

Discovering Other Voices:
Teaching Ethnic American Literature at a Predominantly White State College

In the fall of 2005 I began my first tenure-track position, as an Assistant Professor of American and Ethnic Literature at Fitchburg State College in Massachusetts. Like most of the institutions in the State College system, FSC draws the majority of its undergraduates from its immediate geographical area; in this case that means old industrial towns such as Leominster, Chelmsford, Worcester, and Fitchburg itself. But that geographical emphasis does not make FSC a miniature version of its larger social world; the town of Fitchburg has sizable African- and Hispanic-American communities, for example, but the College itself is between 90 and 95% white non-Hispanic.¹ Certainly there is a great deal of national, religious, and economic diversity within that student population, and any class discussion on politics (for example) quickly reveals the wide variety of viewpoints that results from those and other differences. But when it comes to discussions of ethnic American literature, as I discovered in my first semester while teaching the English department's sole course on the subject (there are also two specifically focused on African-American literature), homogeneity is the status quo; a situation unfortunately (if I believe unintentionally) reflected in that course's longstanding title, "Other Voices."

That Fall 2005 section of Other Voices contained the maximum twenty-eight students, and they represented a wide spectrum of the College's population: from one first-year and a handful of sophomores to a large number of juniors and seniors; from

¹ The reported numbers seem to vary somewhat, perhaps because of different ethnic sub-categories: The *Princeton Review* college information website lists FSC's white non-Hispanic population at 92%; the US College Search site calls it 95%. The awkward "white non-Hispanic" is how both sites, and others like them, delineate this category.

Nursing and Math majors to Education and English students; from football and soccer players to one of the acting program's most decorated performers; and so on. But on the subject that was to be at the heart of our course's readings and discussion, ethnic identity, they were even more homogeneous than the College: all twenty-eight were white non-Hispanic in heritage. The previous summer, as I designed my syllabus for that first semester, I hadn't considered this aspect of my prospective students at all, and had constructed a reading list which utilized the one-volume *Heath Anthology of American Literature* to read a chronologically organized sampling of ethnic American literature by writers from pretty much every category other than white non-Hispanic: Native American, African American, Hispanic American, Asian American. And I can't say that I was at all worried about this demographic question as we began our first weeks of readings, examining exploration/colonial era texts by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, Olaudah Equiano, Phillis Wheatley, and Native American tribal folklorists. After all, every possible context for these authors and texts was distinct from our contemporary setting and perspectives, so why would our distinct ethnic identities matter in particular?

Well, they did. I didn't keep a running tally, but I would estimate that at least a third of all student comments in discussion—and I run literature courses almost entirely as discussions—either overtly or implicitly speculated about general aspects of ethnic experiences and perspectives foreign to us both as individuals and as a class; no matter how specifically I focused our discussions, how often I had us read and analyze one particular passage from one of these dense, difficult texts, the conversation continually returned to “Indian culture,” “black history,” and other ethnic abstractions that we hadn't

experienced, weren't studying, and thus could almost certainly not talk about with any specificity or nuance, much less authority. Jumping from texts to generalizations (about people "in those days," for example) is of course a frequent temptation in any classroom setting, but in this case the generalities explicitly connected to our class topics, and thus the jump more directly undermined our specific discussions. I think it's likely that we wouldn't have raised such abstractions if there had been even one student among us who seemed to belong to one or another of these ethnic groups; or perhaps we would have used that student as an ethnic representative, turning to him or her to confirm our generalities. Regardless, talk in these broadest, vaguest, and least analytical terms we did, more often than any other mode. And the informal student presentations with which I had us begin each discussion tended to exacerbate the situation: I had asked the students to present a bit of the author's bio along with a starting point from within the reading, and more often than not that biographical excerpt became another occasion to link the individual author to one or another of these broad ethnic concepts whose particulars we had no personal or communal contexts through which to discuss: Equiano's presenter, for example, focused the presentation's biographical segment on slavery—not slavery within Africa, the Middle Passage, or the Caribbean slave trade, discussions of which were included in the anthology's Equiano excerpt, but slavery on the whole, and its overall effects on enslaved African Americans.

Exemplifying these trends was the day we discussed one of my favorite underappreciated American short stories: Sui Sin Far's "In the Land of the Free" (1909). Far's story is deceptively simple: only six pages long and written in a seemingly straightforward third-person narrative voice, it nonetheless manages in its four short

sections to introduce an extremely multilayered and complex portrait of, among other things, the effects of the Chinese Exclusion Act, gender and family roles within a Chinese-American family, old and new ethnic traditions in San Francisco's blossoming Chinatown, the perspective of an ambivalent and ambitious white immigration lawyer, and different generational responses to and assimilation into mainstream American society. But it was precisely that combination—a seemingly simple and certainly short short story, a series of broad contexts that connect to many of the most hot-button issues surrounding immigration and ethnic identity—that resulted in one of our least analytical discussions; with very little to latch onto in the story itself, it understandably became that much easier for the conversation to turn, early and often, to broad criticisms of (on the one hand) immigrants' clustering in ethnic neighborhoods and continued use of their native languages or (on the other) America's history of discrimination against immigrant groups. Without communal evidence to bring to bear on any of those broad topics, and without a teacher leading the discussion who was either specifically prepared for it or generally experienced enough to make it work, the conversation lacked analytical engagement with precisely the kinds of complexities that Far's story perceives and portrays in each of those areas. The discussion was unquestionably heated, and the perspectives spread impressively across the spectrum between the two extremes on those two hands, but it had very little to do with either our specific text or with any subject with which we had engaged as a community at any point.

This overly general tenor of our discussions troubled me deeply on three distinct levels. On the level of course content, I felt throughout the semester as if we were missing a chance to talk specifically about these particular and extremely interesting

ethnic authors and texts, to learn about ethnic American literature and ultimately identity from their unique and complex voices, and instead were too often reinforcing broad and thus necessarily simplified ideas about ethnic experience and identity; we talked around the readings a great deal but about them far too infrequently. On the level of academic skills, I felt just as often that complex analysis was being subsumed under easy generalization, a shift that I saw mirrored in a number of the students' essays (even those devoted to the close reading of a single passage), which often used individual texts to argue for broad and largely unprovable (at least in our setting) assertions. And most troubling by far were the ramifications on the level of my teaching philosophy: creating a seminar-based, democratic classroom, bringing out students' individual voices and ideas, has always been my primary focus in any class, much more than passing along any particular content or ideas from either the readings or my knowledge and perspective; and yet it seemed that bringing out the students' voices in this course meant, more often than not, failing to hear and respond to our authors' voices with the complexity and thoroughness that they deserved.

Yet it was through reflecting on that most unsatisfying level, that seeming contradiction between my overall goals as a teacher and the goals of this particular course, that I began to see the class's demographic as a potential benefit rather than a stumbling block. Towards the end of that semester I received, entirely coincidentally, my copy of *American Identities*, the introductory American Studies textbook that had just been published by faculty members from the University of Massachusetts Boston's American Studies program. The most unfamiliar and interesting element of the textbook for me was its discussion of the multigenerational family history and timeline project that

the editors (Lois P. Rudnick, Judith E. Smith, and Rachel Lee Rubin) had long made a part of their American Studies courses; a project, they write in the *Instructor's Guide to American Identities*, designed to “require students to become the historians of multigenerational processes that have shaped their American identities.” They stress the initial resistance with which this request for personal analysis is usually met, but argue that “by the end of the course, the majority of students have a family story that they have at least partially anchored in history.”² The family history and timeline project, that is, helps students to perceive and, even more important, analyze their personal connections to and stakes in a seemingly academic topic such as American Studies.

Of course, before students can perceive and analyze such connections, at least in a classroom setting, their professors must recognize those connections' existence and potential for analysis. As I thought about the project and reflected on my experience with *Other Voices*, I realized that the course's first and most unfortunate oversimplification of identity, ethnic and otherwise, had been performed by none other than the professor himself. In seeing my students as “Other” to the *Other Voices* that we were reading, I had reinforced and perhaps even helped emphasize the kinds of generalizing responses that naturally result when we encounter and attempt to analyze anything entirely separate from and unfamiliar to us. While my students might not have fallen into the rather absolute and rigid ethnic categories into which I had divided the syllabus, each was in his or her own way an other voice—the former Marine, the recently pregnant girl, the ADHD sufferer, the second-generation Polish immigrant, the first kid from his family to attend

² Rudnick, Smith, and Rubin, eds., *Instructor's Guide to American Identities: An Introductory Textbook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1-3. See also Rudnick, Smith, and Rubin, eds., *American Identities: An Introductory Textbook* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

college—in complex relation to the typical “American” voice implied by the course’s title. Those identities in no way meant that my students’ voices or experiences were synonymous with those of the authors we had read, any more than the authors’ voices and experiences were synonymous with the overly abstract categories through which we had too often attempted to define them. While I am still in the process of discovering precisely what my revelation about the students’ identities does mean for our work in and out of the classroom, I believe that I have identified two crucial ramifications thus far: that the course is at every level (from the title down) as much about the students (and, by extension, me, white non-Hispanic as I am) as the readings; and that in both cases our focus is not simply on identity (whether individual or communal) within one generation, but rather on the multigenerational, historical processes through which any individual or communal identity develops and to which every identity connects.

It is with those ramifications very much in mind that I have redesigned my Other Voices syllabus, creating an entirely new version of the course that I will try out in the Fall 2007 semester when I next teach the class. Rather than including a wide variety of chronologically organized short texts from an anthology, the new syllabus focuses on longer texts grouped into multigenerational, linked pairs: Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845) and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945); Sui Sin Far’s *Mrs. Spring Fragrance* (1912) and Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989); Zitkala-Sa’s autobiographical essays (1900) and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977); Anzia Yezierska’s *Bread Givers* (1925) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003). While we will continue to do our best to pay attention to the specifics of each text and author, the pairings are explicitly designed to create dialogues, including a step I have never taken in any literature course:

we will work with the texts side by side, reading a few chapters of both for each class. My hope is that such textual contexts will make it easier for us to discuss broader issues of identity and experience without moving too far away from our shared, specific evidence; I fully anticipate that such contemporaneous reading will also lead to confusions of various kinds, but since I don't give factual quizzes or include identifications on my exams, those confusions can hopefully function more to produce additional conversation than to create worry among the students.

Alongside our in-class work with those readings, and hopefully both driving home those multigenerational connections and linking them to the students' own voices and identities, will be their individual work on the family history and timeline projects. With them I enter territory even less charted (in my own classroom experience) than contemporaneous readings, although the *Instructor's Guide to American Identities* will serve as an important navigational device for sure. I have no doubt that my first work with the projects will encounter any number of speed-bumps and growing pains; to prepare for one that I can already imagine, I'm trying to develop an alternate, less explicitly personal project (such as a multigenerational history of a house or other site), so that students who don't want to investigate their family history can still take part in the project. The only stage of their individual work that I've planned out thoroughly is the first, in which they'll choose one object or photograph that's meaningful to their family, investigate its history a bit, and write a short piece that we'll make a part of our communal conversations (as we will at a few key moments throughout the projects). Whatever the final results of the projects—and I'm certainly looking forward to following and learning from them throughout the semester—I believe they will

unquestionably establish, from the first day when we go over the syllabus through the last day when the students present their completed timelines and histories, that identity (ethnic, American, and otherwise) isn't an academic, general, or foreign concept, but one to which each and every student is linked in complicated, crucial ways.

When I was hired to teach American and Ethnic Literature, I felt pretty confident in my own ideas about both of those adjectives, and ready to begin helping Fitchburg's students encounter and analyze them. It took experiencing *Other Voices* to realize how much I still had to learn—about Fitchburg's student population, certainly, but also and more importantly about teaching American and ethnic literature, about the links between those two categories, and about the ways in which those links can inform identities in the classroom as much as in the class readings. I look forward to learning more, and to discovering all the other voices American literature and Fitchburg State College have to offer, this fall and in the years ahead.

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