Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 12
Issue 1 *The Multicultural Classroom*

Article 3

1996

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Recommended Citation

Stenson, Linnea A. (1996) "A Place at the Table: Teaching Multicultural American Literature," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1499>

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A Place at the Table: Teaching Multicultural American Literature

Linnea A. Stenson

"Ah! America, with all thy rich boons, thou hast a heavy account to render for the talent given; see in every way that thou be not found wanting."

— Margaret Fuller

"Why are we reading this stuff?" "Aren't you being a little too politically correct?" "Is this *really* literature?" These questions, sometimes expressed out loud, sometimes in short response papers, often accompany a discussion of non-canonical authors, especially in a class where, other than gender, there are no marked differences between students. Underlying all of these questions is the one I believe most students ask of any course work: "What does this have to do with me?" Too often, our students have the idea that any writing by non-whites or women in our culture is "victim literature."

Examining the ubiquitous notion that "multicultural literature equals victimization" falls outside the scope of this essay. Nonetheless, it can have a stifling influence on students' open-mindedness regarding the reading of non-canonical texts. What might work as a key to opening our students up to writers who they believe fall outside their ken? One way that I have found useful is to ask students to read accounts of writers who, despite the difficulties of assimilation, nonetheless attempted to find a better life within these shores. As well, through exposure to multicultural literature, students can come to learn that even within a classroom that hosts no students of color that ethnic differences exist. I encourage stu-

dents to talk with family elders. They often find stories of successes and stories of failures, narrative histories that are at best ambiguous in their sentiments about becoming an American. I also ask students to "free write" about special holiday traditions. These brainstormed stories frequently reveal unique dishes or activities that have been passed on from generation to generation. That

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these foods or activities have survived the years, sometimes without any understanding of their origins, speaks to the delights and difficulties of assimilation. Through this activity, students can come to understand that all American writers have something to do with their lives. My course syllabus attempts to take these concerns into account, and I work to frame the questions we bring to these texts in a way that gets students to

see connections among the writers, issues they write about, and their own lives.

I teach at Macalester College, an institution that has adopted as part of its mission a "special emphasis on ... multiculturalism" (*Macalester* 6). Individual faculty members may disagree how this should come about. However, a number of us in the English Department have chosen to regularly build syllabi based on a belief that the material we teach and the epistemologies that inform that material can be enhanced, perhaps understood better, if from the start we include works by non-canonical writers, from a variety of cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds, all of whom have much talent to give to our nation's understanding of itself. The United States of America does have especially "rich boons" within our literary landscapes. One of the places I've had the opportunity to explore the idea of multicultural literature has been in my department's "American Voices" course listing. This course fulfills the college's humanities requirement and the college's domestic diversity requirement. As well, this is one of the several English courses that serves to "provide a foundation for the further study of literature" and as a prerequisite to our upper division courses (*Macalester* 111).

This course . . . serves to help students understand the emerging literatures of contemporary American fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, as well as to enhance their overall understanding of what it may mean to be an "American."

As an educator, expanding the field of American literature is my deepest teaching commitment. In my version of the "American Voices" course, students are initially challenged about their ideas of what makes "legitimate" literature (a question to which we often return during the semester's readings). We then read widely from late nineteenth through twentieth century "voices," both canonical and non-canonical authors, including such texts as *The Adventures of Huckle-*

berry Finn, blues lyrics, Chinese poetry carved on the walls at the Angel Island immigration center, and Native American speeches to government officials. We also read from the rich collection of narratives written by women in the nineteenth century and immigrants from Europe, Eastern Europe, and Asia. This course, primarily through explorations of an "American" self, serves to help students understand the emerging literatures of contemporary American fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, as well as to enhance their overall understanding of what it may mean to be an "American." I have been greatly aided in my ability to teach such a wide range of writers by the publication of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. This text allows for the reading of a rich tradition of writers from many backgrounds, and has been an invaluable tool in the classroom, both for its collection of writers as well as its informative head notes and framing essays.

One of the ways I find useful to discuss many non-canonical writers is to think of them all exploring, in poetry, fiction, and non-fiction, ways that they or their characters are seeking a place at the table in America. No easy "melting pot" or "tossed salad" metaphors are apt here. Langston Hughes's poem "I, Too" best sums up what many writers explore. "I, too, sing America" says Hughes. While for now "the darker brother" is sent to "eat in the kitchen/When company comes"

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

"Besides" says the poet, "They'll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed—/I, too, am America" (1619). While Hughes is here speaking specifically of the experience of African Americans in their search for recognition, he also speaks to the commonalities and the gifts those presently "eating in the kitchen" share and could bring to the table with the rest of the company. By invoking Walt Whitman, poet and singer of ploughboys, mothers, mechanics, and washer women, of people of all ages, races, and ethnicities,

Hughes reminds us, like Whitman, that “of these one and all I weave the song of myself” (Whitman stanza 15, line 329). Despite the ravages of racism Hughes chronicles, he continues to express hope in the rich promises that America holds out. He fundamentally believes that the table is large enough to accept and rich enough to feed everyone. Hughes may be an outsider by some standards, but he is hopeful that he can come to the center, a place where he rightfully belongs.

Mary Antin, a Jewish immigrant from Czarist Russia in 1894, also writes in *The Promised Land* of her family’s hopes upon journeying to the United States. Antin’s delight as a child in “American” things such as tinned food, a “queer, slippery kind of fruit... called ‘banana,’” and “a curious piece of furniture on runners... called ‘rocking chair’” (943) captures something of the excitement she and her siblings feel when they arrive in their new homeland.

To encourage students to think about these encounters, I have often brought in a pomegranate, star fruit, or mango—some sort of fruit many of them are not likely to have tasted. While we discuss Antin, we eat the fruit and try to capture our own sense of wonder that such an amazing item is readily available to us. I move our discussion to consider the idea that we have all come from school systems that have prepared us for this moment. It is, in fact, access to a free public education, “the essence of American opportunity, the treasure that no thief could touch, not even misfortune or poverty” (943) that most impresses Antin. She writes movingly that her father “brought his children to school as if it were an act of consecration” and “who regarded the teacher of the primer class with reverence.” It is in “the simple act of delivering our school certificates to [the teacher] he took possession of America” (947-948).

While Antin extols assimilation as desirable, it is not without its costs. “It was understood” that her sister Frieda, barely older than Antin herself, “would go to work and I to school.... If... [my father] had been able to support his family unaided, it would have been the culmination of his best hopes to see all his children at school.... There was no choosing possible; Frieda was the

oldest, strongest, the best prepared, and the only one who was of legal age to be put to work” (945). Circumstances of immigration and poverty conspire to make America’s advantages out of reach for some; Antin realizes she is fortunate and celebrates her birth as an American. Education is a commonality that we all have been fortunate to share.

It is this hopefulness in the face of adversity that marks the similarities of many non-canonical writers. Language, culture, food, dress may be given up, often painfully. Many narrators are not totally certain that they should or even want to give up what they brought with them. In the college classroom, students can be encouraged to think about the ways they have assimilated into college life. How have they had to change? What have been the costs of their coming to college? What have been the benefits? Students see that in moving to any new environment, adaptations need to be made in order to survive. This giving up of who one is for who one can become is a regular theme in many narratives. Even some Native American writers explore this theme.

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Charles Alexander Eastman is one Sioux writer who explores the theme of assimilation from within the tensions of maintaining an Indian identity versus “Americanization.” Writing at the close of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Eastman’s work proved especially popular in a nation in which an interest in Indian culture and the notion of the “noble savage” was prevailing at the same time the utter destruction of the very same people and their way of life was public policy. Eastman achieved a level of success, but like most other Indians discovered that wearing “citizen’s clothes” and being educated within an Anglo-American system did nothing to allow him access to the profession in which he had been trained. It is in the autobiographical

work *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* that Eastman most clearly struggles with the difficulties of assimilation. In my mind the most moving moment from his autobiography occurs in the chapter describing the Ghost Dance War in 1890. Eastman, then a government physician at the Pine Ridge agency, becomes a witness to the troubles of the Sioux that culminated in the massacre at Wounded Knee.

I instruct students to read Eastman's work carefully, looking for places where Eastman's identities clash. Despite his assimilation, despite his criticisms of the ghost dancers and other "malcontents," he continually refers to the Sioux as "my people," and is quite critical of the government's removal policies, the deliberate starving of his people, and the utterly inhumane conditions his people were forced to live (and die) under.

Eastman is placed in charge of an expedition to search for Indian casualties three days after receiving word of the massacre at Wounded Knee. He finds the corpses of people "scattered along as they had been relentlessly hunted down and slaughtered while fleeing for their lives" (775). In a few short sentences, Eastman tells us "it took all of my nerve to keep my composure in the face of this spectacle, and of the excitement and grief of my Indian companions, nearly every one of whom was crying aloud or singing his death song" (775) and that "all of this was a severe ordeal for one who had so lately put all his faith in the Christian love and lofty ideals of the white man. Yet I passed no hasty judgment, and was thankful that I might be of some service and relieve even a small part of the suffering" (776).

Young people are often attracted to outsiders, and Eastman's work can be framed by such a discussion. To begin, I ask students to write about the different worlds they belong to. What are those worlds? How do they know if they are insiders or outsiders in those worlds? How do they negotiate between the different responsibilities of those worlds? Students are moved by Eastman's struggle in the fringes of two societies, both in which he identifies deeply and both in which he can never fully belong.

We can read the costs of Eastman's assimilation in a few short sentences, while simultaneously reading of his desire nonetheless to be a participant in a "national" (although racist) culture. Through writing and discussion, students, at an age in which they are exploring questions about who they are and how they relate to the world, can connect their own conflicting worlds, responsibilities, and desires to Eastman's struggles.

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How did white ethnics explore these themes? Peter Finley Dunne's work frequently sings praises to the Irish immigrants who populated Chicago's south side neighborhood of Bridgeport at the turn of the century. His fictional character Mr. Dooley proves an astute social commentator on everything from immigrant crossing narratives to the value of firemen to communities and reports of the Spanish-American War. Dunne, through his mouthpiece Mr. Dooley, criticizes Henry Cabot Lodge's proposed literacy test to restrict immigration. Mr. Dooley notes that

I was rayceived with open arms that sometimes ended in a clinch. I was afraid I wasn't goin' to assimilate with th' airlyer pilgrim fathers an' th' instichoochions iv th' counthry, but I soon found that a long swing iv th' pick make me as good as another man an' it didn't require a gr-reat intellect... an' befure I was here a month, I felt enough like a native born American to burn a witch. (853)

Mr. Dooley recognizes the invaluable contributions immigrants had made to the making of America, noting that when the members of "Plymouth Rock Assocyation" get together, including "Schwartzmeister an' Mulcahey an' Ignacio Sbarbaro an' Nels Larsen an' Petrus Gooldvink... All th' pilgrim fathers is rayquested fr to bring interpreters" (855). Mr. Dooley, a much-loved figure, speaks eloquently about the lives of Irish

immigrants in their pursuit of an American self. In this, he spoke for the experiences of many white ethnics who left homelands to find a better life in America. White students invariably draw a connection to their own family heritages, commenting on the ways that "white" yields itself up to more distinct, more complex ethnicities, and noting that these ethnicities have powerful writers who speak of the experience.

The writers all mentioned can be compared and contrasted with other writers. Hughes's "I, Too" might be read with his Jesse B. Simple stories that humorously critique American racism. Narratives about the migration north of many African Americans can be compared to stories from European immigrants. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* can be read with African-American folk tales or the work of Charles Waddell Chesnutt, so students can see that a lively tradition of action and resistance existed within African-American communities. Mary Antin's optimism may be read against a writer such as Abraham Cahan and his work *Yekl*. Yekl, who changes his name to Jake as part of his assimilation, wholeheartedly embraces American-ness, but at the cost of his Jewish heritage, something Jake feels ambivalent about at best.

During class discussion, students frequently respond by telling how their own family names have been altered in America. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* can be read as a cautionary tale of the plight of poor, working class Lithuanian immigrants (socialism *ex machina* and all). On the syllabus I group interrelated authors and themes, and ask students to write about them as a group. In these response papers, students invariably draw larger connections themselves, comparing and contrasting authors and their attitudes toward ethnicity and assimilation.

. . . my students begin to see that multicultural literature is a powerful center to a full accounting of American literary history, that all American literature can be seen as multicultural.

Younghill Kang, a man born in Korea, immigrated to the United States in 1921. Kang took for himself the difficult task of writing about the Korean experience in America at a time when anti-Asian sentiment was at an all-time high. Nonetheless, in *East Goes West*, Kang writes poignantly and critically about the experiences of a young and educated Korean man who seeks a place in American life. Kang's hopeful work can be compared with the despairing poems of incarcerated Chinese immigrants, carved on the walls of the Angel Island immigration center.

Charles Alexander Eastman's work might well be read with Gertrude Bonnin's, another Sioux writer who is much more unequivocal in tallying the costs of assimilation to her sense of herself as a Native American woman. While she believed in cross-cultural understandings between whites and Indians, she did not want it to come about as a result of the loss of Native American cultural identity and spiritual traditions. In class discussions and written work, students respond positively to both her desire for communion between all people and acknowledgment of differences. Even contemporary coming out stories and poems of lesbians and gay men can be seen as narratives that explore their search for a place at the table of America. When presented under this rubric, students are less resistant to the ideas within these writings, and more likely to understand the yearnings present as part of the larger tradition of explorations of an American self.

What is most important about these comparisons is that students can see for themselves that all this "politically correct" literature is a much more complicated melange than they've been led to believe. Multiculturalism can become something other than yet another way to marginalize the already marginalized, a recolonization of the colonized. Instead, my students begin to see that multicultural literature is a powerful *center* to a full accounting of American literary history, that *all* American literature can be seen as multicultural.

In comparing writers or themes, students see that there is no simple way to characterize multicultural literature. These voices, despite racial or ethnic differences, can be heard as

always having been in conversation with one another, rather than added as political afterthoughts. The notion of an "American" identity becomes more complicated and rich for the telling, and that it has everything to do with us and the writers we read today. Toward the end of the course, my students and I read a short story by contemporary writer Bharati Mukherjee (a woman born in Calcutta, India). Mukherjee insists that she is an American writer, not a South Asian-American writer. If I have done what I set out to at the beginning of the course, students can hear in that statement both a love for this country and a critique of an American identity that only accommodates a European birthplace for that identity. This is a suitably more complicated idea, and one that befits a comprehensive understanding of the literature of America.

I don't want to sound like I believe we are all happy, shiny people, "rainbow warriors" in a beautiful and prejudice-free multi-culti world. I could easily build a syllabus out of writers who felt America had no virtues and for whom Americanization served simply to steal from them their selves. These differences are important—central, I would argue. But all of our families have looked hard at, been cheated by, and sometimes thrived under the promises of America. Students, especially those who have gained some measure of the resources America offers, need to see that all of these writers have something to do with their

lives. It is only when students can begin to understand that indeed, we all do have much in common, all of us, that real learning about and appreciation of these differences can begin. Margaret Fuller's words reach forward to remind us that this country does have much in the way of talent, not the least of which is a rich and varied literary history. We owe our students a more complete and complex awareness of these traditions. As teachers, it is in this responsibility that we need not be found wanting.

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