

Multicultural Literature Revisited: New Books and Teaching Ideas

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How do we teach multicultural literature effectively? What multicultural texts will our students enjoy and learn from? We have each taught literature in secondary schools and college for twenty years or more and find ourselves always looking for new books to introduce to our students. In recent years, the increased publication of multicultural tales, novels, memoirs, and other non-fiction for all readers--from elementary students to adults--has provided us and our students with lots of new areas to pursue. The theme of the 2010 Spring MCTE convention, *Continuity and Change*, led us to reflect on our practices of teaching of multicultural texts. In the sections of the article that follows, we will address ways of reading multicultural literature and ideas for structuring courses to improve student interactions with the literature; we will also offer a list of works and resources we have used in our classes or would consider using.

Introductions

Although we both currently teach at Minnesota State University, Mankato, we began teaching in secondary school. We came to multicultural literature in an effort to find books that would appeal to our students; in Madelia, Mn., a third of Jacqueline's students were Hispanic and at least some of them spoke English as their second language. She still remembers the excitement and interest these students exhibited when they encountered poetry that mixed Spanish with English words (*Cool Salsa*), recognized characters in novels who experienced injustice like they had (*To Kill a Mockingbird*) or even saw portrayals of characters in roles they admired (the 1996 *Romeo and Juliet* film with warring gangs). The way one year's group of eighth grade Hispanic young men would suddenly become very animated and involved in class discussion so clearly expressed the importance, necessity, and motivating power of seeing oneself or one's conditions portrayed in literature.

Lately, we have been teaching multicultural literature at the university at the general education level as well as in upper-division level classes for English majors, pre-service elementary through secondary teachers, and graduate students. We especially want future teachers to become familiar with the literature of diverse cultures so that they will be comfortable teaching it to their students. Many students in southern Minnesota, even in this global news age, are surprised to learn that Japanese American citizens were removed to internment camps during World War II or that tribal reservations were divided into parcels of land and allotted to individual Native Americans in an effort to make them assimilate by owning and farming land; many of these parcels were later bought by lumber companies, railroads, and white settlers when taxes were not paid or poverty forced sales by their Native American owners. Increasingly, too, students of color, particularly Hmong and Hispanic students, find forgotten traditions, beliefs, and tales featured in novels and non-fiction we read in these classes. As our Minnesota population becomes more diverse, we feel it is imperative that all our students have opportunities to see themselves in literature as well as opportunities to understand cultural experiences different from their own.

Teaching multicultural literature is a dynamic endeavor. We are always changing our choices of books, restructuring our courses and assignments, and trying to think of new strategies to challenge our students to move further into books about cultures which may be unfamiliar to them.

Ways of Reading

Authorial Reading vs. Personal Experience

Our student audience (of pre-service teachers) in online multicultural literature courses we teach reflects the racial and class demographics of the teaching profession – generally white and middle class. Several problems predominate in their interactions with the multicultural literature.

One problematic response is that students equate their own experiences with those of characters in the text. Although empathy offers a useful way into texts, it is also important that students differentiate or at least are aware of differences between their own experiences and those of characters in the text so that they participate in the literary experience – one that might be quite different from their own - that the author offers them. For example, in *The Skin I'm In*, author Sharon Flake tells a story of Maleeka, a middle school girl, who is bullied by classmates. Reading the novel evokes moving personal accounts from students about their experiences of having been bullied. But, because of their emotional connection to the story, many white readers fail to look at its particular circumstances: the protagonist is singled out by peers because of her very black skin tone. Flake's story offers readers like the protagonist support in standing up for their own beauty and worth, and at the same time it informs cultural outsiders about the effects of internalized racism.

One way to help students move beyond the personal response – that indicates their engagement in the author's narrative – is after a first reading to invite students to step back from the story and engage in a critical or authorial response – one that seeks to discover the author's purposes for writing the story and the conditions that have given rise to it. In the case of *The Skin I'm In*, for example, the teacher might have students read the New York Public Library chat where Flake states her purpose for writing the novel: "I have a beautiful dark-skinned daughter, and . . . as a black woman I know that if you're dark in our communities, people don't always say nice things about you, so I wanted to deal with that issue . . ." ("Author Chat"). The teacher could also have students view excerpts from the CNN series *Black in America* (2008) about skin tone bias or read research articles that provide statistics indicating how skin tone bias negatively affects individuals' life choices and economic success, statistics that can be found in ADL Curriculum extension activities, such as "Skin Tone Bias Focus on the Research" ("Words That Heal") Or instead of moving out of the story, the teacher might invite the students to take a critical stance and move back into the story to examine particular passages that give clues to author themes. For example, in *The Skin I'm In*, the teacher could ask students to consider key passages such as the following one that occurs near the end of the novel when the protagonist, after discovering her own talent for writing, reading Langston Hughes's poetry celebrating blackness, and receiving support from a concerned teacher, finally speaks up for herself: "Call me by my name! I am not ugly. I am not stupid. I am Maleeka Madison, and, yeah, I'm black, real black, and if you don't like me, too bad 'cause black is the skin I'm in!" (Flake 167).

Generalization vs. Differing Perspectives

Another issue is that students might generalize the experiences they read about in one novel as being typical of everyone from a particular group. It is important that teachers offer students opportunities to read the stories of people from diverse groups told from multiple perspectives. For example, students should read about Bobby, the middle class protagonist of

Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* whose parents are able to offer him financial and emotional support, as well as the story of Jacqueline Woodson's young protagonists in *Miracle's Boys* who must be totally self-reliant in their struggle just to make ends meet. Additionally, just as students learn about life on one reservation through the eyes of Junior in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, they should also read the perspective offered by Cynthia Leitich Smith in *Rain is Not My Indian Name* of growing up in rural small town America where dating, town gossip, and coping with loss are more important than one's Indian heritage. In a recent class after students read *Rain is Not My Indian Name*, some complained that they had not learned enough from the book about growing up Indian, only to have others make the point that there is no one experience of growing up Indian in the US.

Individual Prejudice vs. Institutional Discrimination

A final point is that some students might attribute racism to individual prejudice rather than seeing that racism is institutionalized. Some good books that help students see racism as being part of a larger structure are *Monster* and *Autobiography of My Dead Brother* by Walter Dean Myers for middle school readers and memoirs like Luis Rodriguez's *Always Running* and Jimmy Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand*. All of these works highlight how societal institutions are set up to make it extremely difficult for young men of color to escape imprisonment and experience success in our society. (A useful description of this stance is found in Richard Beach's chapter "Students' Resistance to Engagement with Multicultural Literature" in *Reading Across Cultures*.)

Ways of Structuring the Study of Multicultural Literature

Moving beyond "Tourism" and Celebration

One issue arises when readings are chosen for the course. We usually teach courses that consider literature by authors from several cultural groups all in one course; others choose to devote an entire course to one cultural group, as in a course in African American literature. Teaching multicultural literature according to the first approach is sometimes criticized as taking a "tourist" approach. It certainly can be. But travel ("there is no frigate like a book") has often been a way of learning about other cultures. The walking tour was a rite of passage for English gentlemen during the Renaissance; they would walk through Italy or France as a way of finishing their educations by observing the art and culture of other places. Walkers such as Thomas Wyatt and Philip Sydney brought back to England the Italian sonnet form and translated various Italian and French sonnets for 16th century English readers. So, although "tourism" has lots of bad connotations, people from all cultures can learn from studying other cultures if they make an effort to stop and look deeply. Tourism can be a rich source of knowledge and appreciation of other traditions, histories, and arts.

The criticism which charges of "tourism" are meant to convey, though, is one of superficial acquaintance, a celebration of differences that are only vaguely understood. And it seems to us that many teachers have recognized in the past decade that one challenge of teaching multicultural literature well is to try to go more deeply into the beliefs, traditions, and histories that form the cultural contexts from which these books spring. Gradually as we have become familiar with the literature, we have begun looking for more depth, seeing what we need to know to make a more complex context for the literature we are discussing with our students. We take the idea of multicultural literature as a celebration of difference for granted now. We are trying

to get students to go more deeply into the literature, to articulate more fully the conflicts they see enacted, and to see how historical incidents they may or may not know about actually play out in individuals' lives. In multicultural literature classrooms, we are trying to get people of all cultures to form a different picture of "others" when they read these stories and histories.

We're aware that several aspects of our college teaching situation help us as we attempt to enrich the cultural contexts we present to student readers. Teaching in college is much easier than teaching literature in junior high because students have elected the course and, even if it is somewhat required (chosen to fulfill a general education requirement, for instance), they are motivated and often at a time in their lives when difference is new and interesting. And younger college readers today seem to be involved in a "reality craze" (note all the reality shows on television), so non-fiction books, including memoirs, histories, and biographies, as well as historical fiction, are often the hook that will get students to read and consider. Oddly, it also seems easier to teach multicultural literature online rather than face-to-face. Online, students have time to compose their postings, rather than feeling the pressure of speaking "off the cuff" in class; they have time to assemble the incidents and quotations from the book that serve as support. The seeming anonymity of the online course is freeing to some. Early discussion of online teaching techniques warned against flaming and other abuses during discussion, but it has not been our experience at all that online students are disrespectful to each other; they are often startlingly honest and strongly supportive of the efforts of their peers.

Structural solutions: pairing, building the syllabus toward harder material

One way to help students see the diversity of experiences within a racial or ethnic group is to read pairs of books against each other. For example, students might read Smith's *Rain is Not My Indian Name* against Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* or Bruchac's *Heart of a Chief*. The latter stories describe protagonists' experiences on reservations growing up in poverty, struggling with the effects of alcoholism, and the difficulties of moving between the reservation and white society, but these stories also describe the strong communities that support the protagonists. The former novel tells the story of growing up middle class as a member of a minority in a small town. By reading a pair of these novels, readers get some sense of the diversity of experiences lived by Indians in our country.

Another productive structure might be to arrange course texts so that students read books featuring protagonists whose experiences most closely resemble their own and build to those that might be more different so students gradually move from familiar to unfamiliar territory. For example, a teacher might begin with a book such as Johnson's *The First Part Last* where protagonist Bobby reacts similarly to any young person in his situation (unplanned fatherhood), or Smith's *Rain is Not My Indian Name* in which much of protagonist Rain's experience is about small town life and how she learns to recover from the loss of her mother and her best friend. But a book such as Flake's *The Skin I'm In*, where protagonist Maleeka suffers because of her skin color, poverty, and feelings of powerlessness, might be placed later in the course, so that by the time it is introduced to students, they have had practice going beyond their own reality to seeing experience through the lens of a book's character.

Surface vs. in-depth (Norton's 5-level set up)

In researching materials for our 2010 MCTE presentation on multicultural literature, we came across Donna Norton's article in the *Reading Teacher*, "Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum." The article outlines an interesting structural approach to addressing the

tourism problem, taking a five-phase approach to building a cultural context that will help readers understand and appreciate a current book more deeply. Her article contains not only a discussion of the five levels of texts her students encounter during a given unit (31) but also lots of resources and examples of possible texts to use in units on Native American (32-25), African American (36), and Latino/a texts (37). For example, for a unit on Native American literature, she outlines the progression which we summarize below (leaving out many specific suggestions, which are very much worth consulting in the article itself):

Traditional Literature (Generalizations and broad views)

Consider folktales, fables, myths, legends from a variety of tribes. Note common stories (throughout the culture) and common types of stories, as well as oral language style as much as possible.

Learning activities: analyze oral traditions, show map of US with tribal locations, identify types of tales and look at some common types (creation, tribal/family, trickster, crossing the threshold between worlds—animal to human, for example, or vice versa). Have students create a story that opens, develops, and closes as do the oral tales they have read.

Traditional tales from one area/tribe (Narrower view)

Consider tales from one tribe, for example Ojibwe or a specific tribe of Plains Indians.

Learning activities: analyze and compare these tales with the more general characteristics noted above. Note values, beliefs, themes in regional tales.

Autobiographies, biographies, historical non-fiction

Consider works from an earlier time.

Learning activities: analyze these non-fiction texts for values, beliefs, and themes identified in the traditional literature. Compare nonfiction and historical texts with autobiographies and biographies. (See, for instance, Ignatia Broker's *Night Flying Woman*). Norton notes that these kinds of comparisons can point up biases. For example, she notes that juvenile autobiographies tend to soft pedal the cultural repercussions from white-Native American confrontations (34).

Historical fiction

Learning activities: evaluate fiction for authenticity of setting, conflicts, characterization, theme, language, traditional beliefs, and values based on information noted in earlier phases. Discuss the role of traditional literature in comparison; also compare historical fiction with the autobiographies, biographies or historical non-fiction read earlier.

Contemporary literature

Consider works written for readers by current authors.

Learning activities: analyze the inclusion of any beliefs and values identified in the traditional literature, autobiographies, biographies, and historical fiction and non-fiction read above. Analyze character and conflicts. Analyze themes and look for connections across the literature types.

Norton also suggests that teachers use similar specific questions throughout, especially through the last three areas, to help students analyze: for example, what is the problem, what reward is wanted, what kinds of action do the people admire, what kinds of action do people despise, what are the characteristics of great people (34). In this way, students build up an understanding of the values of a culture and develop ways of noting and analyzing changes as a culture moves through time and as they are represented in different kinds of texts.

Works Cited

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Appendix A: A Selection of Books and Teaching Resources

The following selection is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead it represents a collection of works that we and our students have found useful and interesting.

Middle School and up

Abdel-Fattah, Randa. *Does My Head Look Big In This*.

Although set in Australia, US readers will find the setting familiar. The novel opens as Amal, an Australian-Palestinian eleventh grader, makes the decision to wear the *hijab* (Muslim head scarf) full-time. Readers see how following her religious tenets impacts Amal’s interactions with the people in her life. The novel also takes an often humorous look at typical teenage angst surrounding dating, friendship, and appearance, as well as examines the choices immigrants make to fit into a new culture and the stresses faced by immigrant parents and their children when expectations about gender and family roles from the parents’ culture of origin are at odds with their children’s experience in the new culture. (NY: Orchard Books/Scholastic, 2005. 360 pgs.)

Alexie, Sherman. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.*

Written in an appealing format - diary with comic illustrations - this work tells the story of a year in the life of fourteen-year-old Junior who leaves the reservation school to attend school in a nearby all-white town for a good education and "hope." Junior is deemed a traitor by his people who feel rejected by him but is supported by loving family members who want him to follow his dreams despite their poverty and struggles with addiction and loss. During the year, along with educational and social success, Junior also experiences numerous tragedies, including the accidental deaths of his sister and grandmother. Alexie uses humor to soften (or confront) the harsh realities of reservation life as well as to deal with the uncertainties of adolescence. Language and references to masturbation make the book appropriate to a slightly older audience than its readability would indicate. Art by Ellen Forney. (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 2007. 230 pgs.)

Bausum, Anne. *Freedom Riders: John Lewis and Jim Zwerg on the Front Lines of the Civil Rights Movement.*

Bausum focuses her non-fiction account of the Freedom Rides of 1961-1962 on two volunteers, John Lewis, a black man born in Alabama who was later an elected Congressman, and Jim Zwerg, a white man born in Appleton, WI who transferred to Fisk University as part of a college exchange program. They met in Nashville in 1961 and joined the group who rode buses throughout the Deep South in an attempt to end desegregation in buses and bus depots, as ordered by the Supreme Court in two separate cases spanning 14 years. Students get a sense of each man by reading their very different life histories and then seeing them in non-violent action. The violent confrontations between the Riders and the local peoples is described in words, quotations, and pictures. The book also contains a chronology, a partial roster of Riders with brief stories about them, and a Resource guide. (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2005. 79 pgs.)

Bruchac, Joseph. *The Heart of a Chief.*

Sixth grader Chris leaves the reservation to attend school in the nearby town. All students can relate to his nervousness about a new school, making friends, and being in the youngest grade in a middle school. Chris shares observations about reservation life, his alcoholic father, his close-knit family of grandfather, great-aunt and sister, and the painful experience of being Indian at a school where the team mascot is an Indian and the team name is the Chiefs. Chris faces his fears with courage and maturity changing aspects of his life for the better. Bruchac has written numerous picture books, YA novels, collections of traditional stories, and an autobiography, *Bowman's Store*. (NY: Puffin Books, 2001. 153 pgs.)

Budhos, Marina. *Ask Me No Questions*

This book was born after 9/11 as a result of the stories of Muslim immigrants, legal and illegal, who instantly became suspect and entangled in a legal morass as a result of the aftermath. Nadira's family, Bangladeshi, have overstayed their visitor visa. Because all Muslim men need to register as a result of the Homeland Security Patriot Act, Nadira's father and the family--Nadira's mother, sister Aisha, and Nadira--travel to Canada for asylum. Unfortunately, due to the massive influx of immigrants, asylum is denied them. Nadira's father is jailed; her mother stays to support him and help with the hearing, and Nadira and Aisha need to return to New York to continue their studies, studies in which Aisha, the perfect daughter, is very successful. It is in this climate of fear and uncertainty Nadira comes into her own, realizing her strengths as a person and a daughter and beginning to envision a future for herself. The novel puts a human face on illegal immigrants, describes the way 9/11 impacted their lives, and offers some insights into the difficulties they face if they want to live and work in the United States. (NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006. 160 pgs.)

Broker, Ignatia. *Night Flying Woman.*

Ignatia Broker tells the story of her great-great-grandmother, Night Flying Woman, from her girlhood, centered in traditional Ojibwe culture, through the coming of the white people and the ways in which her tribe interacted and their traditional life cycles were changed. Broker's introduction explains and frames her narrative; her story paints a rich portrait of a complex society, demonstrating native values toward natural cycles, animals, elders, storytelling, and the importance of dreams and openness to the spiritual world. It appeals to all age groups, including adults; a clear Minnesota connection adds interest. Supporting websites on Broker and Ojibway culture are available at the Internet Public Library's Special Collections: <http://ipl2.org/div/natam/>. Search by tribe or author. (St Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1983. 135 pgs.)

Carlson, Lori Marie ed. *Moccasin Thunder: American Indian Stories for Today.*

A wonderful collection of stories by acclaimed Native writers (Bruchac, Smith, Van Camp, Erdrich, Alexie, Harjo, Hogan, Sarris, Power, and Francis.) Gr. 8-up. (NY: Harper Collins, 2005.)

Cofer, Judith Ortiz. *Call Me Maria.*

This short, lyrical, coming-of-age novel uses a mixture of genres -- poetry, prose pieces, letters, and journal entries -- to tell the story of fifteen-year-old Maria, a recent newcomer to the New York *barrio* from Puerto Rico. Readers share her loneliness, dreams, and struggles to learn English and to adapt to a new culture/environment. Other themes include divorce, the

importance of education, and the power of language. Teachers using the novel might want to read the first sections aloud to model the importance of noticing titles and to help students realize how easy the poetry is to read. *An Island Like You: Stories of the Barrio* is another Cofer novel readers might enjoy. (NY: Scholastic, 2004. 127 pgs.)

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Elijah of Buxton*.

This work of historical fiction, though often humorous, also addresses the serious issue of US slavery. Its protagonist, Elijah, is the first child born in Buxton, a free settlement for ex-slaves in 1860s Canada. Much of the story revolves around everyday life, pranks, and school, but the shadow of slavery is ever-present. Although Elijah and most of the other settlement children have never experienced slavery first-hand, its effects are far-reaching in the silences and sadness of adults, memories of loved ones left behind, and the pitiful state of newly-arrived runaways. The story takes a particularly dark turn when Elijah, after crossing the border into the US, encounters the violence of slave catchers and meets a chained group of runaway slaves. Elijah has to decide how or even whether or not he can help them. Although Elijah himself never suffers the experience of slavery, his encounter with it, and newly-found understanding of its horrors are what readers take away from the novel. This book would be a good read aloud as younger readers may have difficulty with the dialect of the novel. (NY: Scholastic P, 2007. 352 pgs.)

Draper, Sharon. *Copper Sun*.

In this work of historical fiction, Draper traces the life of protagonist Amari from the village in Africa where she is captured and enslaved, after witnessing the murder of family and friends, to Carolina, where she is bought as a present for a plantation owner's son. The plantation owner also buys a white indentured servant named Polly. The two girls eventually become friends and, at a time of violence and confusion on the plantation, manage to escape together to Fort Mose. Although the novel may be a little sentimentalized, it is also gripping and well-researched, describing many aspects of the slave trade, slavery in America and the interrelationships of those living on plantations. *Forged by Fire*, *The Battle of Jericho* and other books by Draper are also popular with young readers. (NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2006. 302 pgs.)

Flake, Sharon. *The Skin I'm In*.

This realistic novel is written in the voice of first-person narrator, Maleeka Madison, an inner-city African-American seventh grader who is teased by peers because her skin is so dark. The story focuses on Maleeka's struggle with issues of self-esteem and identity. Along with support from caring adults, Maleeka is empowered when she begins to see herself as a writer. The novel is quick-paced and provokes discussion about race/colorism, societal images of beauty, self-esteem, peer pressure, and bullying. Flake's other two novels, *Easy Money* and *Bang*, are also provocative and written in a similar style. (NY: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 1998. 131 pgs.)

Grimes, Nikki. *Bronx Masquerade*.

Grimes uses a mix of poetry and first-person prose to invite readers into the lives of 18 high school students representative of people we all recognize – the jock, the tough talking rapper, the artist, the beauty queen, the teenage mom, etc. Through the student-performed poetry on open-mike Fridays in which the characters reveal their fears, talents and aspirations, readers are invited to look beyond stereotypes and appearance to see who people really are. This inviting and easy read shows the transformative power of art and language. It would work well with a poetry unit and (for an older audience) could be paired with the movie *Slam*. (NY: Speak, 2003. 176 pgs.)

Johnson, Angela. *The First Part Last*.

The story, which focuses on unplanned teenage fatherhood, moves back and forth in time -- from the happy times when Bobby first begins dating Nia to his discovery that he is about to be a father and the uncomfortable weeks as the two of them grapple with the idea of parenthood and face the decision of whether to keep the baby or offer it up for adoption. Bobby, unlike many real-life young fathers, steps up to his responsibility for his child and the book deals realistically with how this decision impacts his life. This very simple but powerful book leads to good discussion. (NY: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003. 131 pgs.)

Martinez, Victor. *Parrot in the Oven*.

Martinez's episodic novel about a young Chicano is written in lush, metaphoric language and stands alongside Chicana coming-of-age stories such as *The House on Mango Street*. Manny and his family struggle against poverty and racism, let down by the institutions that are supposed to help them. At one point, Manny joins a gang but realizes that he is not a person who preys off others. At the end of the novel he returns home, seeing his family rather than his peers as a source of support. Like with *Mango Street*, a teacher might want to help students put the episodes together to get a vision of the story as a whole. Although easy to read, the situations the family faces are desperate, so the book is appropriate for a slightly older audience. See the *The ALAN Review* (Fall 2004) for a good review of the book by Betsey Nies. (NY: HarperCollins, 1996. 224 pgs.)

Myers, Walter Dean. *Autobiography of My Dead Brother.*

Fifteen-year-old Jesse no longer feels like he knows his blood brother, Rise. Rise has decided to get on the fast track to realizing his dreams – through selling drugs and working for a gang – and Rise wants Jesse, an aspiring artist, to use his drawing to tell Rise’s story. Myers explores the ease with which young men get sucked into the violence of a neighborhood plagued by drive-by shootings, vicious gangs, drugs, and turf wars. This novel is an intense but easy read. Art by Christopher Myers, particularly his comics, lightens the dark mood. (NY: Harper Tempest, 2005. 212 pgs.)

Okorafor-Mbachu. Nnedi. *Zarah the Windseeker.*

In this coming-of-age fantasy, thirteen-year-old heroine, Zahrah, is set apart from and teased by her peers because of her dada locks and special powers. Zahrah learns to accept herself and to use her powers when she has to depend on them and her courage to enter and travel through the Forbidden Greeny Jungle to find an antidote that will save the life of her best friend. Over the course of the adventure, Zahrah faces tests of endurance, meets strange creatures, and gains self-knowledge. Okorafor-Mbachu’s second novel *The Shadow Speaker* takes place in the same fantasy world. (NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2005. 308 pgs.)

Rempel, Leah. *Hey Hmong Girl Whassup?*

This journal-style novel written in the voice of a fictitious Minnesota Hmong girl, fifteen-year-old Choua Vang, was a product of ESL teacher Rempel’s master’s thesis. With the purpose of opening avenues for “cultural understanding and interaction,” Rempel worked with Hmong students and other members of the Hmong community to make sure the portrayal of characters and situations in this YA novel were authentic. The novel deals with the difficulties experienced by Choua and her family – the conflicts between children growing up in the US, immersed in US customs and values, and parents holding traditional expectations about gender roles, marriage, and parental respect. Choua’s oldest sisters married young and married men chosen by their father, but her next oldest brother and sister have rebelled, joined gangs and spent time in jail/detention. Choua is at a crossroads, deciding what kind of person she wants to be. (St. Paul, MN: Hamline University P, 2004. 138 pgs.) A good resource for teachers and older students is *I Begin My Life All Over* by Lillian Faderman, a collection of oral histories by Hmong in America.

Smith, Cynthia Leitich. *Rain Is Not My Indian Name.*

This novel combines journal entries with first-person narrative, moving back and forth between the present and recent past, keeping readers engaged until the end to find out what really happened on a fateful New Year’s Eve night when Cassidy Rain Berghoff’s best friend died. This second death –her mother’s death having occurred several years prior to the story’s opening– has left the fourteen-year-old protagonist overcome by grief, and the novel follows Cassidy’s “return” to a normal life through her love of photography, her connections with family and community, and her examination and acceptance of events prior to friend’s death. (NY: Harper Collins, 2001. 135 pgs.) Cynthia Leitich Smith’s “A Different Drum: Native American Writing” in the July/August 2002 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine* is a good resource.

Sterling, Shirley. *My Name is Seepeetza.*

Told in a series of journal entries based on the author’s own experiences, twelve-year-old Seepeetza recounts the story of life in the Indian residential schools (boarding schools) in 1950s British Columbia which Indian students are forced to attend and where they are not allowed to speak their language. The book recounts the sadness of leaving home, the regimented life of the schools, the punishments, the endless hours of cleaning, and the sadness of waiting for the few vacations when students are released from the schools to rejoin their families. The dismal, militaristic life at the school is juxtaposed with the joy students experience with their families, being back on the family ranch and engaging in the activities that help support the family. (Toronto: Groundwood Books, 1992. 126 pgs.)

Tamaki, Mariko and Jillian Tamaki. *Skim.*

A graphic novel about coming-of-age which explores suicide, depression, love, sexuality, crushes, cliques and other issues encountered by adolescents. Main character Kimberly Keiko Cameron (a.k.a. Skim) attends an all-girls school and the novel follows her search for friends and love and portrays the pain and the difficulties of growing up. In the end Skim and her best friend Lisa both find happiness and acceptance. (Berkley, CA: Groundwood Books, 2008. 141 pgs.)

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*

A graphic novel with three intertwined stories: a traditional Chinese tale of the Monkey King who does everything to be human rather than a monkey; the story of Jin Wang, the only Asian American boy in his school, who desires to fit in and to date an all-American girl; and Chin-kee, a television-sitcom-like character compiled of numerous Chinese stereotypes, on his yearly visit to his American cousin Danny, to whom he is a constant embarrassment. The stories eventually tie together, leaving readers to

think about identity, the power and pain of stereotyping, racism and prejudice, and the importance of self-acceptance. (NY: First Second Books, 2006. 233 pgs.) Margaret Chang's "We Like Our Version Better" in the November/December 2002 issue of *The Horn Book Magazine* discusses Asian American Literature.

High School and General Education College

Alexie, Sherman. *Flight*.

This novel, like *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2009, Grades 7-10), has a young male protagonist with an edgy, *Catcher in the Rye*-type of voice. In *Flight*, Zits, an orphaned half-Irish, half-Indian boy who has been through better than twenty foster homes finds himself about to commit a crime but is powered back through time travel and sees historical events personally from different sides of the question while in the body of an FBI agent on an Indian reservation in the 1970s; an Indian child during the Battle of Little Big Horn; a US Army Indian tracker during the 19th century; a flight instructor with a potential terrorist student; and finally in the body of his alcoholic father. Zits experiences and re-considers revenge, violence, shame, change, and empathy during these "lives." Language is "adult." High School and College. The book contains a very specific reading guide at the end with detailed questions. (NY: Black Cat, 2007. 181 pgs.) Sites on the web provide sample units and more general info on teaching approaches: <http://sites.google.com/site/vjohnson119/flightunit> and <http://ncte2008.ning.com/forum/topics/teaching-sherman-alexie> .

Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*.

This novel tells the story of the Garcia family, who fled the Dominican Republic in the 1960s; the story is autobiographical, reminiscent of Alvarez's own experience as a child immigrant and her family's escape after her father's work in the anti-Trujillo underground. The novel moves backwards in time, beginning with the stories of the four sisters as adults and then moving back through their courtships and marriages, college careers, adolescence, and elementary school right after they first moved to the US. The last section takes place in the Dominican Republic and gives a strong sense of political intrigue and the cultural base from which the girls are working. Challenging reading because readers must trace the sisters' developing understanding of American and Dominican cultures backwards and different chapters focus on different sisters. (NY: Algonquin, 2010. [1991] 336 pgs.). Google "Alvarez Garcia Penguin" (without the quotes) for a book discussion page.

Baca, Jimmy Santiago. *A Place to Stand*.

Baca's memoir is very intense, much of it involving his prison experience; it includes the stories of the men he meets there and the steps he takes to survive. Baca also recounts his literacy journey: the writing and reading that help him survive the insanity of prison. The story is inspiring because Baca turns his life around, but it is also a condemnation of our society which fills prisons with young men of color rather than providing them with the resources and support to succeed in society. (NY: Grove Atlantic, 2002. 272 pgs.)

Butler, Octavia. *Kindred*.

In this science-fictional slave narrative, Dana, a 26-year-old black woman, in the midst of moving into a new home in L.A. in 1976 with her husband, is mysteriously transported to an antebellum plantation in Maryland, where she saves a child from drowning. For the remainder of the novel, she time-travels between these two locations in order to save her ancestor, that drowning child, until he grows up and fathers the child who will become her own ancestor. While in Maryland, Dana witnesses and experiences personally the evils of slavery, particularly for women—the drudgery, the psychological abuse, the mother's loss of children, the rapes and beatings, and brutality. Butler uses the conventions of traditional slave narratives and contrasts the reactions of a present-day feminist who, though outraged, is powerless to intervene. Dana also comes to recognize the scarring effects of slavery that remain to this day. (Boston: Beacon, 1979. 264 pgs.). Excellent resources, discussion questions, and a well-thought out creative writing story guide related to *Kindred* at <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/butler.html>

Butler, Octavia. *Parable of the Sower*.

This journal-style novel opens with fifteen-year-old Lauren describing her gated community, a neighborhood that has banded together in a chaotic 2024 California where people battle for scarce resources of water, food, and land. Lauren suffers from hyper-empathy, so she is debilitated by and suffers along with the pain of others. She is also unusual in that she has ceased to believe in the religion of her minister-father but is creating her own religion called Earthseed. After a fire and mob kill, or scatter, the inhabitants of her small community, Lauren takes to the road, moving toward safety in Canada. Along the way, she creates a group of people who coalesce around her and her new teachings. This novel is very powerful particularly as it resonates with current US circumstances. It also invites students to explore their own beliefs and the role of religion in creating community. (NY: Warner Books, Inc., 1993, 329 pgs.)

Culleton, Beatrice. *April Raintree*.

This novel, set in Canada and loosely based on its author's life, tells the story of two Metis sisters who are removed from their family and grow up in foster care. The sisters, April and Cheryl, suffer injustice under the social service system and face a struggle to survive and find their identities. The book is an easy read that is powerful and moving. (Winnipeg: Peguis Publishers, 1995, 196 pgs.)

Dorris, Michael. *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water*.

This novel is excellent for teaching point of view. Its three parts are all first-person narratives, the first told by Rayona, 15, an American Indian who runs away from her reservation in Montana; the second by her mother, Christine; and the third by Aunt Ida, who is Christine's mother and Rayona's grandmother. Sometimes the same incidents are narrated in more than one section with interesting differences in interpretation of the event. All three women encounter difficulties in love and daily life, living always on the brink of poverty. Rayona eventually comes to understand and reconnect with her dying mother and stoic grandmother and to have a strong sense of self. (NY: Picador, 1987. 384 pgs.)

Fairbanks, Evelyn. *Days of Rondo*.

In this memoir, Evelyn Fairbanks tells the story of growing up in the Rondo, St Paul's largest African-American neighborhood during the 1930s and 1940s. Fairbanks describes the people who came to be her parents and family, trips back home to Georgia, school, dating, and working. In a chapter called "Being Black in Minnesota," she talks about discrimination in everyday terms, speaking for instance of not being served at Bridgeman's. of the mini-sit-ins she and her friends tried, of negotiating with the principal for exceptions to the rule that no non-students could come to the prom so that she and her friends could have dates, and of using her "white person's voice" to get an admission interview for business school. It is a reminiscence of a time and era, especially interesting since I-94 was built through the Rondo neighborhood in the 1960s. It includes pictures of her family and St. Paul places. (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical P, 1990. 182 pgs.)

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divine*.

This is another excellent novel for teaching point of view. It is a novel in five parts, telling the story of one Japanese family's removal from Berkeley, California to an internment camp in Utah during World War II. Each section, which carries the story forward, is told from a family member's point of view—the mother tells of the notice and the preparations to leave; the ten-year-old daughter tells of the train journey; the seven-year-old son tells of their stay at the camp; both children narrate the return to Berkeley; and the father "confesses" to his "war crimes" in the final section. The story is told simply and straightforwardly without authorial comment; it is easy to read but the last section poses challenging questions. A good book for discussion of us-them social categories and interactions, social and political reactions to security threats, historical research projects, and literary point of view and symbols. (NY: Anchor, 2002. 144 pgs.). Both a Reader's Guide and a Teacher's Guide are available online at Random House.

Rodriguez, Luis. *Always Running: La Vida Loca: Gang Days in L.A.*

Luis Rodriguez wrote this memoir of his growing up in East L.A. in the 1960s and 1970s as an extended argument to his son, who was following a similar and dangerous path with drugs, gangs, and violence. Rodriguez shows what becomes of living *la vida loca*, although he is singularly lucky in the adults who take an interest in him and help him realize his talents in mural painting, writing, traditional dancing, and social activism. This is a fast and very engaging read; students love it. Rodriguez describes not only the violence and dangers he encountered, but also his own feelings of sorrow, powerlessness, and loss as a gang member. His social activism continues; see his well developed website: <http://www.luisjrodriguez.com/>. Also available in Spanish. (NY: Touchstone, 1993. 262 pgs.)

Shange, Ntozake. *Betsey Brown*.

This coming-of-age novel is set in St Louis during 1959, the year that St Louis schools began desegregation. Betsey, a seventh grader, confronts the usual problems of friendship, love, sexuality, and realizing the effect of her actions against the backdrop of changing ideas about civil rights and black identity. She lives in a solidly middle-class family; her father is a doctor and her mother a social worker. But her parents have very different ideas about integration and black power; her father is proud of their black cultural heritage while her mother is more conventional and accommodating. And Betsey, their oldest child, is in the thick of their—and society's—conflict. This is a good historical novel, one that develops Betsey's personal conflicts, including finding her place within a new school, as well as making readers more aware of the problems facing American society at the start of the civil rights era. (NY: Picador, 1985. 208 pgs.)

Speigelman, Art. *Maus I: A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History* and *Maus II: A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began*.

Speigelman's well-known, breakthrough historical graphic novels about the Holocaust are centered on the author getting the story from his surviving father, Vladek. The two books take Vladek through the build-up of Nazi power, his flight, and finally his stay at Auschwitz. This historical story is interspersed with attention to the lasting personal effect on the survivors as well as on

those close to them, including the author. (*Maus I*: NY: Pantheon, 1986. 160 pgs. and *Maus II*: NY: Pantheon, 1992. 144 pgs.). Excellent sites support teaching the work: a teacher's guide with detailed questions for *Maus I* at Random House <http://www.randomhouse.com/highschool/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780394747231&view=tg> ; another @Web English Teacher <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/spiegelman.html> , and a course site with links to many other informative sites at <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/33d/33dTexts/maus/MausResources.htm>.

Viramontes, Helena. *Under the Feet of Jesus*.

Estrella, a thirteen-year-old, and her family toil in the harsh conditions of California's migrant workers, though nature and family rituals are both beautifully described in this coming-of-age novel. They move often and at each new place, the statue of Jesus and their citizenship papers (which are kept under the feet of the statue) are enshrined. Their existence is precarious and it seems that Perfecto, the man who has replaced Estrella's father after he abandoned the family, is also considering leaving them. Estrella questions the value of religious faith and the ability of adults to offer protection. Her first love, Alejo, is poisoned by a crop duster as he picks peaches in a tree and the family confronts the medical system, trying to get him assistance. By the end of the novel, Estrella finds that the only things she can rely on are her own strength and determination but she is determined to move forward. (NY: Plume, 1995. 192 pgs.)

Appendix B: Additional Teaching Ideas or Resources

Bader, Barbara. "How the Little House Gave Ground: The Beginnings of Multiculturalism in a New, Black Children's Literature." *The Horn Book Magazine* 78.6 (November/December 2002): 657-73. Print.

----- "Multiculturalism Takes Root." *The Horn Book Magazine* 79.2 (March/April 2003): 143-62. Print.

----- "Multiculturalism in the Mainstream." *The Horn Book Magazine* 79.3 (May/June 2003): 265-91. Print.
This series of articles offers a history of children's multicultural literature.

"Books to Avoid: How to Tell the Difference." *Oyate.org*. Oyate. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.
Helpful in suggesting things to look for or avoid in representations of Native peoples.

Clegg, Luther B., Etta Miller, Bill Vanderhoof, Gonzalo Ramirez and Peggy K. Ford. "How To Choose The Best Multicultural Books." *Scholastic.com*. Scholastic. n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

This site suggests 50 multicultural books and contains comments by writers and educators about how to choose good multicultural books; ten books each about, and for, Native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Jewish peoples. K-8.

English Journal: Special Issue on Multicultural Literature of the Americas. 94.3 (Jan 2005): 1-106. Print.
Articles by teachers, writer, and researchers.

Fox, Dana and Kathy Short, eds. *Stories Matter: The Complexity of Cultural Authenticity in Children's Literature*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2003. Print.

A collection of chapters by various experts discussing the controversy surrounding authentic representation, teaching issues, and definitions of multicultural literature.

Sass, Edmund J., ed. "Multicultural Lesson Plans and Resources." *Cloudnet.com*. College of St. Benedict's/St. John's University. 2009. Web. 10 Jan. 2011.

Scroll past the ads and see a large compendium of sites dealing with general issues (such as immigration) or cultural groups or specific authors. At the bottom is a link back to the central index from which you can find other ideas, sites, and lesson plans for adolescent literature and for teaching literature; K-12. Updated regularly; very few dead links.

Norton, Donna E. "Teaching Multicultural Literature in the Reading Curriculum". *Reading Teacher* 44.1 (Sept 1990): 28-40. Print.

Outlines a multi-step approach to teaching multicultural literature, beginning with traditional myths, legends and folktales of the cultural group; narrowing to specific traditional myths and stories related to a specific group or tribe; adding relevant non-fiction such as biographies or historical accounts; historical fiction; and finally contemporary fiction, biography, or poetry. This method seeks to create a context for the contemporary fiction and help student readers understand better the relations between culture and literature. Well worked-out examples for Native American and African American works.

Rabinowitz, Peter J. and Michael W. Smith. *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature*. New York: Teachers College, 1998. Print.

The authors alternate chapters discussing ways of reading literature. Several chapters focus on teaching and reading multicultural literature.

Reese, Debbie. "Native Voices". *School Library Journal* (Nov 2008): 53-60. Print.

Offers an annotated bibliography of literature by and about American Indians suitable for elementary through high school.

----- "Proceed with Caution: Using Native American Folktales in the Classroom". *Language Arts* 41.3 (Jan 2007): 245-256. Print.

Identifies problems of using some folktales as examples of authentic Native American literature.

Zitzer-Comfort, Carol. "Teaching Native American Literature: Inviting Students to See the World through Indigenous Lenses." *Pedagogy* 8:1 (Winter 2008): 160-170. Print.

Discusses difficulties of overcoming stereotypes of Native Americans while teaching Native American literature.