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Teaching the Pluralistic Tradition of American Literatures

HERTHA D. WONG

By now we are tired of hearing about the Euro-centrism of the American literary canon. We are bored with constant discussion of how we should include more women and people of color in our courses. Many of us have been doing this for years, devising our courses to be more fully representative of the pluralistic tradition of American literature. As individuals we have wrestled and negotiated with colleagues, department chairs, deans, and even students about the curriculum. While I was completing my dissertation and for one year after it was completed, I taught at a small private liberal arts college in the Midwest, an institution known for its National Merit Scholars. Just before my arrival, the department chair warned me in a friendly way that I should not be disappointed if no one registered for my upper-division Native American Literature course since there were so few Indian students on campus. Like many well meaning academicians, he believed that any course in "ethnic" literature would appeal only to individuals from that background. You can imagine my delight when I arrived for class the first day to find interested students flowing out the doorways into the hall for what turned out to be the first course in American Indian literature ever taught there. At the same institution later that year, I overheard an English major complaining to his advisor that "there was nothing good to take next term." The advisor responded by pointing out an array of possibilities from the class schedule, noting particularly two courses in African American Literature. This model student's response was: "Oh, yuck!" After that profound exchange, the advisor walked to my office across the hall for consolation. I wondered aloud: If this student dismisses African American literature, with its solid critical corpus, as irrelevant, what would he say about *Native* American literature, which has just recently begun to be studied seriously as literature?

Yet as far as many of my colleagues were concerned, English literature was the all-wise parent, canonical American literature was an unfortunate stepchild that must be tolerated, but ethnic American literatures were illegitimate offspring at best. During one of my annual reviews at a state university in California, a colleague was to evaluate one of my classes. As we arranged schedules, I explained to him the title and content of the course: Major American Authors, in which we were studying the

works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. Major American Authors: Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. He turned to me and said, "Isn't that a contradiction in terms?" Never mind that both women received Pulitzer Prizes, that both women have written and been written about extensively. In that same class were two teaching credential students who never read the course description and were angry to find that the course in Major American Authors did not focus on Hemingway or Faulkner. Originally, they saw no "use" in studying black authors; they did not even understand that African American literature *is* part of American literature.

From the examples cited, it is clear that our students *learn* these opinions; they are not born believing that ethnic writers are inferior. Certainly, they absorb these notions from professors like my former colleague, but they also learn from the relative *absence* of such writers in the overall curriculum. Examine our catalogues, our curricula, the very structure of MLA. How would you feel if you were a student and never saw yourself in the literature you read in school, if you never saw yourself in your professors, if you were rendered invisible and silent? What we call American literature (more accurately the literature of the United States) has been English-oriented, while Latino and African, Asian, and Native American authors are catalogued as "Other." Certainly implementing a more pluralistic approach to American literatures is threatened by those like E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom who promote "cultural literacy" as if it were a monolithic and static entity to be passed on intact from generation to generation. But as scholars like Paul Lauter have pointed out, the very notion of the canon is flexible, shaped by political, social, and historical influences. Similarly fluid are notions of ethnicity, Americanness, and literature. There is no longer such a thing as a homogeneous classroom, particularly in California where by the year 2000 we will have a majority of so-called "ethnic minorities." One function of education, then, is to prepare *all* students to participate in a multi-cultural world.

II

Today, more than 200 years after the beginning of the republic, we are just beginning to recognize the multitude of American voices—African American, Asian American, Chicano/Latino, and Native American—which compose American literature. Such ethnic plurality did not begin in the liberal 1960s, although perhaps our awareness of it did. Because U.S. citizens are not only white and Western, we need to rectify the Euro-centric/Anglophilic approaches to American literature. One way to do this is to amplify the geographic, religious, political, cultural, and ethnic plurality of what has been called "the American experience."

A course in American autobiography is well suited to just such a re-examination of the American literary canon. Despite our post-modern skepticism about the reality of the self, whether or not "announcements of the death of the unified self are

premature" (Eakin), we stubbornly persist in believing in, speaking of, and writing about ourselves. Any notion of self is a linguistic, cultural, and historical construction as well as a personal one. To study autobiography one must examine its roots—self, life, and writing. How does one define oneself? How does one nurture a distinct "self" in the diversity of the United States? What events are important in one's *life*? What does an autobiographer emphasize, diminish? How does one *write* about oneself? Can autobiography be spoken rather than written? Looking at various modes of autobiography as attempts not only to write one's life, but to create and shape a self in language, can be a unifying strategy for examining the diversity of American literature, even from its beginnings.

By now it is nothing new to challenge the so-called "beginning" of American literature, though most literary handbooks insist that "American literature" is supposed to begin around 1608 with John Smith's account of the New World. Some scholars, like James D. Hart, the editor of *The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, claim to deviate from "conventional standards," explaining that he "attempts to include not only the leading authors, books, and periodicals, but also those less distinguished writers and works whose qualities make them noteworthy as representative of their time" (Hart 861). Is it possible for ethnic minorities, those who did not write the "official history" of the country, to be "representative of their time"? Representative of whom and from whose perspective? Likewise, discussing American literature in terms of "the Puritan mind" makes sense only if we limit our focus to whites in the Northeast. Helpful as this myth is in creating an American identity and a *unified* literary tradition, it ignores Southern and Western literary works, non-English writing and oral traditions. Considering all of these may contribute to a more inclusive, multi-dimensional literary tradition, and, concurrently, acknowledge the transition from orality to literacy.

Eighty years before Captain John Smith arrived in Virginia, the Spanish explorer Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca and his expedition arrived in what is now Florida, and "were the first Europeans to cross the North American continent from shore to shore" (Cabeza de Vaca n.p.). The account of his journey was published in 1542 as *Relacion de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*. The expedition accounts of De Soto, Coronado, and others followed. American literature might begin with such explorer journals. Like those of later British authors, these travel narratives describe the continent's landscape, animals, and people in terms of wonder and conquest. They also provide historical background for an understanding of Chicano literature which arose from the long, intimate, and painful interaction of Spanish invaders and indigenous peoples. In addition, including expedition accounts acknowledges the western and southern regions of what is now the United States.

American literature may more accurately begin, though, with the pre-Columbian oral, artistic, and dramatic traditions of indigenous peoples. Even before Europeans arrived, diversity was a reality on the American continent. The mis-named "Indians" were never a homogeneous group. According to writer-anthropologist Michael

Dorris, “the pre 1492 Western Hemisphere was among the most linguistically and culturally plural areas the world has ever known.” Throughout North and South America native peoples comprised more than 300 distinct culture groups, from differing geographical regions, who spoke anywhere from 1000 to 2000 different languages—with many more dialects (Dorris 147). Each of these groups had pre-literate traditions of creative expression.

Long before Columbus stumbled onto this hemisphere five centuries ago, native peoples of the Americas had means of sharing their personal stories. As well as oral traditions, they had “a number of recording systems . . . which have a literary legacy of their own” (Brotherston 15). From the “quipu [knotted cords] libraries” of the Inca (17), to “the birchbark scrolls of the Algonkin,” to the pictographic paintings on rocks and hides of the Plains and Woodlands tribes, to the totemic carvings of the Northwest and the wampum belts of the Northeast, tribal peoples were sharing their personal narratives. One could “read” about the martial or spiritual achievements, the worldly or religious aspirations of one’s community members in these varied artistic forms.

As well as oral and pictographic traditions, by the early 19th century Native American personal narratives were *written* in English. This leads to passionate debate about whether Native Americans, and by extension other oppressed groups, use “the language of the colonialists . . . for their own purposes,” that is to resist colonization, or whether “the resistance is often done in one’s language” (Ortiz 10; Wong 196-218). Some of the earliest autobiographies written by native peoples were simply Christian conversion narratives couched in borrowed European forms. Others were political apologies or ethnographic explanations. Some combined all of these purposes.

When J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote, “There is room for everybody in America,” he was, of course, referring to Europeans. He exulted at the “great metamorphosis” Europeans experienced upon arriving on this “new continent,” and at what he saw as the process of diverse Europeans mixing into the “melting pot” of America (Crevecoeur 53, 56). African American theologian Charles Long presents a new angle on this when he describes how the New World did indeed transform all those who arrived, even those who were here originally. On one level, diversity metamorphosed into *seeming* unity. Seventeenth-century Europeans were a factional people, but British, French, and Spanish came to the New World and became “white men.” Likewise, Africans, from tribes as diverse as the Yoruba, Malinke, and Ibo, were brought to the New World and became “black men.” Upon the arrival of Europeans hundreds of distinct tribes—Mohawk, Lakota, Navajo, Hopi—became simply “red men.” But on another level, these generic distinctions were divisive. Whites declared themselves Americans in 1776, but blacks did not gain citizenship until 1866, ninety years later. Indians were not granted American citizenship until another fifty years had passed, in 1924. Regardless of citizenship status, though, these groups were living and writing in one nation, attempting to define themselves in

writing (and speaking) in relation to one another.

Beginning a course in American Multi-Ethnic Autobiography with Crèvecoeur's "What Is An American?" provides a touchstone for discussion and an 18th-century European perspective to challenge. Reading classic American autobiographies such as Franklin's *Autobiography* (1818), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's *Song of Myself* (1855), introduces students to 18th and 19th-century canonical attitudes about what it means to be American, as well as to various modes of autobiography. Franklin's self-made man, rising to wealth and reputation with this nation, is presented in an anecdotal, chronological life history. Thoreau's self-reflective man, contemplating the depth and breadth of himself as reflected in the American landscape, is revealed in a long meditative essay. Whitman's self-adhesive man, absorbing the American people and language into himself, is glorified in a poem that shakes loose the shackles of conventional rhyme and meter. Each of these autobiographers assumes an identification with the nation and its seemingly unlimited possibilities for personal development. Each writer uses language imaginatively to create a linguistic identity and to educate readers about his psychological and/or physical life.

After glimpsing the expanded possibilities for the beginnings of American literature and becoming familiar with representative works of the traditional canon, students would read a sampling of non-canonical "ethnic autobiographies." In this brief discussion, I'll limit my focus to two sets of autobiographies which raise questions about the ambiguity of American identity for a non-European American. The first set includes autobiographies such as Black Hawk's *Life of Ma-Ka-Tai-Me-She-Kia-Kiak (Life of Black Hawk)* (1833) and Harriet Jacobs' (pseud., Linda Brent) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). These were both edited by whites, and thus accentuate the literary blend of Anglo authority and non-Anglo assimilation. Native American transitional autobiographies (transitional because a native "informant's" oral personal narrative was recorded in writing, and because this usually reflected a shift from a pre-contact way of life to reservation life) are referred to as "as-told-to" life histories, ethnographic autobiographies, or as "bi-cultural documents," since they were often solicited, translated, and edited by white ethnographers (Brumble 2-3). Similarly, abolitionists sought, recorded, and edited the personal experiences of ex-slaves. Such mediation of Native American and African American experiences through European American sensibilities poses some especially complex questions about American identity and authority. Who is defining whom and for what purposes?

Black Hawk, a Sauk warrior, is one of the earliest Native Americans to relate his autobiography, but like the many who follow him, he had editorial assistance. The autobiography "was dictated by Black Hawk, translated into English by the interpreter, and put into manuscript form by its editor" (Jackson 26). Thus Black Hawk's personal experience is thrice mediated. Once through his attempt to translate his experiences for a white audience; a second time by his French Canadian-Potawatami

interpreter, Antoine LeClaire; and a third time by his editor, a newspaper journalist, John B. Patterson. While Thoreau was beginning his education at Harvard and Whitman was working in the printing office of the Long Island *Star*, Black Hawk, deceived into believing that the British would support his campaign to save his lands, waged what has been called the Black Hawk War. After this unsuccessful attempt to resist white encroachment on his tribal lands along the Mississippi River, Black Hawk was captured. While a prisoner of war at Fortress Monroe in Virginia, he told his story. In accordance with native traditions of male personal narrative, Black Hawk's account focuses on his battle history. He not only recounts skirmishes with whites, he notes battles with traditional enemies of the Sauk such as the Sioux, Osages, and Cherokees. More importantly, his autobiography is intended to be a justification of his military actions against whites and a record of Euro-American injustices against Indians. Ironically, he dedicates his autobiography to Brigadier General H. Atkinson, his "conqueror." He says: "The story of my life is told in the following pages; it is intimately connected, and in some measure, identified with a part of the history of your own: I have therefore dedicated it to you." Since white and Indian history is now inextricably linked, he explains his reasons for telling his story: ". . . I have determined to give my motives and reasons for my former hostilities to the whites, and to vindicate my character from misrepresentation." In this dedication, he presents himself as a fallen leader, a prisoner, "an obscure member of a nation" whose people once honored him (Black Hawk n.p.). It is a subdued Black Hawk, then, that accepts what he now sees as the inevitability of European American domination.

Controversy abounds over the authenticity of Black Hawk's account. Some critics say that the interpreter was unreliable, that Black Hawk did not dictate it, that "no Indian would talk that way" or even think of telling his life story (24-25). Donald Jackson, the most recent and reliable editor of Black Hawk's autobiography, suggests that these accusations may be true for the second edition of the autobiography which was published in 1882. With both LeClaire (Black Hawk's interpreter) and Black Hawk dead, the editor Patterson took liberties with the narrative, making Black Hawk sound "even less aboriginal" and adding colorful, but suspect, anecdotes about kidnapping, war, love, and travel (29-30). Perhaps Black Hawk's autobiographical pose as a defeated, humbled warrior made his criticism of white treachery against the Indians palatable to white readers (as did the elevated language put into "the noble savage's" mouth) who were all too ready to believe he was the murderer of helpless mothers and babies.

Harriet Jacobs' (Linda Brent's) autobiography also addresses a European American audience, not from a pose of personal defeat, but from a stance of social justice. In her "Preface," Jacobs does not want sympathy for herself, rather she appeals to "the women of the North" to realize the miserable plight of "two millions of women" who are victims of that foul "pit of abominations," slavery (Jacobs 1-2). Jacobs escaped from slavery in 1845, just as Thoreau was beginning his stay at Walden Pond, when

Whitman was publishing articles against the “abominable fanaticism,” as he calls it, of abolitionists who failed to see the slavery of the human spirit, as Chinese were immigrating to California, and just as Frederick Douglass published his autobiography. Her account, however, was not written until ten years later, and was not published until 1861. Like Black Hawk, she catalogues the ill treatment of her people at the hands of whites. But whereas Black Hawk hopes to justify his actions and to educate European Americans about the Sauk, Jacobs wishes to use her experiences, humiliating though they are, to inspire readers to help her people.¹ Unlike Black Hawk, Harriet Jacobs needed no translator. Her editor, Lydia Maria Child, claims she did little to add or alter Jacobs’ words. She writes that “the changes I have made have been mainly for purposes of condensation and orderly arrangement” (Child xi). Jean Yellin concludes that Child condensed atrocities into one chapter, developed the depiction of harassment after the Nat Turner incident, and deleted the final chapter on John Brown (Yellin xiii-xiv). In addition, Child most likely added literary and moral embellishments throughout. Both Jacobs and Child share the same goal—the abolition of slavery. Black Hawk and Patterson, however, may not have had the same purposes in mind. While Black Hawk is clearly concerned with self-justification, Patterson may be more interested in showing off the colorful Indian who attracted so much attention during his Eastern tour. While the editors have much to do with the final shape of these narratives, the two autobiographers incorporate some of their individual oral traditions into their accounts. Black Hawk recalls visions, battles, and oratory, while Jacobs includes Southern dialects, and slave sermons and songs.

Pairing Black Hawk’s and Jacobs’ collaborative autobiographies with two which are not mediated by European American editors, but which are influenced by Western traditions of autobiography, provides a meaningful basis for comparison. William Apes, a Methodist minister of Pequot-white descent, wrote “the first full autobiography published by an Indian,” and “a model followed by subsequent Indian writers—that of combining personal reminiscence with history” (Ruoff 148). *A Son of the Forest* (1829), part Christian conversion narrative, part personal history, and part Indian-white history, educates its audience about the complexities of Apes’ search for identity. His conversion to Methodism and his defense of the rights of the Pequots merge into a bi-cultural vision of social action. Writing is part of this social activism—it awakens and educates white readers.

Likewise, Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave and anti-slavery lecturer, wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)—a slave narrative employing classical rhetorical flourishes. A “self-emancipated young man” (Garrison vii), Douglass’ freedom and livelihood are bound to language. When he stands on the banks of the Chesapeake River and orates eloquently about freedom, we may not think it credible, but we can’t help but be moved. Not surprisingly, while Douglass is still a slave, he feels that “learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing” since it had made clear his “wretched condition,” but provided no salvation. It is his ability to read and write, however, that is responsible for his escape. He writes passes in the

South, he reads *The Liberator* in the North, and he composes his personal narrative to assist in the abolition of slavery. For both Apes and Douglass language was an important tool for freedom, self-sufficiency, and potential political transformation. Both of these men expressed themselves without the aid of an amanuensis, but both used forms from the Western literary tradition to tell their personal stories and to argue for the rights of their people. For Black Hawk, Harriet Jacobs, William Apes, and Frederick Douglass, literature is not divorced from its social function.

III

Let me close with a few questions and suggestions. Why should we tamper with the American canon? Is being more inclusive a valid reason for expanding and reassessing what we teach in our classes? Is this only a “political issue”? Are we “diluting” American literature by moving away from formal literary concerns? Are we, in fact, moving away from formal concerns? What are the implications of challenging the “privileging” of the literate? Reading multi-ethnic personal narratives provides the opportunity to consider the beauty and efficacy of language without separating it from its use to create identity or to fight oppression. We can trace the transformation of oral traditions of diverse groups into written forms; we can analyze what James Olney calls “metaphors of self”; we can scrutinize syntax and rhetorical strategies; and we can examine the phenomenon of autobiographical collaboration. Also this endeavor creates a dialogue between the traditional canon (and its predominantly white male voices) and the often unacknowledged voices of various ethnic groups. What all of the authors (white or non-white, male or female) have in common is the desire to tell their personal stories, to use language to create and claim their part in the experience of the nation. By listening to these voices, oral or written, we can uncover *a tradition of American plurality* and enrich our understanding of what must come to be known as American literatures.

It is not enough, however, for a few of us to incorporate women and writers of color into our courses, although this is certainly important. In addition, even though Ethnic and Women’s Studies Programs may seem marginalized, often by the very fact of their physical locations, they provide a necessary focus and background for ethnic and women’s studies and should be continued. Such courses also need to be offered in English departments; they need to be visible in our catalogues *and* included as department and university requirements. Similarly, we need to re-envision what Reed Way Dasenbrock refers to as the “geography” of English departments which usually “organize our field according to four dividing principles, structured hierarchically”: *our* literature vs. foreign literature; language; nationality, and period (53-54). We should question these divisions and the assumptions which underlie them (e.g., dualities such as us/them; high/low; serious/popular and the assumption that any historical period is coherent and unified). Finally, in addition to restructur-

ing the curriculum, we need to re-examine our *approaches* to literature. In particular, the narrative and performance possibilities of oral traditions and the privileged status of chronology, unity, and closure, as well as irony and paradox, should be reconsidered. As Karl Kroeber notes in an essay on traditional Native American literatures: "It is our scholarship, not Indian literature which is 'primitive' or undeveloped" (9). Likewise, it is our profession, not ethnic literature which is inadequate. We know the literary canon evolves; so should our profession.

Notes

1. An effective book to read in conjunction with *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, is Frances Kemble's *Journal of A Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838-39*. Kemble, the famous Shakespearean actress, was a British abolitionist who married a rich Philadelphian without realizing his family was from the South, and consequently his money tainted by slaveholding. When her husband inherited a Georgia plantation she joined him there, and in a series of letters to her friend, Elizabeth, she described the horrors of slavery. When her husband refused to let her help his slaves, she concluded that, as a woman, she was as much his property as were his slaves. See Cynthia Larson, "Frances Kemble." Diss., Univ. of Iowa.

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