that of the students themselves.

Though the problems with teaching early American literature are obvious—the limited number of texts, a fidelity to the master narrative, the ever-expanding generational
gap between the texts and the students, etc.—the virtues of doing so are rooted in the very ideologies of the United States: a venerable respect for liberty and democracy and the right of every person to pursue that which matters to the self and society. For better or worse, we can trace the origins of contemporary American culture and institutions back to the paradigmatic rhetoric of early American literature. All that is left to do for the professor is to make these connections and show the students how their critical focus on the texts is not only relevant to them, but essential to their passage from student to citizen. Surprisingly, the narrow sample of texts in the genre still offers plentiful examples of how a professor can engage students in a productive and progressive way.

Before offering examples from the texts themselves, I think it necessary to comment upon a seemingly glaring disciplinary paradox: the teaching of literary theory in undergraduate classrooms. Typically, this sort of instruction is reserved for graduate classes in literature, rather than undergraduate classes where students may not even be English majors. This thinking is, however, reductive. Instead of presuming undergraduate students cannot grasp the complexity and subtly of literary theory, I posit that certain pedagogical strategies—to be outlined presently—can help to establish a keen sense of not just how analyzing texts through theory is done, but why it is eminently relevant to their general critical thinking skills.

Certainly, literary theory is a polarizing practice; for some literary scholars, it has the stigma of being dense, exclusive, and esoteric. Many scholars may remember nightmares or panic attacks from their graduate instruction in trying to comprehend Derrida or Beauvoir. Others question the validity of the practice, recognizing the changing culture of the mid-20th century as a boon for ad-hoc theories as a result of an advancing commodification of higher education and thus refusing to teach or apply them at all. The subsequent thought of trying to teach these concepts to undergraduate students is bewildering at best. The idea is that doing so would repel students from the literature itself, making vulnerable the already tentative grasp academia may have on students interested in literary study, as if literary theory was a secret graduate professors sprung on unsuspecting Masters candidates. In order to allay these fears, I must assert that not only have I successfully taught literary theory in undergraduate community college classes, but the conversations therein reveal a
unique richness to literary study that can be approached if only we can perforate the shield of impenetrability surrounding the dubious reputation of literary theory.

According to James M. Cahalan and David B. Downing, “The usual explanation for the gaps between theoretical discourse and classroom practice typically hinges on the assertions of the difficulty of the theories, the abstruseness of their ‘jargon,’ or the simple impracticality of the ideas” (2). Indeed, literary theories can have a marginalizing effect: students can feel the concepts too lofty or beyond their comprehension, or worse, students can feel the theories make a science out of an art form, turning literature away from its metaphysical aestheticism and rendering it a bland academic vessel for empty, scholarly diatribes.

Naturally, practitioners of literary theory and professors devoted to diverse analyses of literature find this conception faulty, but therein lies the paradox. How can literary theory be divorced from its stigma and be bolstered as an authentic way to study literature in the student’s mind? One of the predominant successful approaches I’ve found is to focus on teaching the concepts, not the theorists. I would like to make it clear that I do not think it beyond the students’ grasps to comprehend the writings of the primary theorists, nor do I wish to neglect recognizing the scholars who developed the ideas; but at the introductory level, explaining how a theory interacts with a text as a conceptual framework is far more effective a strategy than attempting to translate arduous academic exposition. The theorists and their essays are important, but—assuming that students take survey classes early in their undergraduate careers—their aforementioned density may lose the students’ interest. To develop an enjoyment of rock climbing, it would be more effective to show someone the joys of traversing simple routes than to repel them down the face of Yosemite’s Half Dome.

For instance, rather than read Hélène Cixous’s concept of *écriture féminine*, it is more valuable for undergraduate students to understand how Feminist Literary Theory looks at texts to underscore examples of patriarchal oppression against women.

It is helpful to explain to students the history of literary theory and what its aims are. I often liken it to reading the same text while wearing different shades of glasses, wherein the differing tints highlight aspects idiosyncratic to the particular theory. Perhaps, wearing the red-tinted glasses of Marxist Theory, we can analyze how class hierarchies result in
struggles for poor characters; or, wearing the green-tinted glasses of Post-Colonial Theory, we can recognize the debilitating effects of displacing indigenous peoples. And so on. What is essential is not so much that students can identify who said what, but that they see literary theory as a tool to bring new awareness and dynamic interpretation to the study of literature and that literature can be analyzed in such dynamic ways. This helps students understand how literary texts have a much larger intellectual and social value than just pure enjoyment or an assessment of what is "good."

Additionally, I find it important to focus on the Identity theories as opposed to the Structural or Linguistic theories. This is because there are much more practical applications of the Identity theories (those dealing with marginalized identities/cultures) to the literature when students can identify contemporary relevancies, strivings against social injustice, and/or contrariness to master narratives. This is especially true for students who may not be English majors. Cahalan and Downing find this uniquely relevant because undergraduate survey literature courses have the potential to effect the critical abilities of a student body with widely diverse academic interests, "[Survey literature courses] contain one of the most tangible audiences—and certainly the largest—by which the profession reaches beyond itself in everyday practice" (8). This indicates that there is a social responsibility of survey classes, at the institutional level, to help students with diverging interests champion common goals.

As pertains to early American literature, I teach the utilization of the following Identity theories in conjunction with a recognition of minority voices, while maintaining a constant consideration of the connection between the texts and contemporary American ideology. I use Feminist Theory in analyzing the writing of women, Post-Colonial Theory in dealing with the Native American speeches, and Critical Race Theory in conjunction with slave narratives. Of course, with the richness that is early American literature, there is a large amount of intersectionality amongst these theories and texts, so it is valuable to offer this instruction to students while simultaneously sharpening their general analytical skills and unique critical approaches. What follows are some specific examples, using the literature, that I have found to be the most successful in my early American literature classes.
I try to make it clear, from the very construction of the syllabus, that we will approach early American texts from a peripheral perspective; that is to say, we will analyze the standard texts, but from the boundaries of marginalization. On the semester schedule, students find one of our earlier discourses to be on the "Founding Mothers." I like to use this nomenclature to provoke a discussion of Feminist Theory and its relevance to textual study. In challenging the typical "Founding Fathers" designation of male writers responsible for the establishment of the country, our class focuses on how women writers have an inarguable relevancy to the foundations of American literature and culture. Of course, we read everything from Franklin to Jefferson, but the goal is to present a wider perspective of cultural considerations often disguised by the hyper-masculine table of contents (my copy of the Norton Anthology has forty-six male writers and twenty-two female writers). This is where a content-driven discourse on Feminist Theory becomes relevant.

I begin with simple questions: why are there so few women featured? Are we to believe that women had little opinions about the foundation of the country? How do you think women were perceived by the men who we link famously to American independence? Through this budding discourse, I reveal the central premises of Feminist Theory, namely ideas of patriarchy and female subjugation within the constructs of male-dominated culture. This conversation, held prior to even engaging with any particular texts, lingers throughout the study of not just the included women writers of the time, but of the male writers as well. As a class, we complicate the idea of authorial voice, identifying patriarchal standards as deeming women's voices as less valuable than those of men. We talk about unfairness in publication opportunities and general inequities in civil rights at the time. Contextually, understanding how the country was founded on patriarchal principals (men voted, men had land) helps us to engage the texts with a conscious responsibility to understanding exposition as rhetoric and—more importantly—as cultural constituents.

In using Sojourner Truth's "Speech to the Women's Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, 1851," the students begin to discover latent feministic principals within the body of mid-19th century American literature. Before reading the short piece, we discuss Truth's double-marginalized perspective as a slave and a woman, which functions well to talk about how theories can intersect. The speech's date—1851—also allows for a discourse on
literary voices prior to the formalized moves toward garnered rights: abolition and first-wave feminism.

This construct in place, a literary analysis of the text itself becomes enthusiastic and rich. Truth discusses a women's capacity to think and that it is perhaps biologically inferior that that of a man's, "As for intellect, all I can say is, if woman have a pint and man a quart—why cant she have her little pint full? You need not be afraid to give us our rights for fear we will take too much,—for we cant take more than out pint'll hold" (761). Without the foundation of Feminist Theory in place, the quote could be read as misogynistic. I talk about the Feminist ideas of social constructionism versus biological essentialism and the students begin to recognize how Truth's discourse may be a result of an accepted notion that women are biologically inferior to men. However, a more dynamic result of the analysis can lead to further comprehension of Truth's rhetoric, including one student's analysis of tone. That student harped upon the "if" at the beginning of the quote, suggesting Truth maintains a latent sarcasm in what she is saying. Truth teases the men, calling upon their fears, by presenting a paradox: if women are biologically, intellectually inferior, then men need not worry about them overstepping their roles. However, if men are indeed worried about women having equal rights to education and voting, then they are conceding that they do have a similar intellectual capacity.

What began to happen in the classroom was the students used Feminist Theory to engage the text and were then able to use the text to engage cultural constructs, such as those that may still exist in our society today. In accordance with the first of my two thematic approaches to the course, the Truth conversation naturally ceded into an awareness of similar hierarchal power structures in contemporary American society. The students saw a correlation between Truth's paradox and patriarchal hierarchies in today's world, including persistent constructs that situate women as inferior to men. Using what we had learned from the theory and the text, we were able to open up a wide discussion of objectification/sexualization, male supremacy, and other female subjugations; which was distinctly relevant to the students themselves. Thus, what were accomplished were—simultaneously—an awareness of critical theory, a profound analysis of text, and a sense of personal relevance that bridged the gap between the literature and the students' lives.
As the period came to its end, the students were energetic about returning to Truth's speech to find more examples of patriarchal structures and oppressions. They were particularly drawn to Truth's biblical reference, "I have heard the bible and have learned that Eve caused man to sin. Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it rightside up again" (762). Without provocation, the students were able to recognize the latent misogyny in the Adam and Eve story and identified a sense of religious guilt meant for women in recognizing Eve as their progenitor, of course, all along acknowledging Truth's sarcastic interpretation of the story.

Approaching "foundational" writing from the periphery is useful because it admits there is a historical, textual gap in knowledge while recognizing how typically muted voices in the discourse are actually strident components of the literary culture. Perhaps most importantly, the students become aware of how a study of literary texts becomes directly pertinent to their lives. Beyond the scope of the early American literature classroom, this practice will continue to help them engage with texts to find relevant cultural connections, something that literary study boasts as one of its fundamental consequences.

Of the most marginalized and non-represented peoples in American literature, reading the Native American speeches may be the most challenging but also the most provocative for contemporary students. Professors are saddled with two distinct problematic considerations when approaching the texts: the dearth of Native American voices in the canon and existent cultural stigmas latently associated with early Native American conflicts. In admitting that teaching early American literature is already a practice in teaching textual analysis and history, the responsibility of the professor in broaching discourse on Native American texts and influences is a delicate one, at best. Though there has been much discussion of the negative effects of European colonization on indigenous peoples, undergraduate students are faced with the trying prospect of potentially incomplete literature, rendered both from speeches interpreted and transcribed by European descendants and the inherent prejudices of scholars and writers of the time. Using Post-Colonial Literary Theory, the students can attempt to engage with the Native American speeches from a more objective perspective, analyzing the texts themselves while understanding meta-textual considerations that may blemish our historical accounts.
Post-Colonial Theory is advantageous to an early American literature class because one of its predominant features is to recognize a "master narrative" and how such a thing has the potential to skew interpretations of literary and historical texts. For undergraduate students, it is sometimes difficult to persuade them against the authority of texts; they often suspend skepticism when engaging with work deemed to be canon, included in textbooks, and taught by college instructors. In other words, students can almost automatically trust in what they are instructed to read because they understand it as vetted by powers more accomplished than themselves (note the inherent hierarchy of power existent in academia). This is instantly problematic for pedagogues because one of the fundamental elements of successful teaching—critical thinking—is usurped by the students’ passive acceptance of texts. Post-Colonial Theory begins with the concept of dismantling the "master narrative," positing that global power has had an impact on how texts were constructed, how they have been maintained, and how they are sustained as cultural artifacts in the contemporary world.

I begin the discussion of the Native American speeches with some of these key ideas in Post-Colonial Theory. As a class, we talk about disrupting the master narrative and recognizing the rhetoric inherent in texts that deal with the relations between multiple cultures. Of course, we discuss colonization, harkening back to our early readings of American Independence. But we also talk about "Othering" through adjacent European-descendant texts (like Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of Captivity and Restoration*) where the unknown indigenous culture is stigmatized as "savage" and violent. We discuss religious imperialism and look for colonial conflict within the Native American speeches themselves. What this ultimately does is help the students recognize how textual analysis—in its most basic and general sense—can be used to examine not just the texts themselves but wider cultural circumstances where literature and even academic structures complete marginalizing injustices rather than challenge them.

One of the first questions the class contemplates is the sense of textual authority. Because of the infrequency of Native American texts in the canon, I have the students read the biographical information of the texts we read in addition to the texts themselves. Doing so reveals essential problems in what we refer to as the debate between translation and
transliteration. What was simply recorded and what was augmented to reflect the needs of the translating writers? In analyzing the problem of language barriers and the filtering of Native American speeches through Eurocentric lenses, the students become concerned about the non-indigenous writers' biases in translating and transcribing Native American speeches for their own rhetoric.

In Pontiac's "Speech at Detroit," for example, the students brought up valuable questions about Pontiac's assertion that the "Maker" instructed them to "lift the hatchet" against the colonial invaders in order to "wipe them from the face of the Earth" (209). Naturally, because we had just been discussing master narratives and the problems with authorial voice, the students were keen to criticize these lines as bastions of a colonial need to stigmatize the Native Americans as violently opposed to foreign trespass. I was quick to point out that we do not know if Pontiac said this to in fact justify the violent resistance against colonial hostility or if there were liberties taken by whoever transcribed the manuscript. Reading the biographical note from the Norton text, we realized that there is little evidence to help us understand the origins of this text. This conundrum is important not because it reveals answers to Pontiac's feelings or to colonial rhetoric, but that the analysis of literature is complex and must be performed with these contextual influences in mind; such a realization is pivotal in the students' awareness of analysis and critical thought.

This study can be applied to the other Native American speeches of the section. In Red Jacket's "Speech to the U.S. Senate," the students were able to recognize the missionary's religious rhetoric as imperial ideology, desiring to reduce the religions of the indigenous people in the hopes of forcing assimilation to European Christianity. In using Post-Colonial Theory, the students fixated upon Red Jacket's perspective of European colonization:

But an evil day came upon us. Your forefathers crossed the great water and landed on this island. Their numbers were small. They found friends and not enemies. They told us they had fled from their own country for fear of wicked men, and had come here to enjoy their religion. They asked for a small seat. We took pity on
them, granted their request; and they sat down amongst us. We gave them corn and meat; they gave us poison in return. (215)

We began to discuss how the texts serve as evidence to criticize some of the more nefarious aspects of colonial ideology, which resulted in our ability to translate this issue to our contemporary world. Without much instigation, the students were able to recognize relationships between the textual rhetoric of the colonial "Othering" of the Native Americans to present-day fears of Muslims and even Queer culture. Ultimately, what studying these speeches through a Post-Colonial theoretical construct did was to broaden the students' sense of how texts do not exist in a vacuum, that they are indebted to the culture from which they were designed and the hand by which they were written. More importantly, texts that may have originally seemed archaic and outdated became increasingly relevant.

One of the most important sections of the class is the discourse on slave narrative. In addition to teaching Wheatley, Truth, and Douglass, I require the students to read the entire *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, even though only a selection of it is included in the *Norton Anthology*. The text is so crucial to an expansive awareness of slavery, abolition, and its lingering effects that an analysis of the entire document is worth the class time.

Again, finding purchase for theoretical approaches, I introduce students to some of the essential principles of Critical Race Theory; namely, relatable concepts such as: institutionalized racism, assimilation, Eurocentric/white superiority, and the master narrative. Understanding these concepts of the theory do more to just position the student in their analysis of the text, they help students achieve an objective relationship to the meaning of text itself. That is to say, students begin to see the literature not just as a memoir of oppression and horror, but as a rhetorical tool used to initiate the very liberation the slave narratives often promote.

One of our first essential duties is to recognize how the slave narratives are examples of writing by enslaved black writers but that they are simultaneously conditioned by the surrounding white culture; namely, abolitionists who aimed to utilize the writing for the benefit of their cause. When engaging with the texts themselves, it does not take long
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for the students to recognize the horror of violence within the pages. We begin to understand such gruesome illustrations as rhetorical tools: these fluent and often artful narratives were written not by the implied subhuman slave—a condition that hoped to justify the moral wrongness of slavery in the South—but by humans who were artistic and intellectual. This provocative realization, as illustrated through the writing, hoped to convince Northern sympathizers to the abolitionist cause. With this premise founded, the class could begin an analysis of texts relevant to the time the texts were written as well as to our present society.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is an important text to consider for the class. I typically have the students read this after Wheatley and Douglass, so that they have a clear understanding of what to expect and can perhaps shield their shock with a more scholarly analysis of what the text hopes to achieve. Jacobs's narrative is especially useful when incorporating Critical Race Theory because it so clearly is a rhetorical artifact. As indicated in the Preface, "I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered"; her correlated goal is to explain "what Slavery really is" (5). The students began to recognize that Jacobs often employs meta-narrative to "break the fourth wall" and speak directly to her readers—most often Northern women—in order to rally them to her cause. It became clear to the class that Jacobs's text was not simply about displaying the horrors of slavery but doing so in a way that charged the readers with action against the unjust institution.

As a class, we discussed the contextual aspects of the book: that people did not think a slave capable of constructing such an eloquent memoir (here, we harken back to Douglass and the similar prejudice to his work) and how Jacobs was inspired by Amy Post—an abolitionist—to use her own story as a rhetorical tool, as Post claims, "Still, I urged upon [Jacobs] the duty of publishing her experience, for the sake of the good it might do" (222). What was dynamic about this discourse was that a cursory reading of the text, without the theoretical approach, proved to only underscore the abominable acts of violence against the slaves. Using Critical Race Theory, however, the class was able to zero in on meta-textual considerations: how abolitionist culture used the slave narrative as rhetoric for
their own cause—which, created an interesting discourse on the appropriation of black experience for white enterprise—and how similar institutionalized racisms still exist in contemporary society.

At the end of the slave narrative section came the most crucial conversation, that of the lingering effects of slavery on present-day culture. I teach at The Community College of Philadelphia, a large urban school where the student population reflects the diversity of America's cosmopolitan cities. There is a large African American contingent at the college, which makes Critical Race discourse in relation to slave narratives all the more relevant. If my goal as a professor of the early American literature survey is to position the texts as relevant to my students and the mission of my college is to prepare students to become "informed and concerned citizens" (Mission and Goals), then understanding how narratives like Jacobs's correlate to our culture today is not only necessary, but is a civic responsibility. Studying the texts in this way promotes a similar sense of social duty in the students—regardless of their ethnicity—that makes the literature relevant and its study imperative to contemporary American culture.

Early American literature survey courses present challenges but are essential to the critical thinking of undergraduate students. Approaching the literature as a conduit between previous centuries and contemporary times, and using literary theory as a vessel of objective analysis can provide for an engaging and inspiring literature class.
Works Cited


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