

Teaching Native Literature Responsibly in a Multiethnic Course

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Abstract and Keywords

This article examines some of the complications that arise when teaching Indigenous literature in a multiethnic classroom. It considers not only how to teach American Indian literature responsibly in multiethnic courses, but also whether teaching Native literature in a broader framework has any advantages. It argues that there are potential benefits to teaching students how to examine the experiences of distinct tribal nations and narratives within a wider context. It suggests that multiethnic courses offer opportunities for students to learn politically engaged approaches to literature that might foster understanding and political solidarity across cultures. It also explains how teaching novels by American Indians and other peoples can be usefully extended to other multiethnic courses on specific genres.

Keywords: teaching, Indigenous literature, Native American literature, multiethnic courses, tribal nations, novels, Native Americans, genres

CRAIG Womack (Creek) notes the limitations of teaching Native literature in multiethnic courses. He argues that these courses are “demeaning and destructive” to Native, Chicano/a, Asian American, and African American studies because they “reduc[e] literary studies to little more than an English department version of the melting pot” (Womack 8). According to Womack, this literary “melting pot” limits academics’ in-depth training, privileges Euro-American literary approaches over distinct cultural approaches, and disrupts important “connections between literature and liberation struggles” (11). He persuasively calls for teaching and understanding Native literature from a tribally specific perspective. I agree with Womack’s assertions that tribally specific approaches are an essential first step to understanding Native literature. However, like many teachers, I am required to teach multiethnic literature courses in addition to classes devoted solely to Indigenous writing. Thus, I have been prompted to consider not only how to teach Native literature responsibly in multiethnic courses, but also whether there could be any advantages to teaching Native literature in a broader framework. I have come to believe that there are potential benefits to teaching students to examine the experiences of distinct tribal nations and narratives within a wider context. Multiethnic literature classes that provide nu-

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anced, historicized approaches to understanding Native literature through both a tribally specific and also a broader critical lens offer opportunities to teach students politically engaged approaches to literature that might foster understanding and political solidarity across cultures.

To teach Native literature responsibly in multiethnic classes, we must replace general survey courses that collapse differences among peoples and storytelling traditions with tailored multiethnic literature courses on genre and politics that first recognize communities' distinct literary traditions and then examine texts in wider historical and political contexts. Situating Native and other peoples' literatures within either a specific (p. 434) political or generic context forces students to acknowledge their need to learn new literary approaches and gives them a more nuanced, productive grounding for discussing both differences and shared common interests. By teaching students to examine Native and other peoples' literatures first through culturally and tribally specific approaches and then through broader generic and political contexts, students are encouraged to consider what Native peoples' stories have to teach a wider world about generic innovation and political and ethical negotiation. Of course, such classes cannot provide the depth of knowledge found in courses devoted solely to Indigenous literature or tribally specific literatures and therefore should be taught alongside these more concentrated classes.

Like many, I have experienced the difficulties of teaching Native literature in multiethnic courses. Despite my warnings to the contrary, students in my general multiethnic survey courses sought to collapse key differences among various peoples' cultures and narratives in a desperate effort to contain the literature through dominant cultural categories of analysis. Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) notes the way that "non-Indian students" expect literary texts by Native peoples "to reflect themselves back again" and when they do not see "their desired image of themselves—they often stop, dismiss, or erase the text entirely and thus our voices and perspectives" (Justice 258-259). I have also seen this response in assimilated Native students at my southeastern US university who, presumably because of the legacies of forced displacement, often have little knowledge of tribal traditions and histories. Faced with radical differences in worldviews and perspectives when reading Native and other peoples' literatures in my general multiethnic survey courses, my students used categories of analysis from the dominant culture to judge these literatures as either deficient or the same as mainstream Euro-American literatures, effectively collapsing differences among various peoples' storytelling traditions, histories, and political aims. Some of my non-Native and assimilated Native students have dismissed Native literature as "angry," "badly written," or, when praising it, as simply another example of "the universal truth" that "we're all the same." I know other teachers share my experience, and many of us have responded either by providing our students with the necessary historical and cultural background to understand these distinct literatures or by creating assignments in which students research background knowledge independently or in groups. However, I have come to believe that this is not enough. Discussing the distinct tribal and cultural contexts of individual texts is, by itself, insufficient in multiethnic courses; it leaves students with ways to understand texts individually but without a methodology for discussing how texts might relate to each other in complex ways. In this

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vacuum, students' desperate desire to compare texts has led them to fall back on the categories of analysis learned in their more mainstream British and American literature courses, approaches that often reflect the academy's entrenched Euro-American imperialism.

To teach Native literature responsibly in multiethnic courses we must begin by focusing on tribally specific approaches to literature, then contextualize texts within wider generic and political contexts. This approach offers students methods for productively exploring both cultural differences and shared political interests among differing (p. 435) literatures. The specificity of a multiethnic course focused on a distinct political context (like courses on the literature of the US-Mexico border or narratives of forced migration and displacement) or on a particular genre (such as multiethnic novels or multiethnic literary horror traditions) prompts students more readily to acknowledge a need to learn new historical and literary approaches. Although they might previously have taken a class on mainstream novel theory or a general multiethnic survey, many of my students will recognize their lack of expertise in more tailored, historically contextualized courses. Constructing tailored courses encourages students to resist dominant cultural categories of interpretation and forces them to approach literature in more nuanced, culturally and historically conscious ways. For example, it is hard to collapse differences between cultures' views of land in a course on the literature of the US-Mexico border. Students in my *Borderlands* course first read Chicano writer Luís Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway*, which portrays this desert region as a deadly, dangerous wasteland for walking migrants, then read *Where Clouds Are Formed* by Tohono O'odham poet Ofelia Zepeda, which describes the desert as home and the location of her tribe's sacred places. The course's broader political and cultural framework allows students to see differing approaches to the same place and to explore these different cultures' relationships to the land in a nuanced way. However, my students are also encouraged to see how both Urrea and Zepeda similarly memorialize lives lost in the desert, victims of the United States and Mexico's ineffective attempts to contain peoples and the land through written documents. Replacing a more general multiethnic survey course with a multiethnic course on the literature of a specific political context provides an opportunity to teach students how to examine both differences and common interests among differing peoples in a shared place. Such courses highlight cultural difference and foreground the relationship between literature and contemporary political struggles, working to resist the apolitical literary "melting pot" that Womack critiques.

Some of us hesitate to teach politicized texts and topics, fearing they create dissonance in the classroom. However, conflict among competing ideologies and worldviews already exists in our classes. As Jeffrey Berglund notes, "avoiding conflict *feeds conflict* because it is merely an avoidance of honesty and truthfulness. Allowing expression of angry feelings may seem uncomfortable. Avoidance of conflict will not actually eliminate discomfort...it will simply displace it and deepen it" (Berglund 85, his emphasis). Openly and respectfully addressing the differences that already exist in our classrooms might provide opportunities for decreasing conflict and for resisting the apolitical "melting pot" approach to literary study that simply displaces and deepens cultural misunderstanding. Careful selec-

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tion of course texts can help to promote a more productive environment for discussing difference. Deliberately pairing texts (like Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* and Zepeda's *Where Clouds Are Formed*) to reveal distinct historical and cultural differences, as well as overlapping political concerns, gives students a starting place for discussing differences and shared interests. Teachers should highlight difference rather than avoid it and give students new methodologies for discussing cultural and ideological difference and shared political interests. Without such models, multiethnic courses threaten to collapse important cultural differences as students work to contain (p. 436) perspectives that differ from their own through either outright dismissal or efforts to subsume difference under dominant cultural categories of analysis.

The two best lenses for broader analysis I have used are courses tailored to specific political or generic contexts. The in-depth knowledge of history and/or form required in these courses gives students a concrete grounding for structuring their thinking about texts and their relationships to each other. Although students will surely encounter worldviews in the texts that differ from their own, these views may appear less frightening than they might in a general survey course because the students can place them in the specific historical, political, and/or generic contexts learned in the course.

Courses on Political Contexts

Constructing a course around a specific political context allows us more easily to highlight historic and contemporary political struggle and resistance, a key to disrupting apolitical "melting pot" pedagogy. For example, the course material in my *Borderlands* course explicitly addresses issues of colonialism, land rights, environmental racism and pollution, and citizenship. Since the political concerns of the US-Mexico border, like many political contexts, are directly related to the area's history, the class is able to devote considerable time to learning how this region's history relates to present political and social struggles. Learning this more in-depth history enables students to contextualize the anger expressed in the literature. Some texts that were previously dismissed by students in my more general multiethnic survey courses as being "too angry" or "racist," like Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* or Leslie Marmon Silko's "Border Patrol State," become more readily accepted when paired with Rachel Nez's documentary *The Border Crossed Us* (2005) about border harassment of the Tohono O'odham people. After reading and viewing these texts together and learning more about their political and historical context, many of my students' initial resistance has lessened and several have become personally and politically invested in the issues raised. For example, on the first day of class one student, who registered under the general multiethnic course number solely to fulfill a requirement, took one look at the course description on the syllabus and loudly declared his disgust for the course topic and his disdain for the "wetbacks" that work on his family's ranch. However, by the end of the class, this student began questioning the migrant laborers' non-livable wage on his family's ranch and treatment by the foreman. Obviously, not all students experience such a dramatic response to the literature. However, such a response would have been altogether foreclosed if the course had not explicitly

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addressed contemporary political concerns and provided students with an arena in which to explore and negotiate political responses to literature.

In addition, choosing a political context that highlights negotiations among differing nations is key to disrupting a common misunderstanding many students have in multiethnic survey courses regarding tribal sovereignty. Too often in general multiethnic survey courses non-Native students perceive Natives as simply another “ethnic” group, (p. 437) effectively ignoring or erasing tribes’ sovereign negotiations with the United States and other nations. To teach Native literature responsibly in multiethnic courses, we must promote an understanding of Native tribes’ national sovereignty, highlighting how treaty rights and tribal sovereignty differ from other groups’ efforts to seek full inclusion into mainstream US society. Emphasizing tribal sovereignty and how it differs from other groups’ civil rights need not disrupt the class’s efforts to examine and discuss shared commonalities in the political struggles faced by Natives and other peoples. Sandy Grande (Quechua) has called for a Native-centered “red pedagogy” that “addresses the political need for sovereignty and the socioeconomic urgency for building a transnational agenda” (Grande 113–114). She asserts, “it is critical that American Indians work to maintain their distinctiveness as tribal peoples of sovereign nations...while, at the same time, move toward building political solidarity and coalition” (Grande 114). Grande claims such work can be furthered by constructing intellectual and pedagogical spaces that theorize and examine the relationship between Native peoples’ national sovereignty and other political groups’ efforts to resist the legacies of colonialism and capitalism (Grande 118). Multiethnic courses that critically examine Native tribes’ sovereign negotiations and their differences and similarities to other groups’ political activism act as “red pedagogy.” Such classes work against the divisive logic of colonialism that sought to pit Indigenous peoples against each other and other peoples. Responsibly taught, culturally aware multiethnic classes can work alongside tribally specific literature courses in a concerted effort to resist the divisive logic of colonialism, revealing shared political aims of decolonization alongside cultural and historical differences.

One way to enact Grande’s “red pedagogy” is to construct courses that emphasize negotiations among nations and teach students how Native tribes’ sovereignty relates to groups’ resistances to and relations with the US government. For example, my Borderlands course calls attention to the international relations that affect lives in the US-Mexico border region. Because the border is characterized as a space of international negotiation between, at the very least, the governments of the United States and Mexico, it is easier to contextualize Native tribes in the region as nations entering into sovereign relations with other nations. Having students read the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and observe how the treaty affected and continues to affect the Tohono O’odham people’s sovereignty in Rachel Nez’s documentary *The Border Crossed Us* helps further demonstrate Native nations’ sovereign negotiations with the United States and Mexico. Encouraging students to compare the tribal nationalism asserted by Indigenous writers to the very different way Chicano/a and Mexican writers characterize their relations to these governments helps to emphasize Native nations’ sovereignty while also revealing shared experiences of police harassment and abuse at the border. Teaching students to recognize these

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differences, along with the overlapping goals of Mexican, Chicano/a, and Indigenous writers to resist imperialism and racial profiling, helps classes act as spaces of decolonization. Courses organized around specific political contexts, which teach students to recognize Native tribes' sovereignty but also their overlapping interests with other peoples' political struggles, trouble the colonial legacy of divisiveness and competition. Teaching students to perceive nation-state borders (p. 438) through Indigenous ways of thinking, rather than the US government's written designations, works to resist the entrenched Euro-American imperialism of mainstream academic and literary approaches.

Courses on Genres

Constructing a multiethnic course around a specific genre helps highlight Native literary aesthetics and generic innovation. Womack asserts that "the future direction of Native studies" will "challenge the nature of what we have inherited in the discipline. Rather than revising dominant-culture literary and critical aesthetics and 'fitting' Native texts and cultures to such criteria, the criteria themselves will be questioned as to their applicability" (Womack 303). Courses on Native literature and multiethnic literature that include Native texts should model this critique of dominant cultural understandings of aesthetics and form. To truly question the applicability of dominant literary approaches in our courses, we must engage our students in an active critique of canonized literary aesthetics while demonstrating the greater applicability of Native and other cultures' literary aesthetics. Grande argues "the project of decolonization demands students to acquire not only the knowledge of 'the oppressor' but also the skills to dismantle and negotiate the implications of such knowledge" (Grande 56). One decolonizing strategy I use in my Multiethnic Novel course is to pair Stephen Graham Jones's novel *Ledfeather* with excerpts from Ian Watt's canonized work of novel theory, *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt's theorization of the way character naming and linear time function in the traditional Euro-American novel is highly regarded, yet it is absolutely unsuitable for discussing Native writers' appropriation of the novel form. Although I begin discussions on Stephen Graham Jones's *Ledfeather* using Watt's theories of the novel, it takes only a few minutes for my (generally conservative) students to begin demanding more appropriate categories of analysis. When I then introduce students to Blackfeet storytelling traditions, naming practices, and understandings of time, students immediately call on these aesthetics to understand the complexity and innovation of the novel.

Teaching canonized literary approaches to oral storytelling alongside Native and other peoples' literatures reveals the academy's entrenched imperialism. For example, Walter Benjamin's essay "Storyteller," on the supposed replacement of oral storytelling traditions with the novel form, is much taught in literature courses and is sometimes the only academic understanding my mostly non-Native students have of oral storytelling. (By the time they enter my sophomore and upper-level courses, most students at my university have already learned the seeming "inapplicability" of their family's oral storytelling traditions in the "Literature" classroom.) I teach Benjamin's "Storyteller" alongside Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* to encourage students to actively question Benjamin's and oth-

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er novel theorists' canonization and applicability to Native and other peoples' literatures. Benjamin's essay is particularly useful when paired alongside Leslie Marmon Silko's essay "Language and Literature From a Pueblo Indian Perspective" or (p. 439) Simon Ortiz's essay "Towards a National Indian Literature." Read on its own, Benjamin's essay seems to lament the loss of oral traditions. Read alongside Silko's and Ortiz's essays, students are quickly able to see how Benjamin's essay actively works to erase or elide oral traditions and their power. Calling students' attention to the ideological pressure enacted by Benjamin's essay encourages them to question the ideology found in other canonized literary approaches. Suddenly, literary approaches that were seemingly natural, given, and innocuous are seen for the cultural imperialism they present. To be truly effective, multiethnic genre courses must demonstrate over and over again that canonized literary approaches are not just inapplicable to one or two texts, but to many texts. Here, multiethnic courses offer an opportunity not available in courses devoted solely to Indigenous literature. By demonstrating Benjamin's inapplicability and ideological bias, not only in regards to Native literature, but also to African-American, Asian-American, and Latino/a literatures, students can more readily acknowledge the imperialism of canonized literary approaches.

Many of us might not want to engage with theories so discordant from the discipline of Native Studies; I certainly did not want to. Yet I have discovered that students are far more receptive to questioning canonized literary approaches when they discover the inapplicability on their own. Once my students acknowledged for themselves the inappropriateness of applying dominant criteria of analysis to Native literature, they exhibited less resistance and more complex engagement with both primary and secondary texts. My generally conservative students have been willing to adopt more radical approaches to literature when they feel they are generating those approaches independently.

Although I have been directly addressing how I teach novels by Natives and other peoples, I believe this strategy can be usefully extended to other multiethnic courses on specific genres. The approach I have used successfully is to choose one specific genre for students to learn in-depth (drama, horror, sentimentalism, narratives of removal, etc.) and then to pair excerpts or short pieces of canonized literary criticism about that genre alongside primary texts by Native, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino/a authors. When discussing these primary texts, students also learn culturally distinct and appropriate approaches. For example, when discussing Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, students learn about the ideological function of Dick and Jane readers and read Morrison's essay on the characteristics of African-American oral traditions, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." It is essential that class discussions on specific genres examine not only the relationship between canonized and culturally distinct approaches, but also the differences and overlappings these culturally distinct approaches might share with other peoples' literatures. For example, when moving from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, I often introduce a brief excerpt from Leslie Marmon Silko's *Storyteller* that examines the inappropriateness of Dick and Jane readers for Pueblo children. The class discusses both Morrison's and Silko's shared interests in disrupting dominant cultural approaches and revealing the underpinnings of cultural ideolo-

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gy in children's literacy manuals. However, we also examine key differences between Pueblo and African-American oral traditions. By (p. 440) encouraging students not just to discuss Native, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino/a responses to dominant culture, but also how they might share some overlapping interests or political aims, I seek to decenter dominant cultural categories of analysis and forge greater understanding of what different peoples' storytelling traditions have to teach a wider world about ethical responsibility and negotiation.

Like Native literature, much African-American, Asian-American, and Latino/a literatures have lessons to teach us. The goal of teaching these literatures responsibly in multiethnic courses is to allow for cross-cultural discussions without diminishing difference. To truly understand these literatures, we must read them through culturally distinct and appropriate approaches. Although that is the necessary first step, we should not stop there but should continue to examine how the differences and overlapping similarities among them might provide fruitful lessons for our students and ourselves.

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