

From the Ground Up: Multiethnic Literature in the Humanities Curriculum

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In “Relocation” by Simon Ortiz, the Native American speaker ends a catalogue of the troubles that have beset him since his uprooting with these emblematic lines:

i am ashamed
i am hungry
i speak words
i am lonely for hills
i am lonely for myself¹

Spiritual dismemberment, which many associate with the plight of disinherited Native Americans, has dislocated millions of others in this country as well. Teaching multi-ethnic literature, I note in particular streams of students who like the narrator of Ortiz’s poem are lonely for an authentic connection to a personal history. Throughout the term, they read selections which extol or dramatize the palpable struggles of characters who have a strong bond with ethnic traditions. They attend class surrounded by identifiable, certifiable ethnics. They listen to the instructor hold forth on the apocalyptic possibilities open to any who have access to these worldviews. In response, they may close up, become hostile, sympathize from a distance. But underneath, another current may swell with a question that also concerns many teachers in the humanities: in a nation where millions no longer identify with a distinct ethnic background, where individuals can trace bloodlines to multiple sources divided by time and place, what role does multi-ethnic literature play? How might the experiences of some ethnic groups be used by others in their own quests to help create a stronger, more intimate sense of community? In practice these questions are not briefly nor simply dealt with; at the personal level they require an enormous commitment to introspection and the possible pain of discovering a history that one might prefer buried. Nevertheless, as students—no matter what their ethnic ties—continue to grapple with troublesome questions, instructors must move from textual analysis to confront matters of application and synthesis. The alternative is that the vitality and creative potential of this subject matter will be lost when it is most needed, as Americans step into a new level of chastened self-awareness. In beginning to apply and synthesize, I have been struck by how interwoven matters of ethnicity

are with other aspects of American life. As these informal observations will suggest, students are often forced to think about a nexus of issues—personal and immediate—as they interact with the texts.

Michael Novak writes that “America still has not dealt with the problem of preserving its diversity.”² Despite the dated flavor of Novak’s diatribe in *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (1971), statements such as his remain provocative. They force us to ask what it means to “preserve” a country’s diversity: what is it that is worth preserving? It certainly does not mean doing the impossible, putting traditions and attitudes in formaldehyde, hoping time will not corrode the weave. Nor does it mean trying to stop the agents of assimilation—intermarriage, public education, and shared work—from taking their course. Perhaps it is more accurate to frame the issue in this way: America has not yet dealt with the desirability of nurturing a diversified culture. Unable—or reluctant—to envision what such a culture might be like, we cling to self-images that breed pessimism and fear.

Multi-ethnic literature helps us flesh out that abstraction, “diversity,” providing students with images that help them fine tune their perceptions of American life. In the intensive comparing and contrasting of fiction, poetry, essays, and autobiography from multiple traditions, Walt Whitman’s watchwords “unity and diversity” are synchronized in gratifying ways. Reading of protagonists such as Toshio Mori’s *Seventh Street Philosopher*, Philip Roth’s *Eli the Fanatic*, or James Baldwin’s *Stranger in the Village* confronting and articulating the unspoken neuroses of the group helps us measure what Baldwin refers to as the “weight and complexity” of American experience at large. In turn, generalizations are more carefully filtered through a growing sympathy toward individuals of diverse backgrounds.

For those who already identify with a particular group (sometimes two or three), the literature highlights many of the questions that students have grown up with, alleviating the loneliness and inarticulateness many have felt. By contrast, those who have little or no sense of ethnic background are often spurred to ask questions which have long lain dormant. These questions are not only related to the specifics of the past—when, who, where, and how?—but more importantly, raise existential issues: what does it *mean* that my family history seems so convoluted? Has the mingling of many traditions in my past deprived me of all except the most general label, American? Is there any way to evoke the uniqueness of my heritage, even if it cannot be designated as “ethnic”? Although students might not frame their questions this succinctly, not a few leave this literature envious of the perceived solidarity of the tribes from which they are now in exile.

As students begin to sort out the strands of their past, the term “ethnicity” gets closely scrutinized, often losing its sharp edges. In *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986), Werner Sollors argues that this term is

confusing at best:

The dominant assumption among serious scholars who study ethnic literary history is that such history can best be written by separating the groups that produced literature in the United States. The published results of this procedure are the readers and compendiums made up of random essays on groups of ethnic writers who have little in common except so-called ethnic roots; meanwhile, obvious and important literature and cultural connections [with writers outside the group] are obfuscated.³

One might add that the dangers of this assumption are amplified without the multi-ethnic perspective. Students whose only relationship with “roots” experience via the academy is through Black Studies, Native American Studies, or occasionally an American literature class, are often in for a shock when they enter the multi-ethnic arena. Misleading generalizations which they—and their instructors—may have indulged in order to distinguish their history begin to leak. Sollors cites a humorous finding in David Schneider’s *American Kinship* (1968) to illustrate the type of goof even the most alert can fall into; in citing the distinctive family characteristics of their ethnic groups, various respondents had this to say:

For the Italians the matter was quite simple; it is not possible to fully understand the Italian family in America until one has understood the Italian mother. For the Irish the matter was equally clear; it is not really possible to understand the Irish family until one has understood the special place of the Irish mother. For the Jews the matter was beyond dispute; it is impossible to fully comprehend the complexities and special qualities of Jewish family life without understanding the Jewish mother.⁴

Assumptions such as the above and others that may be even harder to pin down surface in the comparative framework, particularly questions related to codes of conduct, values, even terms which one group has thought uniquely its own. As we discover what is universally shared, it paradoxically becomes possible to appreciate what has been unique about the history of a particular group. Thoughtless overclassifications about “all” Middle Eastern women being molded out of the same cultural milieu; or “all” Catholics; or “all” Native Americans are more easily seen as the reductive ploys that they are.

The myth of the generations falls even more quickly when examined in a multi-ethnic perspective. Sollors is not the only one to have observed the limitations of typecasting immigrants and their children in terms of first, second, and third generation labels. Anyone who has taught a course in ethnic literature to a classroom full of American students is bound to notice the rising confusion as students try to locate themselves generationally. I had one such experience recently after teaching Isaac Bashevis Singer’s “The Little Shoemakers,” a short story which portrays the classical progression of the generations from a Yiddish village in Poland to their new home in New Jersey. During discussion, questions such as these arose: What if one is born into a family where the mother’s father immigrated from Russia, her mother’s mother immigrated from Ireland, and her father’s family has been in this country for two hundred years? What *does* one do with the millions who don’t belong to any particular group or generation? Or entering even more difficult territory,

what if a person is multi-cultural in heritage, but mainly seen as belonging solely to one group because of skin color, as is the case with many students who identify themselves as black? The issues such questions raise are neither simple nor unimportant, for depending on how individuals come to terms with them, they either take responsibility for who they are (some might say for *choosing* who they are) or perpetuate the guilt-ridden naivete with which many Americans still view the past.

Multi-ethnic literature also brings into focus another pervasive hunger at this time: the urge to recapture a living relationship with the land. Repeatedly, ethnic writers evoke the specifics of geography and geology to show the role of place in sustaining or modifying group traditions. We not only see this theme in much Native American literature, but sprouting in the nooks and crannies of less expected sources. Even the academic Jewish intellectual Herzog of Saul Bellow's novel, one of the most dissociated characters in American literature, finds a new peace of mind by moving into the Berkshires at the end of the novel. By symbolically moving back into his body at the same time, Herzog is finally able to take charge of his life. Reading texts laden with the imagery of the Southwest of the Navaho, Hopi, and Pueblo; the Central Valley of the Japanese, Armenians, Chinese, Mexicans, and Assyrians; the New York and Chicago of Irish, Jews, and East European ethnics frees us to re-imagine America. In the process, we see anew how much impact the folkways of our ethnic groups have had on regional character.

"Living with Music," an autobiographical essay by Ralph Ellison, examines the relationship between ethnic and folk traditions, geography, and the discovery of American identity. It is a text central to the study of multi-ethnic literature because Ellison clearly sets forth the issue that binds Americans, no matter what their ethnic shading: how does one establish a secure stance in a society as fluid as ours? To illustrate how early the uprooting begins, Ellison recounts an incident that happened to him in a third-grade music appreciation class. Like other memorable anecdotes about the advent of knowledge, this one centers on a snake:

... a friend of mine insisted that it was a large green snake he saw swimming down a quiet brook instead of the snowy bird the teacher felt that Saint-Saens' *Carnival of the Animals* should evoke. The rest of us sat there and lied like little black, brown and yellow Trojans about that swan, but our stalwart classmate held firm to his snake. In the end he got himself spanked and reduced the teacher to tears, but truth, reality and our environment were redeemed.⁵

Though brief, this excerpt invites extended reflection, for it raises the most basic question about the source of culture: is it imported or homegrown? Is our model of what it means to be cultured that of a swan, gliding on the surface of the water, elegantly aloof from the murky depths? Or do we emulate the sinuous movements of the water snake, navigating the muddy recesses with a knowledgeable intimacy? Though it shares the fluidity of the swan, the green body of the water snake cleaves to the curving earth, an archetype of indestructible cultivating

energy. Yet, unwilling to let go of their lesson plans and their illusions of time and place, many teachers have grasped the neck of the swan and floated into an ethereal realm where abstractions about what culture *ought to be* substitute for what culture *is*. The cost has been that many Americans have never been able to see—to say nothing of take part in—the redeeming mysteries of the water snake.

Through the use of allusive anecdotes such as this, Ellison creates a matrix of images which offers an affirmative and complex view of what might be possible for Americans if they were to recognize and mine the gold of their native traditions. Close to the end of the essay he summarizes our task when he writes, “Those who know their culture and love it unchauvinistically are never lost when encountering the unfamiliar.”⁶ The key words are of course “know” and “love.” Repelled or mesmerized by the veneer of the popular image of culture, many students aren’t even aware that there might be a substratum of culture worth cultivating, to say nothing of loving a culture found off the main drag in places hidden from the leveling impact of the trans-American network. As so much ethnic literature suggests, such places may be no larger than a neighborhood; in some cases they may only be a filament of distinction against the plastic backdrop. But as Ellison implies, the price of knowledge is cultivation, a conscious and in-depth exploration that discerns and extends the resources of the culture. Equally important, as Ellison and American folklorists have long argued, individualizing forces such as those in black culture—particularly jazz and folklore—remind us “that the roots of high culture lie in the expression of the common people.”⁷ If this observation is valid for the wealth of black culture, it is proportionally valid for the contributions of other ethnic groups to American society. Even the smallest in size have created adaptive forms of group life: picnics, bazaars, hybrid folk arts, linguistic variations—the improvisations are endless.⁸

Thus, as immigrants continue to enter the United States, this literature not only introduces us to the challenges faced by each group in turn, but points toward a common center where we can address our common need: in a country where so much—economically, politically, and spiritually—seems to be at crisis pitch, where can we find stability? In depicting individuals who face the crises—some successfully, others not—multi-ethnic literature helps students plot strategy; its diversity becomes its greatest strength. To discover how some have tried to re-live the old world myth, they can turn to Marko Palamas in “The Wooing of Ariadne,” a Greek bartender in New York City, whose greatest desire is to consummate an epic passion in a world devoid of heroes. To enter into communion with ancestors from another world, they can take their cues from a poem such as Denise Levertov’s “Illustrious Ancestors,” where the imagination creates new links between two heritages; reflecting on her Russian Jewish and Welsh forebears, she writes:

Well, I would like to make, thinking some line still taut between me and then,
poems as direct as what the birds said, hard as a floor, sound as a bench, mysterious
as the silence when the tailor would pause with his needle in the air.⁹

If they are struggling with their ambivalence toward their heritage, works such as John Okada's *No-No Boy*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, or Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory* help them sort out the intricate dynamics that keep us wavering between choices.

If they are ready to go even deeper into the psychological core of their experience, works such as Leslie Silko's *Ceremony* and Peter Najarian's *Voyages* describe alternative paths to the transcending acceptance of one's temporal identity. In *Ceremony*, Tayo—half-white, half-Pueblo—is led from the trauma of the collective nuclear nightmare through a series of initiations modeled on the Pueblo variant of the classical hero's journey. His eventual realization of the Goddess and confrontation with the embodied archetype of evil mirrors our common task today. Refusing to succumb to the witchery that returns evil with evil, Tayo literally and symbolically breaks the cycle that has kept the world in darkness. Like a myth, this novel helps us tread the razor's edge: step by step, our awareness of the two realms, secular and sacred, is unified until the healing ceremony is complete.

If Tayo is guided toward self-knowledge by the grace of the feminine principle and the guides of the natural world, the Aram Tomasian of Najarian's novel must enter the labyrinth of his Armenian and American heritages and strip bare the monstrosity that lives at the bottom of his psyche. Prowling through the same psychological borderlands as Tayo and Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Aram learns to withdraw the projections he has cast onto his father, America, and his past. By the end of the novel, he manages to look at his face and see it clear: freed of caricature and his need to make it bear the betrayals of the Armenian past, it fills the mirror with the warmth and health that are also his Armenian and human heritage. Because works such as *Voyages* show characters in a state of deep introversion, radically restructuring their worldviews as they come to a new understanding of who they are, they read much like case histories in depth psychology; here individuals trace their experience to its "underlying and unconscious root." As M. Esther Harding explains, "the meditation with its inner concentration, . . . prevents the energy from flowing outward and leads ever deeper into the unconscious, where it activates the latent creative source at the center."¹⁰

The willingness of characters such as Aram Tomasian to explore the meaning of their experience, to follow its spiral all the way down, enables them to discover that there is a creative center in the psyche that is beyond ethnic labels, a source of inspiration that paradoxically helps them move past the limitations of their cultural conditioning and simultaneously helps them re-enter the community with a more mature sense of social responsibility. From this perspective, they can weld the old oppositions which have divided the world into "us" and a monstrous

“them,” and share in the Invisible Man’s ending realization, “Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you.”

Obviously, immersion in multi-ethnic literature and art does not guarantee that we will withdraw the layers of shadows we have cast onto each other. Nor will it ensure that students will have an easier time gaining a foothold in time and place. But it will make it impossible for anyone to assert that they are singled out for special suffering or grace; even more importantly, by reaffirming the sources of culture in the imagination and in the earth, these texts return us to the task at hand, to building community from the ground up.

Notes

¹Simon Ortiz. “Relocation.” *Speaking for Ourselves: American Ethnic Writing*. Lilian Faderman and Barbara Bradshaw, eds. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1975) 59.

²Michael Novak. “White Ethnic.” *Speaking for Ourselves*, 549. This essay was taken from Novak’s longer work, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1971).

³Werner Sollors. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 14.

⁴Sollors, 234.

⁵Ralph Ellison. “Living with Music.” *Shadow and Act*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1972) 191.

⁶Ellison, 198.

⁷Gene Bluestein. *The Voice of the Folk: Folklore and American Literary Theory*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1972) 139-40.

⁸Folklore is not only found in ethnic communities, As American folklorists attest, it thrives in the form of urban crime stories and the “xeroxlore” of the corporate office, to give just two examples. See “Folklore Thriving in Cities,” *New York Times*. (25 Feb., 1985) 18.

⁹Denise Levertov. “Illustrious Ancestors.” *Speaking for Ourselves*, 512.

¹⁰M. Esther Harding. *Psychic Energy and Its Transformation*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973) 434.