Integrated Literature: Using Multi-Ethnic Literature in Survey Courses
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The American literary tradition is exclusionary in that even in an age of heightened awareness of multiculturalism it continues to be dominated by white, male authors. Admittedly, writers such as Alice Walker, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Maxine Hong Kingston have been canonized and are included in literature anthologies and taught in survey courses, yet there are many outstanding ethnic writers who remain absent from college-level reading lists. This is, in part, because critics of multicultural literature believe that it does not meet traditional notions of "literature" and that teaching it leads to the lowering of standards. Amy Ling notes that many opponents have argued that if ethnic literature has value, "it would have risen to the top and we'd certainly all know about it" (n. pag.). However, as Ling points out, historically, what had 'risen to the top' was determined by who was doing the lifting. . . . Books don't rise like cream. Some are promoted; others are ignored (n. pag.). Another reason that ethnic writers are neglected is that some of us resist teaching multicultural literature because we lack the necessary background and doing so challenges our comfort level, but as literature instructors, we have a responsibility to our students to incorporate ethnic literature into our survey courses. I'd like to address concerns that some might have about doing so and offer teaching strategies and a few text suggestions.
First, though, I’d like to speak to my qualifications, or what some might consider my “deficiencies” in order to allay others’ concerns about my motivations. When I was in graduate school and decided that I wanted to teach multicultural literature, I wondered, “...Hmmmm...I’m a middle class ‘white’ woman. Am I eligible?” I was especially concerned about attitudes held by critics such as Janet M. Powers, who, in response to what she refers to as “the Insider/Outsider question,” says that it is arrogant for an outsider to think that she can teach ethnic literature. She wonders, “What gives me, an Outsider, the right to teach a work of African American literature and claim to be teaching its essence?” (70-1). Similarly, Linda Alcoff grapples with the question, “[I]s it ever valid to speak for others who are unlike me or who are less privileged than me?” (8). I expressed my concerns to my Cuban American professor and mentor, and her fervent response was, “Your teaching our literature will help our voices to be heard.” So let there be no mistaking my intentions: by no means am I attempting to speak for others; instead, my goal is to give others a forum in an arena in which they might otherwise be ignored.

In addition to survey courses, I am also fortunate to teach *African American Literature* each fall. Generally, one-third of the students are African American, and the remainder are “white” Americans. On the first day of class, I assume that a few students are surprised by my skin color and may even question my expertise, so I begin by addressing my color, or lack of, my credentials, an MA and a PhD, and, especially, my personal reasons for being committed to teaching African American literature, which include living on the south side of Chicago in the early 1970s when my best friend had to move because her parents did not want her to be the first Black student to attend an all-white school. And as I put aside my soapbox, I nonchalantly wonder aloud: “If you have to be like the literature that you teach, does this mean that we have to hire a British guy who also happens to be dead to teach Shakespeare?”
Laurie Grobman refers to this attitude as “identity politics” (“Toward a Multicultural Pedagogy” 233), and this way of thinking is, in fact, counterproductive. Several years ago, I was given a course release and did not teach the African American Literature class. The department chair at that time hired a part-time instructor and commented, “It’s about time that we have an African American teach this course.” As it turned out, this instructor did not have a background in African American Literature; in fact, she didn’t even have a background in literature; it seems that her only qualification was her skin color. Ultimately, many students complained that they didn’t discuss the readings and, instead, spent most of the class time reading aloud. This example is evidence that, as Bonnie TuSmith observed in her 2001 presidential address to MELUS, “The pursuit of learning is not advanced by allowing an individual’s ‘subject position’—these days, meaning what a person looks like—to dictate what the person can study or teach” (7). Indeed, Grobman believes that we need to avoid such “identity politics” because “it would be utterly counterproductive to limit one’s teaching to texts representative of one’s culture(s)” (“Toward a Multicultural Pedagogy” 234). I’m a Heinz 57 mutt. Sadly, I lack a definitive ethnic identity; in fact, you might call me an American. So I’m unclear about the type of literature that I am “qualified” to teach. Despite the fact that I’m an Americanist with specialties in women’s and ethnic literature, am I more eligible to teach American writers such as Hemingway and Fitzgerald because I am an “American”?  

So despite the ongoing debate that questions whether or not I am qualified to teach it, I make every attempt to include ethnic literature in my survey courses, and I have been doing so for over fifteen years. While I agree with those who believe that there is a need for what AnaLouise Keating refers to as “ethnic-specific courses,” (97) this is an unrealistic goal for many of our financially challenged institutions. So, at the very least, we must ensure that our survey courses include multiethnic writers.
How do we accomplish this? Naturally, the selection of texts presents the first challenge. I refrain from using anthologies. Yes, today there are anthologies, the forerunner being the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, that have an impressive range of ethnic authors, but I find that anthologies place too many restrictions on what I can teach. Instead, I select novels and supplement the readings with short stories, poetry, and essays. Students purchase the novels, and the other selections are accessed electronically or I place them on reserve at the library.

When selecting texts for survey courses, we should not opt for the one-obligatory-ethnic-text strategy. Keating notes that this melting-pot multicultural approach does not challenge underlying knowledge structures or conventional teaching methods. Nor do such modest curricular changes alter student perceptions. It is, in fact, often the reverse. The emphasis on an underlying “sameness” reinforces the dominant-cultural belief that, in our post-Civil Rights era, we live in a “color-blind” meritocracy. (2)

In other words, by treating the ethnic text as being *like* the canonized works, we are implying that race issues are no longer a concern. bell hooks admonishes “white women [who] ‘boast’ about how they have shown students that black writers are ‘as good’ as the white male canon when they do not call attention to race” (38-9). Indeed, it is imperative that the instructor acknowledge racial differences. Grobman identifies another problem with the token-text approach: it leads “students to believe one writer speaks for all ethnic groups or individuals” (“Toward a Multicultural Pedagogy” 232). Certainly, *The Color Purple* is an outstanding novel, and I use it in my *African American Literature* course, but it appears on many high school and college reading lists as the token ethnic work. With all due respect, developing a multi-ethnic course should be about more than adding the perfunctory African American novel. Concomitantly, in many
cases, the study of Asian American literature is limited to Chinese American writers. What about Arab American, Indian American, and Vietnamese American authors?

Another suggestion for incorporating ethnic literature is that we avoid lumping together ethnic writers in our syllabi merely because they share the fact that they are ethnic. Grobman points out that this can lead to “ghettoizing, essentializing, tokenism, and stereotyping” ("Toward a Multicultural Pedagogy" 232). While there may be commonalities between ethnic groups, we know that looking at what people share often leads to stereotyping. Certainly, there may be some value in looking at what ethnic groups have in common, but there is more to be gained by exploring what Grobman refers to as “cultural differences,” meaning that we need to acquire “culture-specific knowledge” (232).

To be sure, placing an emphasis on culture necessitates that the instructor be prepared to fill in what are often significant gaps and misunderstandings for we must also combat our students’ commercially influenced notions of ethnicity. Students need to understand that their familiarity with the films of Jackie Chan and Chinese style all-you-can-eat buffets does not make them experts in Chinese culture. Certainly, this requires extra effort on the instructor’s part and the realization that we cannot become experts in all-things-ethnic, but we can, in a sense, share the responsibility. Grobman notes that this can be accomplished through student presentations, secondary readings, and guest lecturers (227), and in my experience, these strategies are effective.

In particular, I find assigning oral presentations to be valuable, for this encourages students to be active learners. For example, I have used Anzia Yezierska’s novel Bread Givers in Women and Literature, Coming of Age Literature, and Literature and the American Dream, and it is a work that is always well received by students. Presentation topics included Jewish immigration, Ellis Island, the teachings of the Torah, and Jacob Riis’s How the Other Half Lives. I sometimes use Sandra Cisneros’s The
House on Mango Street in the same courses, and the presentation topics include Mexican immigration, and secondary readings include excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza. When I teach The Color Purple, a colleague who is a musician brings her keyboard to class and gives a short lecture on the history of blues music and juke joints. While we may make every effort to bring to life the cultural elements of a work, we also have to accept that there is no shame in saying, “I don’t know, but I’ll find out and get back to you” when a student asks a question that we cannot answer. And, sometimes, there is no easy answer. For example, Yuan Shu discusses the complexity and variability of Asian values and how we need to consider this when teaching Asian American literature.

So how should we incorporate ethnic texts into our existing reading lists? Some people categorize according to genre, but I like organizing chronologically according to the works’ setting, allowing each work to represent a chapter, if you will, in American history. In doing so, I take a quasi New Historical approach. I will acknowledge that Brook Thomas warns against organizing texts chronologically because doing so “is only superficially historical” (89) and it reinforces the “fragmented, unrelated experiences” that our undergraduates have. Despite her concern, I have found a chronological approach to be effective, and I work to fill in gaps in history as we move from one time period to the next.

While the cultural aspects of a work must be explored and, as noted, this can be accomplished in a variety of ways, we also need to consider ethnic writing as literature. TuSmith agrees: “If, as critics, scholars, and teachers, we read ethnically identified texts exclusively for their cultural content, their political message, their historicity, or whatever, we are not really treating them as literary works of art—as artistic creations” (9). She believes that “[o]ur approaches to ethnic texts often fall short of substantive critical analyses” (8), and, in fact, we need to “insist on professionally valid appraisals of ethnic texts” and put forth an “honest
assessment” of the literature (TuSmith 10). In truth, doing so might help us prove to naysayers that ethnic writing does have value as literature. Indeed, Grobman explains that “[a]s multiculturalists we must be able to counter charges that multicultural literature dilutes literary education; we must be able to articulate that our literary curricular choices are not grounded exclusively in critiques of race, gender, and class” (“The Value and Valuable” 86-7). Grobman encourages the use of “aesthetic judgements” that are “intimately connected with dominant cultural standards of value” because the standards have “not yet been replaced” (“The Value and Valuable” 83). Thus, it is acceptable and, in fact, productive, to use conventional methods to address multicultural literature. The ethnic works that I assign are subjected to the same close reading as the traditional works in that students must identify, the plot, theme, narrative voice, and setting of the works.

It is important to acknowledge that we may encounter conflicts when teaching ethnic literature. Certainly, there is the potential for tension when the issue of race enters into any discussion. Cynthia Hogue recommends ground rules that should be discussed at the beginning of the semester. These include acknowledging the existence of oppression, being a respectful listener, and challenging stereotypes. Kim Parker, Hogue’s co-author, calls these “rules of engagement.” Parker’s ground rules require that students avoid racist and other derogatory language, even when quoting from a text. We should also avoid being the type of instructor who asks a student to be a “native informant,” what bell hooks explains as expecting a single person to act as the spokesperson for the race (43-4).

And as Trudy Christine Palmer notes, “We are bound to make mistakes as we put into place the structure and goals of multicultural literacy. We will have imbalanced classes, token texts, even uninformed readings” (221). Sometimes a text that we love doesn’t translate well in the classroom. For example, Gigi Jasper discusses the frustration that she
experienced when she used *The Woman Warrior* in a nearly all-white Wyoming high school. While there is no doubt that it is an outstanding cross genre work, the novel is challenging to teach, even at the college level. So while Jasper says that her high school “students are appalled by how ‘foreign’ the story is” (93), perhaps this is their attempt to articulate the frustration that they feel as they try to distinguish what is real and what is fantasy in the novel. The high school students’ difficulty in interpreting an especially demanding work might give them the false impression that all ethnic literature is too “foreign” for them to appreciate. As is always the case, we want to keep our resisting readers in mind when we select texts. While it’s unlikely that all of my choices will appeal to everyone, I hope that my students might be exposed to an author that they, at the very least, find bearable. When a class raved about Sherman Alexie’s *Indian Killer* and said that it was the type of book that they would read on their own, I felt like I’d accomplished a great feat.

Our literature classrooms *can* be places where we encourage our students to accept and appreciate the diversity of the literature of the United States and, in turn, its diverse people. The consequence of teaching multicultural literature is, as Ling states, “the affirmation of the most fundamental principle of a democracy: to give all people an equal voice” (6), and Keating confirms this by stating that “students and teachers can be changed through our exploration of multicultural issues and themes” (93). Palmer observes that “[t]he traditional English department that teaches a predominantly white, male canon is a ghetto, training students in an extremely narrow view of the world” (223). Conversely, an English department that teaches a diverse canon is broadening our students’ view of America and encouraging acceptance by demystifying the unfamiliar.
References


Thomas, Brook. “The Historical Necessity for—and Difficulties with—New Historical Analysis in Introductory Literature Courses.” *Practicing