Multiethnic American Literatures

Essays for Teaching Context and Culture

Edited by
Helane Adams Androne

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For Becky Benoit,
my first and best teacher

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Introduction: Teaching to the (Con)Text

Ask a teacher of literature about what characterizes American literature, and you will likely elicit a number of worthwhile answers. One might hear the familiar explanations about literatures borne of the pursuit of liberties big and small, about familiar tropes that suggest visions of bootstraps and American fortitude. American literature is where postmodern and bildungsroman structures loom large and where the pursuit of individuality articulated against the expectations of communalism emerge as a driving force behind an "American spirit." As teachers of multiethnic American literatures, we often find ourselves facing difficult questions based on our role as the ones who introduce students to these literatures and by default suggest through that introduction what is important, interesting and representative. Even so, we long for students to stumble upon the rhetorical patterns, the deeply astute characterizations and complexities of plot. We want them to discover the ironies and the beauty of the voices that emerge within literature. As teachers of American literatures by people "of color," the imperatives and opportunities are even more complex. As J.D. Isip's sarcasm suggests: "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" (Isip 25).

These days, many of us struggle to teach multiethnic American literatures. We may or may not wish to "blow up" the canon, but we at least struggle to make sure that students note that there is a dominant literature that can monopolize the canon, and that both the traditional canonical texts as well as the canon's "others" ought to be of interest because of what they reveal about issues of privilege and attending identity politics that also characterize what it means to be "American." Traditionally these texts can find their way into the last bits of the instructional time within the American literature survey course, or out of the canon altogether with only honorable mention, keenly represented by how much time and energy and emphasis their com-

plexities receive in the larger discourse of the course. As Isip suggests, plenty of teachers, in a basic buck against the limitations of chronology and anthology, sprinkle their classes with literatures from the margins, but grow to understand the difficulty of that when dealing with students who have been long exposed to dominant ideologies that make the classics seem familiar and that make the literatures of minoritized populations seem different, strange, and transgressive. Marci L. Carrasquillo notes that, despite a change of venue from a "very small, private, religiously affiliated liberal arts college in the Midwest where, in 2008–2009, 3.6 percent of a 1479-member student body belonged to an underrepresented group," to a "a mid-sized, public university in a major metropolitan area in the northeast" where the students tend to be less affluent, more diverse, and have had significantly more interaction with texts by writers "of color," she finds that her students were similarly ill-equipped to address more complex questions that often emerged if not characterized such texts (64, 65). Instead, Carrasquillo finds that:

> Unfortunately, when such students find themselves reading literature that not only does not reflect their experiences as American citizens or their understanding of what an American is, can, or should be, but that also requires them to examine the often unequal ethno-racial, class, gender, and linguistic dynamics from which they might benefit, some simply refuse to participate in discussions, while others assume an antagonistic presence in the classroom. Both responses can seriously disrupt the learning environment [71].

It is this reality of which most of us are keenly aware. Teaching these literatures means engaging students in deeply troubling discourses at times, conversations that fly in the face of their present day assumptions and beliefs about race, ethnicity, class, gender, spirituality and sexuality. And so we code these literatures as "ethnic" or "multicultural," often separating them from the American literature survey to free the traditional canon from the opportunity to really engage such "others" or to allow the necessary space to engage the complexities and question traditional assumptions, with the un/fortunate result that we signal to students that these literatures are indeed "different," that there are ideological questions within them that require specific acknowledgment. And that is the conundrum for teachers of American literature who wish to teach in the plural. The authors of these texts are historically non-canonical to the body of work that has been legitimately attached to American literature by virtue of their identities and the attachment of those identities to histories and politics that education systems have and continue to struggle to acknowledge. These literatures remind us of the flaws within the Dream, the boundaries of citizenship, and the underbelly of the idealism, which have

as much characterized this nation as any other trait of opportunity has built its reputation. Teaching culture and context in American literatures means we attempt to legitimize and complicate the existential questions that our students struggle to engage typically through texts written by Americans "of color." We teach what is often referred to in the post-secondary environment as "American ethnic literatures," which implies both the foregrounding of ethnicity and the explicit difference of that ethnicity in relationship to what it means to be "American." Many of us seek to adjust the focus toward specificity. Multiethnic American literatures, as it's used in this book interchangeably with American clinic literature, includes literatures by authors "of color" and by those considered "white" who identify in ethno-cultural ways, less because of their actual invisibility than for the passion with which they undermine and reveal the less frequently spoken truths about human experience within the United States. Because these literatures force our serious examination of the assumptions of privilege, equal citizenship and justice, and sometimes call up raw and intense experiences from the liminal spaces that rapidly growing minority and academically marginalized populations occupy, these texts find themselves flying in the face of the idealism of mobility, universality of privilege, and absence of persistently restrictive systems modeled in much of the literature in the canon. Instead, many of the texts that question these limits end up on "banned" lists in many educational systems, available only to the persistent after activism or approval. For our students, this leaves a gap not only in their understanding of the rich and diverse literature of the United States, but also a gap in both a deeper sense of the multiply interpreted contexts that produce American literatures and a greater understanding of the variety of ways that human experience in such a unique nation has been and continues to be expressed and revealed.

In more contemporary arguments, there is the notion that these literatures should be included within the canon and no longer separated out as different from it. In other words, there is no need to fetter out branches of American literature as much as take on a more inclusive perspective for what American really means. The activist work of the 1960s that called attention to the race, class and gender absences within public education's literary and cultural studies, some have argued, was an effort to prove the necessary inclusion of these texts as part of the canon. Others argue that these original efforts recognized that these literatures required and determined to have their own spaces for study precisely because those spaces would allow for the deeper engagement with the contextual realities that affect and produce such works. These spaces would provide a safe space for the conversations that might cri-

tique and address the inequalities and inherent revelations about the realities of living in an idealized and unique nation. In either case, the argument presses us to understand that these texts carry with them contexts that intervene in the text, build upon the text, and help us to reveal and learn about the text in ways that are unique, important and useful to balancing our disciplinary knowledge (history, sociology, law, sciences, politics, etc.) because of the ways in which they question accepted modes and tenets of American experience as it has been customarily idealized and universalized. Yes, some of us necessarily teach cultural studies precepts; and, no, others of us would argue that we do not teach cultural studies. What we do is deeply informed by cultural studies, but rarely can we do justice to the breadth and depth of cultural studies when it comes to teaching introductory or survey literature courses; what we can do is deal deeply, in one way or another, with context and with the text itself. In the *University of Chicago Magazine*, Elizabeth Station's article, "Teaching to the Text," looks at the Edgar J. Goodspeed collection of New Testament manuscripts and fragments, discussing the beauty, the personal and tactile encounter with these texts, the portable codex that represented a "media revolution" of the time, and the inevitable damage that comes from deep engagement with these texts. For K-12 teachers, the phrase is a rhythmic revision on the heavily debated and most recently maligned idea that one must focus on the standardized tests when teaching and, therefore, "teach to the test." While I openly and adamantly reject this latter notion for K-12 learning, in this book, I accept the revision of this phrase through the metaphor Station provides by suggesting that there is indeed a dangerous encounter, a specific and forceful purpose in what we do as well: We "teach to the text."

Whatever the stance and whichever way these debates about the positioning of multiethnic literatures resolve institutionally, the assumption of this book is that our experiences have at least revealed that the reading of these literatures requires an intimacy of interaction with texts and their contexts that usually involves difficult conversations about the interplay of history, politics, and religion with regard to race, ethnicity, culture, spirituality, gender, and class. It is this that allows multiethnic text to sharpen our view of canonical texts. We can also agree that these texts, though they intersect so fluidly with contextual realities, they are not only their contexts. They are not only about the memories and questions, they are also about the strategies, stylistics and poetics that we adore as lovers of literature. These literatures are as much about the textual choices as any and these choices can as much point us to unique author styles as they can simultaneously speak to issues of context. Teaching to the text suggests teaching to engage the content and form of that expression Multiethnic American liter-

atures expand our understanding of structure, rhythm, and voice even as they stretch us to cross established boundaries of space, language, nation, and spirit.

The obvious debate emerges from the commentary above: every author is "ethnic" and every text has a context. True. What I find most interesting about what I teach is the way that the texts within the texts, the contexts to which authors openly refer and those which are implicit, present counter-arguments to dominant ideologies that have been perhaps previously unquestioned by our students. And so, the interplay of identity politics that happen in literatures that are written by people who are located on societal margins is part of the interpretation of meaning and craft in these texts. They are speaking back to the canon from within and outside of it and our jobs in the classroom have often meant helping students to hear that conversation and draw meaning from it. Not all American literatures have required the kinds of conversations that teaching these literatures require, nor have traditional literatures always facilitated the approach into deeply ingrained sensitivities within students regarding their core beliefs and values with regard to race, gender, language, religion, citizenship and class. I would argue that many such texts simply didn't intend to move in that direction. In fact, it's not that traditionally canonical works don't comment on these concepts; American literatures have always commented upon these realities by virtue of absence and exclusion, which is at least a comment, if not a specific argument. Those canonized works that begin to articulate scathing truths related to race, gender and class have rocked the canon and society, and have been at times historically situated as propaganda, or in the other extreme, have been held up as the acceptable methods for addressing such issues, though arguably they have been deeply neglected outside specialized circles for their representations of craft and artistic merit. The stretch into sensitive spaces is, however, unavoidable for literatures written by and about American "minorities." Is it possible to address the craft of writing by African Americans without engaging the metaphors of invisibility and privilege that are part of a context of racism, or to appreciate the stylistic language choices of Latino/a writers without necessarily remarking on the politics of linguistic identity and citizenship, or to understand the delicate dialogics of Asian American literatures without a sense of the social politics between generations, or to read metaphors of internalized exile in Arab American literature outside the United States' response to extremist protest, or to imagine that one can sustain a conversation about the rhythm and symbolism of Native American literature without consideration to the cultural tokenism that abounds in the popular culture of the United States? As teachers of American literatures, we cannot dwell only in the con-

texts of the literatures we teach; however, we can stress that the privilege of not reading such issues abounds within the constructs of much traditionally canonical American literature, which can speak to the issues of life as if they are matters of individual choices held in isolation, by virtue of theme and possibility. It is that privilege that teachers of American literatures necessarily obscure in the classroom simply by suggesting that there is another reality, another body of work that makes different assumptions, operates under different rules, and makes altogether different suggestions about the state of freedom, democracy, spirituality, and the moral obligations of the writer.

I mean to suggest, then, that there is a difference between teaching these literatures in a separated context and teaching them within the context of American Literature as a course. There is work to be done when teaching these literatures that involves the unpacking of privilege and the disclosing of racially dependent stereotypes and assumptions, the recovering of history and politics that worked to immobilize some as it mobilized others, whether we engage these conversations at the center or margins of our teaching practices. Taking on the teaching of American literatures written by authors committed to the relevance of perspectives that scrape and tatter dominant views of what it means to be American in an American context feels for students very much like personal affronts to the values they hold dear, quite often the same values that led them to our classrooms in the first place.

We teach these students, trying to find ways to weave in and out of the texts they read and the texts they've built up in their minds about who they are and how the world works. So we try to find balance between our focus on the creativity and skill of the authored text and what it teaches us about craft even as we need to provide reasonable contextual foundations for our students for whom American history seems a distant and expansive Pandora's box. The premise of this compilation is that we assist students in reading, recognizing, interpreting, positioning, analyzing and imagining American literatures not as different, but differently. We want students to hear the voices, examine the contexts, and even develop their own texts as they develop their relationship to American literatures. Some of us work from the context in, others from the text out. Whatever our methods, we engage deeply with texts and contexts to help our students engage more deeply with meaning. While we well know what engaging these texts and contexts meant in the culture wars of the 1960s when the struggle looked even worse for expanding the canonical spaces to include conversations about the relevance of race, gender and class, what does such a designation mean for a twenty-first century classroom within which students are likely more accustomed to inter-

cultural contexts—at least through popular culture, if not their own personal experiences—and in a time when "information" has in some ways become interchangeable with "knowledge" and students interact in modes that question the very structure of current educational systems?

There are many texts available that address approaches to teaching texts established as classic during the twentieth century, but not even a few actually provide instructors with a variety of opportunities to incorporate contemporary American literatures and both culturally and pedagogically based methods into their classrooms. American literatures present an ongoing dialogue between ethnic individual and mainstream culture, history, class, religion, politics and sexuality. All of these issues are at play for teachers attempting to establish ethnically inclusive literary curriculums. Not since the middle 1990s has a book been published to speak to the questions that we have as teachers of American literatures in the plural. In 1996, John R. Maitino and David R. Peck published the very useful *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures: Nineteen Essays* in which they offer critical essays on teaching longer prose by the four "major" ethnic groups of the United States. Other books on the teaching of American literatures are more specifically focused on one or another group, or are those which have served as important resources for our thinking about the contexts inherent in the texts we teach. Maitino and Peck's book is useful for those who teach survey courses as well as those who are planning their experiences in specialized courses. The book is a wonderful precursor to this one in that it features the most currently canonized of American ethnics, such as N. Scott Momaday, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, Rudolfo Anaya, and Sandra Cisneros among others; however, it is poised in a time when criticism on these works was emergent and only beginning to truly flourish. To this point, the book remains more useful for teachers desiring an initial exploration of these works in their classrooms. The pedagogical strategies associated with each essay is secondary; the critical reading of the texts and their associated discourses are the primary focus. In that respect it opens an important conversation on the pedagogical complexities of teaching such texts, but it also presents an opportunity for an expanded discourse now that criticism, exposure, and technology have changed enough to allow for another conversation to emerge.

When I began teaching American literatures, it was as an English department graduate student working in a diverse, public research university that served over 30,000 students and boasted a separate American ethnic studies department. I assisted instructors with Asian American studies courses and had the great fortune of being assigned as the instructor of my own (recently

vacated) Introduction to Black Studies course. So, armed with someone else's syllabus, deep insecurities about my preparedness, and energy sustained by the course content and its relationship to my future interests, I dove right in and waded into the deep waters with my students. As a novice, certain questions would often follow me into my classes: Am I doing justice to these texts? How do I get students to inquire, engage and learn something worthwhile about themselves and their world through their interactions with these texts? As an English graduate student, I was deeply invested in the study and teaching of writing alongside the study and teaching of literature. I sought after opportunities to do both, resolved that engaging texts could also emerge within the processes involved in creating texts. I have since taught as much or more composition as I have taught American ethnic literatures. Now, as a tenured associate professor, I cross programmatic borders between rhetoric and composition and literature regularly, but it is rare that I get to sit in on a colleague's course without the stigma of evaluation, despite in my own mind being deeply interested in sharing with others as well as learning from the classrooms of my dynamic and fruitful senior and junior colleagues. But research, family, service opportunities and such can press us further and further into our own corners of the academy, create and sustain for us imagined distances more often than collaborations and, if we are not careful, we can find ourselves operating in practiced isolation, imagining that we have become "experts."

At multiple moments within my own teaching, I have felt those same questions emerge from when I was a graduate student; armed with the attitude that I can specialize without being an "expert" who is somehow beyond innovation. I thrive on the kind of pedagogical interaction that challenges my interpretations, my philosophies, and my methods for teaching multiethnic American literatures and I pursue learning from multiple sources that do not always seem to communicate on equal terms. There is a clear line others have drawn between educational levels, perhaps even more stringent than that of the line often etched out between rhetoric and composition programs and literature programs, American literatures and American ethnic literatures, that I have actively crossed and I have encouraged others to do so as well. And so this book is for border crossers, those who, like me, still want fresh perspectives on real classroom practices that make a difference in the experience that students can have with American literatures, and still want to imagine the multiple ways of getting students to engage texts and generate texts themselves so that they better understand how and from what American literature emerges. Some have said that one should write the book one desires to read. This book is what I wanted in my hand as a graduate student and on my shelf as a teacher scholar, a book that both challenges me and provides

me with an opportunity to look into the classrooms of my peers to learn from them and, well, to adapt their best practices, a sort of appreciative and less covert thievery, into my own courses.

I should note that this is not a handbook; that was not at all what I needed since it would have encouraged my prescriptive enforcement of the "correct" moves to make in the classroom. No book could possibly provide for the "correct" way to teach anything. Seeking that seems akin to looking for random visits from upper administration into one's classes; teaching handbooks provide an unnecessary amount of stress if and when the handbook's carefully constructed and articulated methods fail miserably in one's own class. Inevitably, a handbook would stand as perfect and the teacher using it would be the failure, along with her obstinate and unprepared students. What we learn from each other is what works for certain teachers in certain contexts. Then, we can consider our similarities and differences, adapt and apply as we see fit. Teachers who are deeply invested in their students' learning are usually deeply invested in their own learning. We have to be connected enough to our contexts and to the needs and abilities of our students to understand there is no handbook for what we do because our students are ever changing and evolving in their motivations, their experiences, their commitments. Part of the reason that we do this work is to be always learning and revising and updating our thinking about the world and its texts.

As a teacher open to this sort of pedagogical input, I want to do more than expand my thinking about the classroom and institutional goals. Sometimes I just want to be excited and refreshed. I want to reach out to my colleagues near and far and be renewed by their thinking about pedagogy in the same way that I am renewed by innovative thinking in my research area. Fortunately, we now have multiple teaching journals and online resources that feature the variety of teaching strategies associated with American literatures in varied contexts and using multiple modes. Publishing about teaching practice does much to affect our teaching by providing a space within which we reflect and acknowledge our achievements and challenges with our multiple texts and contexts. Professional journals, like *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition and Culture* and *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* provide critical forums for teacher-scholars to share and re-think professional and ideological groundings within realistic circumstances of teaching.

My stance on cross-disciplinary/level/program sharing is inspired by a history of interacting with educators and the experience of my work with the writing project at my university, which is a site of the National Writing Project. If there is a mantra of a writing project site, it is that "the best teacher of a