

Towards Segregation of Native American Literature Instruction in Secondary English Classrooms

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The Indians survived our open intention of wiping them out, and since the tide turned they have even weathered our good intentions toward them, which can be much more deadly.

--John Steinbeck (326)

Act 1: A non-descript, high school English classroom, eight days before the first day of school.

Karl Peterson is an eager, new English teacher at Inner-Ring Suburban High School in Minnesota. Of his many plans, one thing that his teaching program encouraged him to do is use “multicultural literature” in his classroom. He might use Toni Morrison or Cisneros... or, hmm... maybe some Indian...errr....Native American literature from the new Minnesota Common Core Standards. Hmm... he’d really liked the book Black Elk Speaks back in his freshman year of college; the Indians had really been so far ahead of things on so many things like spirituality and the environment. Hmm... and in his Young Adult Literature course, he’d skimmed Lipsyte’s The Chief, a book that showed how native bravery had overcome hardships. He could use that with his struggling readers in a unit about overcoming the odds. His students could learn about the environment and courage even as they learned about Native American culture.

Karl is exploring the desk in his new room and mumbling aloud about the use of multicultural texts. He wonders if the school has any classroom sets.

Enter, Cynthia Jones, the English teacher from the room next door, where she has taught for the past thirty-two long years.

Cynthia: Hi Karl. Hadn’t seen you since the interview, so I thought I’d stop by to see if you needed any materials... or any nearly-retired veteran teacher tips! (*Smiling, with her hand extended*) You might recall; I’m Cynthia.

Karl: (*Shakes her hand*) Sure, thanks Cynthia. No big needs, really. But you did catch me thinking about this: Do we by chance have any multicultural novels? I’m teaching a regular American Lit and one for struggling readers. I’ve got about 34 students in my second hour. I’d like to add something diverse to augment the textbook.

Cynthia: (*Pausing*)... umm... sure, probably... there are quite a few boxes in the bookroom with novels that teachers have used over the years. I can check for you. (*Cynthia gives him a playful stare*) So... thinking you’ll shake things up a bit, eh?

Karl: Umm...not really... (*Grinning*) I’m just hoping teach some diverse novels, not start

a political party.

Cynthia: (*Laughing*) No, of course; it's just the way you said "multicultural," like you've got an agenda or something. I personally think it's a great idea, but I always caution new teachers not too open too many cans of worms in the classroom too fast. That's tip one!

Karl: (*Laughing*) No need to worry about that. But I would appreciate it if you could help me find some books. Hmm, maybe I could get a "good" Native American title or two. Do you think we might have something like *Black Elk Speaks* for the regular class or Lipsyte's *The Chief* that I could use with struggling readers?

Cynthia: Well I'll get back there and take a look before classes start up. (*Pause*)... Can I ask a question, though? I'm just curious about the way you said that: So, how do you define a "good" Indian author or novel? I mean, there are lots out there...

Karl: (*Looks away, thinking*) Yeah... umm...

Cynthia: ... and when you find it, what are your thoughts on how to teach it? What kind of approach will you use? I mean, not that's there a right or wrong here... I'm just saying...

Karl: Well... (*Still processing her questions*) yeah... first, I think it's good for students to learn about Native American culture. Second, and maybe most importantly, it's good literature: quality writing, universal themes... and I like to use a lot of reader-response activities to connect it to students' lives. Those approaches can really help students engage and make relevant meanings from the text. Surely you agree that letting students read about other cultures is the most...

BING! BING!

(*Suddenly, the voices of Native American authors Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn blare over the school's public address system and interrupt the discussion, which is really odd since their primary audience is tribal First Nation members and higher academia, but anyway...*)

Womack/Cook-Lynn: "We regret this interruption... (throat clearing cough)... ATTENTION. KARL. WE ARE SORRY TO ANNOUNCE THAT YOU ARE ANOTHER WELL-MEANING TEACHER WITH NO IDEA WHAT THE HELL HE IS DOING..."

(*Karl stares into the distant eyes of Cynthia. He's bewildered, but listens even more intently to their blaring, somewhat synchronized voices. He looks around the room expecting to see Ashton Kutcher or, given Cynthia's age, Allan Funt.*)

... AS YOU DON'T EVEN CONSIDER TRIBAL PERSPECTIVES ABOUT WHAT MIGHT CONSTITUTE A NATIVE AUTHOR, A NATIVE TEXT, OR A NATIVE INTERPRETATION...

At that moment, Cynthia reached up, and with years of practiced experience flips the switch to "OFF." The room falls silent.

Karl: Hey, what are you doing? Those voices, those people... are ... are... talking directly to me!

Cynthia: (*Smiling and shaking her head*) It always seems that way at first! After a few years, you learn to tune out that loudspeaker. If it's important, it'll show up in our mailboxes in the morning. That's tip number two!

Karl: (*Frantically*) Could you just please turn it back on? I think it could really be meaningful!

(*Cynthia lets out a "hrmph," walks over to the wall, returns the switch to the 'ON' position. She moves back near the door, and looks down the hall trying to get the attention of the custodian who is putting the final coat of wax on the floor at the end of the hallway.*)

"...AND ON TUESDAY, SPIRIT WEEK WILL CONTINUE WITH COWBOY DAY; DON'T FORGET TO WEAR YOUR HATS. FINALLY, KARL, BE SURE TO READ THIS

(*The rest of the Parks MEJ article begins spewing page by page from the fresh air vent in the wall above Karl's desk. Karl runs and scoops pages up off the floor as the voices continue*)

... OR YOU'RE DOOMED TO PERPETUATE THE VERY SYSTEM THAT YOU THINK YOU'RE INVOLVED IN CHANGING. (*Karl looks bewildered as he reaches under his desk for the last page.*) ALSO...(*The sound of paper shuffling*) THE LIBRARIAN WISHES TO REMIND ALL FACULTY THAT SHE PREFERS TO BE CALLED THE "MEDIA SPECIALIST" THIS YEAR. HAVE A GREAT OPENING WEEK, EVERYONE. (*Silence*)

(*Cynthia catches the custodian's attention, waves with one hand, and holds her nose with the other while shaking her head back and forth. As Cynthia turns around and returns her attention to Karl, he is now slumped in his desk chair with his head bobbing in disbelief.*)

Karl: Did... did... did you see that? Did you? That paper, it just came blowing out all over the floor. I... I... picked it all up.

Cynthia: (*Looking shocked*) That is a surprise! Usually Lenny and the crew have everything spotless by now. Anyway, like I was sayin', just don't try to take on too much too soon. That's tip number three. (*Turning to leave*) I'll head on back and let you get your work done. I'll follow up on those multicultural novels when I can.

Karl: (*Still confused*). Um, yeah... thanks Cynthia. It seems that I've got some fresh reading to do before I follow up on those (*He looks down at this MEJ article*). Will you be in your room working on your syllabi this week?

Cynthia: (*Soberly*) No, I'll be immersing myself in the new Common Core Standards. (*Pause*) Ha! (*She laughs*) Gotcha! (*Smiling broadly*) Actually, I've got a little copying to do, but my goal before school starts is to start working on my retirement numbers. Bye!

(Karl turns his eyes to the pages that have arrived from the fresh-air vent overhead. He reads...)

Introduction

The inclusion of Native American literature within the classroom may be understood as more than the mere changing of book titles on a course syllabus; instead, it is a move steeped in history and the politics of many groups. The pages that follow provide a brief overview of some of the common conversations related to texts, interpretation, and pedagogy before considering the writings of Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, two Native American authors whose provocative views regarding the relationship between Native American texts, authors, and the political concerns of First Nation tribes may serve as a sobering wake-up call for well-meaning English teachers such as Karl.

The context of Karl's push for multicultural literature

The political nature of curriculum is well-documented by Jurgen Habermas and many others. Perhaps no classroom within the school is more culturally significant than the English classroom in which the texts selected for study are understood as having great influence in shaping students' worldviews; text selection has been part of the "culture wars" stretching from the 1980's to today. Theorists such as E. D. Hirsch and Alan Bloom argued for a fixed cultural literacy in which the European literary canon would be the primary foundation upon which literature instruction rests. In contrast, scholars such as James Banks argued for an inclusive canon that does not perpetuate a singular cultural heritage but incorporates authors, experiences, and perspectives of multiple cultures into the classroom (5-7); authors and publishers such as Rick Simonson and Scott Walker argued that "multicultural literacy" is essential for accurately representing the breadth of contributions to culture within the United States.

Those supporting the use of multicultural literature cite a variety of reasons. Banks argued for multicultural education due to its transformational power in a democratic society; multicultural literature can serve the goal of a more just nation. Simonson and Walker argued that the exclusion of females and authors of color within the canon fails to reflect the lack of change that has taken place within the US, and that this is a result of "Eurocentric bias" (xii). In today's teacher education programs, the emphasis on our changing society, the needs of diverse learners, and the desire to engage "all" students finds English teachers both well-meaning and well-intentioned when adding multicultural literature to their classrooms, a laudable goal for Karl and others.

In common use, however, the phrase "multicultural literature" is essentially pejorative. Typically, it still holds up a standard of the white, male, heterosexual literary tradition as normative, and lumps those outside of its experiences into a single category of "otherness" that frequently overlooks those literatures' abilities to stand independently and within the fullness of their own cultural traditions; African-American literature is not Asian literature, is not Native literature, and is not Latina literature. Yet, the multicultural moniker would lead the hearer to believe that somehow these texts are similar as they function merely as a colorful variance from the canonical norm. The teacher who incorporates such a cognitive frame into literature instruction functions as little more than an interloping tour guide who points out to students the ways in which these multicultural "others" bear similarity and difference to the mainstream; the majority population remains the primary focus of inquiry.

The undercurrent of multicultural education yearns for an inclusive, just America. It represents a move towards bringing all of the marginalized, disenfranchised voices into discussion of a unified America. But what of those whose goals are not necessarily within “the American Dream,” but apart from it? What of those who don’t want in, but want out? Clearly, this is a point of demarcation when combining contemporary Native American concerns with African-American or Latino; while lawsuits and protests in the latter communities tend toward equality and inclusion, the consistent political voice and legal negotiating of Native America is for separatism, as Cook-Lynn attests:

In practice, multicultural education has not and will not cast much light on the centuries’ long struggle for sovereignty faced by the people of the First Nation of America. Its very nature, ironically, is in conflict with the concept of American Indian sovereignty... (91)

Regarding current practices in relationship to Native literature, Cook-Lynn’s voice resonates with a call against this random merging of cultural groups into a new category. She writes:

Because of flaws in pedagogy and criticism, much modern fiction written in English by American Indians is being used as the basis for the cynical absorption into the “melting pot,” pragmatic inclusion in the canon, and involuntary unification of an American national literary voice. (96)

As the First Nation tribes seek sovereignty, they, not well-intentioned teachers, should certainly be afforded a voice when considering the questions posed by Cynthia: What constitutes a Native American author or novel? How is such a text to be interpreted and taught? How might it reflect (or not) the specific culture or the politics of the tribe to which it is connected? Though the potential answers to such questions are broad and complex, value exists in considering seminal voices in the conversation.

Craig Womack, in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in *Why I Can’t Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays*, are two such voices. Though their audience is primarily Creek and Sioux tribal readers and extended First Nation communities, and while their emphasis is first to argue for the foundation of tribal literary traditions and a more active, autonomous voice within academia, their ideas are likely to resonate with contemporary literature teachers both in and out of those contexts.

The first point of concern with Karl’s perspective on Native America occurs long before he arrives at questions of authors and texts. When he notes that Natives, “had really been so far ahead on so many things...” he considers Native America in the past tense, a view that Womack describes as widespread and misinformed (28). Part of this misguided notion arises from the premise that the “pure” native culture was only the one that existed prior to European contact (65), which leads Womack to wonder why “Indian cultures are the only cultures where it is assumed that if they change they are no longer a culture?” (31). European America and its numerous, notable western writers perpetuate romantic eulogies of the native cultures that have passed (Cook-Lynn 31). When Womack writes, “The tendency to put native people in this reductive tainted/untainted framework occurs, at least partially, because Indians are thought of not in their true legal status, which is as members of nations, but as cultural artifacts” (65), he identifies and refutes America’s (and Karl’s) faulty zeitgeist.

Having established that Native American Tribes are alive, well, and seeking the full implementation of sovereignty, it is understandable that Womack and Cook-Lynn call for the establishment and recognition of a native literary tradition that is independent of the US canon, as most nations would. While teachers like Karl hope for Native literature to be acknowledged as canon-worthy, Womack applauds a form of segregation, writing:

The primary purpose of this study is not to argue for canonical inclusion or opening up native literature to a broader audience. I say that tribal literatures are not some branch waiting to be grafted onto the main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas. We *are* the canon. (6)

Such a position forces a new way to think about native texts: they are not a subgroup of multicultural literature, but contemporary expressions of rooted, tribal literary histories expressed in both oral and written forms. The consideration of a Native text should not be first in its relationship to European or American literary history, but in relationship to Native literary histories. This is especially significant given the current political and legal battles in which specific tribes engage, as Womack writes of the Creek tribe:

When Creek people assume they have the inherent right to interpret their own literature and history, even when their interpretations differ from those of dominant culture, they are setting themselves apart as a nation of people with distinct worldviews that deserve to be taken seriously. This is an important exercise in sovereignty. (29)

A Native canon is not about enacting a new push toward multiculturalism in classrooms; a Native canon is about strengthening tribal independence.

Karl should also reconsider his laissez-faire use of contemporary trends in interpretation and textual criticism. Womack and Cook-Lynn propose a new direction towards restoring the primacy of the authors in relationship to meaning being constructed within a work, a call usually in contradiction with a postmodern age. Womack argues that the establishment of an authentic “national literary identity” is essential in order to “reaffirm the real truth about our place in history” (5). In order to establish such a place, Womack alludes, those involved with the texts must ignore the deconstructionist’s cry of “the author is dead” and restore attention to the author of the text and the tribal context of such. She explains: “So, at least until we get our stories told, especially in terms of establishing a body of Native criticism in relation to 19th century writing, postmodernism may have some limitations in regard to its applicability to native scholarship” (4). For Karl, a reconsideration of the everyday use of reader-response or new critical approaches, for example, is likely in order. If heeding Womack and Cook-Lynn’s call, he will move towards understanding the centrality of the author and his or her tribal context in the work before contemplating the use of other popular interpretive strategies.

The ancestry of the author is primary concern for Womack and Cook-Lynn as they seek to strengthen and construct tribal canons. Both authors argue that America’s understanding of Native American stories have come too frequently from non-native voices, individuals that claim native status or expertise, then make a career of speaking on behalf of specific tribes or nations. Womack explains, “I feel that native perspectives have to do with allowing Indian people to

speak for themselves; with prioritizing native voices” (4). Given this maxim, authors who lack tribal affiliations should not be regarded as creating Native American literature or authoring Native American criticism. Because a text or analysis infuses native characters, perspectives, histories, or themes does not make it Native literature; a book *about* Native Americans is different than a book *by* Native Americans. Karl might consider such distinctions.

Womack acknowledges, however, that tribal authors may certainly possess a variety of native perspectives--“rez, urban, full blood, mixed blood, language speakers, non-speakers, gay, straight, and many other possibilities” (2). Yet, cultural credentials alone do not mean that the texts they author are in synch with the emerging traditions for which Womack and Cook-Lynn argue. For example, in assessing the writing of Alice Callahan’s *Wynema*, Womack affirms her Creek identity, yet he problematizes her novel “because of its failure to engage Creek culture, history, and politics” (107). Womack and Cook-Lynn both struggle to find tribal function in Native-authored texts that are not firmly rooted in tribal landscapes and concerns. This perspective is not intended to dismiss Callahan or her work, but to clarify the parameters for which they argue in the construction of tribal canons, parameters in which the credentials of the author alone do not make a text representative of a tribe or tied to contemporary tribal political interests.

Cook-Lynn critiques Native authors whose texts may be described as culturally rooted but do not address greater tribal considerations within those works. She struggles to embrace literature that engages some aspects of tribal landscapes and culture, such as “loss, exile, identity, and degeneration” (89), but glosses over those elements that are less palatable to the mainstream, such as “the sovereign rights and obligations of citizens of the first nation of America” (89). She finds herself ultimately concerned with this: “How does the tribe benefit from this text?” Womack echoes that America “loves Indian culture; America is much less enthusiastic about Indian land title” (11). Cook-Lynn encourages increased scrutiny of Native-authored texts to assess the motivation of the author as related to the needs of tribal concerns. For Cook-Lynn, the text should be more attentive to tribal concerns than those of a literary agent or a broad book-buying public. Teachers such as Karl would do well to acknowledge such complex conversations around both authorship and tribally-representative texts (or not) in which Native literatures live.

A tradition of functional Native literary criticism can more fully emerge with the establishment of a tribal and pan-tribal native canon. Cook-Lynn argues that “...individual works are comprehensible only within the context of the economic, behavioral, and political forces of the culture from which they emerge...” (77). Womack concurs, while also proposing a more intentional reclamation and translation of tribes’ oral tales that would allow structures and symbols to be teased out, framed in political contexts (64), and used to interpret future native works (61). Womack writes:

We scholars haven’t yet done enough to articulate how the oral tradition provides the principles for interpreting our national literatures—the genres; the unique approaches to character development, plot, theme, setting, and so on; the effect on the structuring of stories; the philosophies that come out of this tradition; the contexts it provides for understanding politics, religion, and society. (61)

These authors strongly encourage the interpretation of tribal literatures to take place within the growing tribal canon, the culture, the political, spiritual, and social histories, and within the body

of symbols, genres, and interests of the tribes from which they are birthed. Only within this framework and context can (should?) native meaning be made. Karl, take note.

Conclusion

Common practices for Native American literature selection and use in today's secondary English classrooms should be reconsidered when placed alongside the arguments of Womack and Cook-Lynn. Teachers like Karl would do well to explore the complexities and conversations of the tribal nations in which such texts are rooted, nations whose authors, interpretations, strategies for instruction, and ultimate aims usually differ from those of non-Native teachers. As secondary teachers of literature become purposeful regarding the genuine, effective incorporation of Native American literatures, there will hopefully be less focus on the abstract broadening of a classroom canon and instead increased focus on tribal voices that call for the creation of a Native one.

(Karl stretches. He looks up soberly from the pages at the PA speaker and air vent above his desk. He shakes his head in a slow, contemplative manner, releases a long sigh, and rises to stretch. As he wanders around his classroom adjusting the desks, he seems to arrive at a fresh sense of resolve.)

Act II: Karl Peterson's High School English classroom

(One week has passed. Karl is teetering atop a desk taking down an old Tiger Woods poster. In walks a grinning Cynthia...)

Cynthia: Karl, how are you? I just wanted to stop by to see if you have everything ready for school tomorrow... and to announce a little surprise!

Karl: Hi Cynthia! Yep, I've got everything pretty much ready *(Karl steps down gingerly)*: syllabi are copied, seating charts are ready, and I'm just putting the final touches on the room. And did you say surprise?

Cynthia: Yes, I did; check these out! *(Cynthia pulls from her denim bookbag a handful of paperback novels. She spreads them out on the desk like a card dealer.)* I'm like a multicultural novel Old Country Buffet! Isn't it great? I looked through some bookcases and found a variety of novels: some of them are Native American! Just let me know which one you'd like, and I think I can rustle up a classroom set for you within a week, pardner.

Karl: *(Grinning)* I appreciate it, I really do. But I think I'd better take a slight raincheck before I place the order. The truth is that I've been doing a little research since we spoke last, and I'm putting a new plan into place before I incorporate them in the classroom. I'm really excited!

Cynthia: *(Taking a chair near his desk)* Oh, do tell what you've learned in one week on the job! *(As Karl begins to talk, Cynthia reaches into her purse and takes out notepaper and a pencil)*

(Behind the muted microphone in the principal's office, Craig Womack and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn watch Karl's classroom on the security screen)

Womack: Pass me the popcorn and grab me a tissue. It's time for the DENOUEMENT! I think Cynthia is going to learn something from this kid!

Cook-Lynn: Are you kidding? She's a foil! A flat character! A grizzled veteran! Parks won't let her change. You'll see.

Karl: Awesome! Okay, so check this out. (*Karl's eyes widen and his voice quicken*) In the past week I did some research spawned by the *Minnesota English Journal*. It encouraged me to teach Native American literature, but to do so with increased integrity. In addition to authors Womack and Cook-Lynn, I learned more about these complex issues from Minnesotans like... errr... Leech Lake Ojibewe, David Treuer. I found that while many tribal members and scholars differ on key questions, but they would agree that my ... our... multicultural-literature-lumping is problematic. I realize now that my teacher education program could only do so much, and I have much more to do much on my own if I'm going to teach diverse literatures effectively. Would you like me to quickly sketch out my plan?

(*Cindy nods blankly and begins jotting down words on the notebook page. Karl jumps up, runs over to the white board, and scribbles furiously with a dry-erase marker*)

SHORT TERM PLAN: I will...

- resist my previous thinking of Native tribes in the past tense
- get input from tribal educators/scholars regarding resources. A call or email to a tribal office can get me started
- teach texts in a more tribally specific manner --over 500 tribes! (Reese 247)

(*Cynthia has reached down, extracted a calculator, and enters numbers as Karl continues*)

- increase attention to the role of the author as situated in both historical and contemporary contexts of the tribe
- use multiple texts of a tribe to reflect diverse perspectives in that community; poems can work well. One text does not reflect the group!
- be willing to address misrepresentations that students will bring to the texts

Karl: (*Loudly*) This is tough because I didn't even realize the faulty approaches I was bringing to the novels! The hard part of this work is that I'm trying to learn things that I don't know I'm missing! Which leads to my long-term plan! (*Karl scribbles furiously*)

(*Cook-Lynn leans in closer to the security camera screen to see what Cynthia is writing*)

LONG TERM PLAN: I will...

- be intentional about growing in Native American awareness.

Karl: (*Rapidly*) I'm enrolling in the Native Studies Summer Workshop for Educators held in June on the White Earth Reservation! I found information at www.stcloudstate.edu/aic:

- be ready to deconstruct faulty stereotypes about Native groups.

--better determine my purposes between “reading books *as* culture and seeing books as capable of *suggesting* culture” (Treuer 5)

--understand Native literatures’ “immensity and diversity” (Porter and Roemer 4)

--understand the ways Native narrative structures differ from ours (Susag 43)

(Karl stops writing. He lets out a long sigh and turns back to look at Cynthia.)

Karl: Whew *(Dropping his arms)*, my shoulder is getting sore, but as you can see... *(Karl puts the marker in the rail beneath the white board and turns back to Cynthia.)*... I could go on a long time.

Cynthia: *(Mumbling)* Not really. *(Looking up at Karl)* Not that long.

Karl: No, I agree. Not that long. I mean, not compared to 32 years. But I do have to get started.

Cynthia: I agree. If you get started this first year, you’ll be amazed at the growth over time.

Karl: I thought you might understand! Do you think funds will be available from the school to help me with some of these things?

Cynthia: I’m sure of it. The work teachers do is really important. That is why the school district offers generous support.

Karl: For these sorts of staff development opportunities?

Cynthia: *(Looks confused)* Staff development? No, silly, for retirement, of course; they’ll match your IRAP up to 4%! Look at column one. *(She thrusts her notebook under his nose)* The way I’ve figured it, I’m out before Spring Break.

(Cooke-Lynn to Womack: Told you so; told you so. Womack chuckles, mumbles “I shoulda known... I shoulda known,” and gathers up his things. He and Cook-Lynn exit the building.)

And you? Look at how things start to compound after just 10 years of contributions!

Karl: *(Realizing he’d been giving a soliloquy)* Ummm... yeah. Thanks. I see exactly what you mean. *(Pause)* So, I’ll follow up on that book request then after I connect with some tribal resources and get my ducks in a row.

Cynthia: *(Picking up her bag and heading toward the exit as Karl is speaking)* And I’ll put these numbers into an Excel sheet and get back to you soon! *(She pauses at the door and turns back)* And, my last tip is this: you can never start planning for your future success too soon, Karl!

Karl: *(Nodding, and looking up at the PA speaker, then down at the paper on his desk)* You’re right about that, Cynthia, you’re right about that.

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