

Transnational Identities: Limitations and Possibilities of Multicultural Literature

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This paper explores the role of secondary literature studies to influence the identity formation of an increasingly globalized citizenry, here in Canada, and other settings worldwide where literature in English is taught. The author attempts to answer the question of how, for example, educators build connections between contemporary multicultural writers with those of the canon in ways that develop critical and multiple perspectives. Engagement with literature needs to avoid reducing cultural identity to essential characteristics and focus instead on helping students to question the meanings of authenticity, authority and their impact on notions of self and community. The author argues that this is possible if literature in the classroom is about creating conflict and empowering students to embrace dissonance as part of their evolving identities and dynamically changing communities (Pouwels, 2005).

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The imagination — its spaces, its potential, and its communal as well as individual manifestations — is embedded in the process of teaching literature in secondary school settings. In Canada, the *Ontario English Curriculum Guide for Grades 11 & 12* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2000), for example, positions “the study of literature [as] central to the English curriculum. It offers students opportunities to expand their intellectual horizons; as a creative representation of life and experience, literature raises important questions about the human condition, now and in the past” (p. 8). Literature studies at the secondary level have also long been understood as a cornerstone of civic education (Smagorinsky, 1992), identity construction (Rosenblatt, 1995) and have, more recently, supported the goals of multiculturalism that “seek the recognition of individual differences, serving as an antidote to nationalism, and national prejudice” (in Cai, 2001, p. 312). As teachers of English, we need understand more clearly what role literature studies might have in the dynamic formation of an increasingly globalized citizenry. Herbert recently argued that “transnational realities — that is, a landscape of citizenship reshaped by global migration patterns — call upon educators to develop more sophisticated understandings of history and social representations of self and others (Hébert, Eyford, & Jutras, 2005, p. 9).

A glance through the recommended writers listed in the literature section of the same Ontario Curriculum Guide, confirms the recent impact of multiculturalism and post-colonial theory on suggested reading choices. Margaret Atwood and Roberston Davies, established writers in the Canadian canon, as well as John Steinbeck and Joseph Conrad, recognizably British and American canonical authors, are listed alongside Chinua Achebe, Toni Morrison, Rohinton Mistry and Michael Ondaatje. The latter are celebrated post-colonial authors, widely taught, but not generally considered canonical. Teachers of English who are committed to providing multiple perspectives in their classrooms will try to engage their students by reading both Ondaatje and Conrad, for example, in ways that will help develop critical and multiple perspectives. Yet many practitioners are challenged by this and continue to

teach works of fiction in isolation which serves to reinforce a single perspective on identity. Engagement with literature needs to avoid essentialism; in other words, the reduction of identity to a prescribed set of qualities. As Johnston (1997) stated, “students need to start from the belief that writers often write successfully from a perspective that is not their own” and must be guided to “recognize agency in others, not simply comprehend otherness by trying to reduce it to an inferior version of our own world view” (p. 99). This will be possible if the practices of teaching literature in the classroom focus on creating conflict and empowering students to embrace dissonance as part of their evolving identities as well as their dynamically changing and increasingly transnational communities (Pouwels, 2005).

There is little doubt that the works of authors like Mark Twain or Ernest Hemingway, perceived incorrectly or otherwise as being *of their time*, are taught less frequently today in North American secondary classrooms. On the other hand, Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) remains prominent on the high school curricula across the U.S. and Canada (Altmann, Johnston, & Mackey, 1998; Applebee, Burroughs, & Stevens, 2000). Why does Lee’s novel about racism in the American south continue to be the choice of teachers who perceive the novel as one that continues to connect with their students? The answer may lie in exploring how these tensions play out in the context the treatment of Asian perspectives within the North American English curricula. Amy Tan’s highly popular novels, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) or *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), are also frequently taught in classrooms across North America — not only because of their accessibility — but because they are deemed representative of a Chinese cultural perspective (Wong, 1995). The common feature of Lee’s novel and Tan’s work is, perhaps, their moral frameworks in which large societal ills are the backdrop for the triumph of individual spirit and resiliency. Fifteen years ago, secondary educators who were interested in offering an example of a Chinese immigrant perspective might have opted for Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* (1976). Hong Kingston’s book, however, is now

rarely taught because, this author believes, its anti-nostalgic take on the immigrant experience. Teaching these novels, often in isolation from one another, has contributed to creating a new form of essentialism rooted, in the case of Tan's work, in an immigrant's sentimental view of her homeland and in the case of Lee's, in a nation's myth-making, represented through a child's journey from innocence to adulthood. What results from the persistent choice of works of fiction like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Kitchen God's Wife* is then a "narrow focus on a single ethnic work which tends to have an ahistorical effect...and encourages the cult of a minority genius, [and] isolates the value of the text" (Trimmer & Warnock, 1992, p. 177).

There are numerous restrictions on constructing identities out of conflict when a teacher teaches only *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) and holds it up as a multicultural text providing an authentic view of China. Wong (1995) suggests that the Amy Tan phenomenon is an example of a text that has been seized upon by a white dominated readership as a convergence of an ethnic group-specific literary tradition and ideological need. While this view appears to be just another way to interpret identity in essentialist terms, it is true that Tan's narrators in these two novels are always mothers/daughters/sisters of Chinese immigrants who learn about the complexities/difficulties/triumphs of their parents' early lives in China. These lives are borne out in great, and often very moving, detail. Readers are uplifted in a very conventional manner by these stories of suffering and courage. They learn about the cultural traditions of China and come away with some knowledge of the country's harrowing political and social upheavals. But that view is from the perspective of the younger generation who "escaped" to America. Tan and her storytellers are arguable no more "inside" the culture than a colonial writer. Her portrait of the country is highly sentimental, often loving, but wholly confirming of China's "otherness". It may be, in fact, that the increase in teaching Tan's novels is partly the result of a perilous search for so-called authenticity created by post-colonial and multicultural theorists in the first instance. Having found an acceptably accessible author who wrote about a country as "mysterious" as China, readers and critics have

been, perhaps, quickly satisfied and the legacies of colonialism have been confirmed rather than resisted. In the end, it may mean that teachers of literature find themselves chasing the tail of authenticity and authority. As a result, students may come away from their only contact with a new culture with an insufficient appreciation of its complexity — a single lens representation of Asian identity. Tan's novel confirms the fact that westerners stand outside China, looking in, "encouraging tight categorizations and a monolithic interpretation of culture" (Spence, 1998).

What Tan's work, in fact, successfully explores are relationships between women in a feudal context and offered a "rosy outlook of familial renewal" in the words of David Leiwei (in Trimmer & Warnock, 1992, p. 195). Her work is probably best understood as a feminist telling of a universal family saga and as a wishful reconstruction of the past, many steps removed from being written out of a modern Chinese context (Chow, 1991).

However, these restrictions on Amy Tan's view of China do not necessarily have to stand in the way of teaching her books in secondary classrooms. Exploring with students the questions about the literary tradition out of which she is writing, the colonial repercussions of writing in English, and the immigrant gaze upon China, can provide the necessary and dynamic forum for conflict creation and resolution in the classroom. For example, Spence (1998) offers the example of Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814/1949), in which the author used China as a metaphor for male power outside the domestic sphere. He argues that it might be more fruitful to see Tan's fiction as part of the writing tradition of the Brontës and of Austen and its subtle but harsh critique of the constricted social world of 19th century Britain, rather than as a multicultural authentication of a particular cultural identity.

Newly emerging transnational identities are often characterized by multiple linguistic competencies, sometimes regarded as impediments to comprehension in English, but which can effectively be harnessed as a different means of student engagement with text. If teachers approach Tan's work in dialogue with a novel written originally in Mandarin by a native Chinese, richer possibilities may exist for exploring dissonances. The novella

length story, titled *The Butterfly* (1989) by Wang Meng, is a text that might best support dialogic methods of conflict creation.

Wang Meng was a celebrated writer in China in the 1950s. As a result of the publication of *The Newcomer in the Organization Department*, Wang was labeled a “Rightist” and sent to labor camp. He was also prevented from publishing until after the Cultural Revolution. His more recent work deals with these historical upheavals impressionistically. This was perhaps the only way, he argued, that one could make sense of such political and social chaos. *The Butterfly* (1989) is the story of Zhang Siyuan, a government official whose fall from grace during the Cultural Revolution and later rehabilitation are examined through a series of episodes tracing his life from the late 1940s through the late 1970s. During the course of the story, Zhang’s wife commits suicide, his first son dies because of Zhang’s negligence, and another son lives on and eventually publicly condemns his father. An obvious parallel point between *The Butterfly* (1989) and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991) are both works’ relationship to the “butterfly” literature tradition. Butterfly literature, works which melodramatically extol the conservative virtues of Chinese society, were suppressed by the government because they were seen as fundamentally dangerous to a society which “relies on its members’ earnest, serious, and thus appropriate involvement with what they read, learn and study” (Chow, 1991, p. 162). Chow suggests, in fact, that butterfly literature fulfils a post-structural notion of literature as essentially parodic — a contestation of language — and that it makes a powerful statement about the role of women in feudal Chinese society. Wang Meng’s *The Butterfly* (1989), as its title implies, playfully engages the reader in this ongoing tension between feudal and “modern” cultural attitudes in China. The tension is in evidence in Tan’s *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), in the form of Winnie’s insufferable first marriage and her struggle to be set free. Yet Tan’s relationship to the butterfly tradition lacks the post-structural relationship to language as well as the implicit historical critique vividly present in Wang Meng’s story. Female entrapment in a feudal system, which promotes suicide as a form of honorable problem-solving, lies at the heart

of both works. The “gaze” upon the native culture in Tan’s novel is the gaze of the Chinese-American upon the old country. This is quite a different view from that of Wang Meng as a writer living in China and working in his native language. By reading both perspectives, students could explore the fundamental differences and possible similarities between the two. It is possible, therefore, that the two novels could work dialogically; helping students to develop a full and critical understanding of the complex world they inhabit (Johnston, 1997).

Finally, besides points of contact between *The Butterfly* (1989) and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), there are profound differences worth exploring. The most obvious is the treatment of class in both works, particularly as manifested between author and reader but also, of course, between author and character. Winnie, in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), while experiencing some privations, is able to keep servants and is patronizing of women who must earn their living. Her daughter is also firmly middle class, married to a doctor and with no concern about her financial future. Conversely, the characters in Wang Meng’s novella are utterly shaped by their class; the security of their futures is at once uncertain and variable as well as fixed and unchangeable. The rise, fall, and bitter resurrection of Zhang Siyuan, the party official at the centre of the story, are tied to the socialism-driven upheavals of modern China.

In order to teach Meng’s stories and Tan’s novels dialogically, strategies used in the English classroom should help students better understand the positions or social contexts of the author, the characters, and themselves so that essentialism is avoided and multiple perspectives are embraced. In developing these strategies, English teachers may wish to turn to Bakhtin’s concept of the dialogic imagination: “a vision requiring more than one pair of eyes, surveying the universe in a multilayered mirror designed for simultaneous reflection and difference” (in Baraheni, 2004) and to increase their awareness of their own position to texts they choose to teach. As Sumara (1996) argues, “[this requires] rediscovering the self that stands behind the teacher” (p. 232). Teachers can embrace dialogic practices and within those

practices recognize the novels they teach as re-creative and transactional texts (Rosenblatt, 1995) and historical locations (Guillory, 1993). Strategies should include variety of ways of exploring difference for students. This might include opportunities for creative writing — imaginary character sketches, dialogues, journals, as well as essay writing that could, for example, engage the historical continuities or discontinuities between works of fiction. There should be opportunities for drama and role playing and for discussion that provides space for multiple and conflicting perspectives as private and public reader of texts. All these approaches will provide fertile ground for a citizenry of readers who understand identity — their own and others' — in dynamic, and ultimately empathetic, ways.

Despite the pressure on the English curriculum from technology, literature studies remain central to the project of a liberal education. Literature in the classroom can continue to function as an effective lightning rod for passionate debate and for learning about language and writing in multiple cultural contexts. Therefore, teachers must closely interrogate their text choices and re-invigorate their approaches through embracing dialogic methods. Literature studies provide one of the best educative opportunities to interrogate societal values and norms; in other words, create the conflicts in imaginative and safe spaces. New meanings of community are possible from a position of diversity (Willis, 1994). The recognition of our forming transnational identities — in other words, the transformative development of self in the post-modern age — is a clear pathway to truly engaged democracy.

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