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Exploding the Monolith: The Value of Teaching Appalachian Literature in Inner-City Environments

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The following is a paper I will be presenting at the Appalachian Studies Association Annual Conference at Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio on Friday, March 27, 2009.

There are, of course, similarities between the Appalachian college student and the Brooklyn one, but you won't find them if you go looking for racial or ethnic parallels, religious ones, or even economic similarities. There may be a few superficial racial relationships, but these will prove about as significant as lumping together the Basque and the Belgian. Some of the Christian denominations may share names, but the individual churches struggle with problems distinct to their environments. And poverty in the city and in the country mean completely different things. The similarities, instead, lie in traditions of trouble and struggle, of loss, of the internal battle between desires to give up and push on, of fatalism that somehow still pushes one to fight against fate, of a 'borderer' toughness that Appalachia has retained and new immigrants must develop—at least until they assimilate or establish a strong enough enclave to maintain themselves by themselves—and, sadly enough, of failure. Oh, and one more: All of the groups have found themselves on the receiving end of stereotyping, insult, and discrimination.

I don't know much about the ethos of teaching in Appalachia these days but, among educators in Brooklyn, there's certainly one of liberal condescension towards my students—students outside of the elite, private schools, that is. There's a distancing, reinforced by choices of the literature to be studied, for instance, literature that the teachers assume can "reach" the student through identity, primarily racial or ethnic identity, or through poverty, which is

assumed to be a blanket bad, no different in Delhi than in Duluth. The choices are justified by the argument that they reflect a student-centered orientation. Else, why choose them? The fact is that these are not the works the teachers (for the most part) read themselves, or would choose for their own children. These are not works the teachers can generate much enthusiasm for within themselves. The works are “for” the needy, not for those who are clearly going to “make it.” So, I avoid them.

One of the things that has always been important to me is the enthusiasm I can show for the literature I teach. I’ve had great success, for example, with Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* in sophomore survey classes. Why? Because I love the book, and am always finding something new and sneaky in it. I haven’t found that it “works” only for sophisticated students from good schools and families with libraries. Quite the opposite; it can work for any group as long as I am able to bridge the student/teacher gap with my enthusiasm.

As we all know, it is hard to maintain the appropriate level of zeal for a particular work or works year after year. I haven’t taught *Pale Fire* since 2007, for example, and may not teach it again for another year or two; so I am always looking for new books and genres to explore, so that my discovery can be relatively immediate in relation to that of my students.

A couple of years ago, after posting a rant against Jane Smiley who had, in my view, besmirched my own Appalachian roots through use of David Hackett Fischer’s *Albion’s Seed*, portraying us as the cause of all of America’s troubles, I heard from one Rodger Cunningham, whose book *Apples on the Flood* I soon devoured.

I was hooked; I felt I had come home.

My growing interest led me to apply for an NEH summer seminar last year at Ferrum College organized by Peter Crow. Though I had to leave early due to the illness and death of my mother, I learned enough to give me the confidence to construct a syllabus for the course in the Appalachian novel that I taught last fall.

The students didn't know what they were getting into. We have an umbrella sophomore grouping of literature courses with rather generic titles. Mine was Introduction to Literature I: Fiction. Most students end up in a section of that, or of the poetry or drama courses, more by chance than anything else. So, as I walked in with a stack of books by Lee Smith, Denise Giardina, John Ehle, Charles Frasier and James Still, the students had no clue that I wasn't saddling them with, say, Edwidge Danticat, V.S. Naipaul's early work, and Jean Rhys—all of whom I could easily and willingly teach under the same umbrella had I a different geographic focus.

At City Tech—our shorthand for New York City College of Technology, one of the campuses of the City University of New York—the sheer diversity of the students makes the task of attempting conclusions about them and their cultures daunting. Of those responding to one survey, 46.6% said they were born outside of the United States (representing 134 countries), 60.6% said a language other than English is spoken in their home, and only a third listed a parent as having graduated from college. Almost half of the students have African ancestry, through generations in the United States, through the Caribbean, or through recent immigration. Very few have any conception of Appalachia. In my particular class, only one had even visited any of the core counties of the region. An African-American woman, her father was born in West Virginia and she occasionally returned with him for family reunions.

Back to that first day: As I quickly discovered, few of my students knew of “Appalachia” as anything more than a vaguely familiar word representing mountains somewhere. For a survey I conducted towards the end of the semester, I asked the students what the word had meant to them at the beginning of the course. Only one, the woman with a West Virginian father, said it had meant much more than “mountains.” Her attitude, clearly coming from her father, was much more akin to my own nostalgia and that of others who have left the mountains: “I always think of beautiful landscapes. There truly is a relaxing, laid back lifestyle to be had there.”

When I asked, “What does the word ‘Appalachia’ mean to you today?” most of the answers dealt with culture instead of landscape or geography: “an undiscovered culture that is perceived as a ‘dumb’ culture through today’s society”; “People struggling and being looked down on. A very hard life with a lot of secluded ideas and perceptions”; “Appalachia is a culture that needs to be acknowledged”; “it is not just the mountains with mountain people, it is a place just like any other that has real people with real feelings and issues.” The general tenor was one of a movement from alien landscape to familiar culture—or to culture understood to be analogous to the students’ own—for many of the comments, clearly, could have been made about the people in the New York neighborhoods where these students live.

One of the questions whose answers would, I knew, fascinate me was, “‘Hillbilly,’ ‘cracker,’ ‘redneck’: what do these words bring to mind?” The answers showed that, over the course of the semester, the students had, among other things, begun to break up what they had perceived as the “white” monolith. Not all groups of white people, they were beginning to understand, are alike or successful or powerful: “It brings to mind a person that is not

intelligent to 'white' standards only because it is 'white' brainwashing with shows like *Dukes of Hazzard*, etc.”; “It’s a racial insult against whites from the culture”; “Racism! Well some people who come from different countries, they tend to be called names representing their culture”; “It makes me angry because they are meant to be a put down”; “Racism, I hate those words!”

Admittedly, a high percentage of the students still associated those words, without any sense of irony, with people they have contempt for—racists, bigots, and people who live in trailers.

Overall, however, they showed more cognition of the impact of these words than have many of my colleagues, one of whom actually said to me (when I called her on her use of “hillbilly”), “I’ve nothing against your people. I’ve seen them when they come down from the mountains, pasty skin and bad teeth, and I feel sorry for them—I don’t dislike them.”

[Which reminds me of the groups my students liked best in the movie *Matewan*: the blacks, the immigrants, and the “real” (actually, stereotype) mountaineers who appear for only a moment. They understood completely the reply of one of them to a union-buster who tries to make fun of his rifle, asking if it came from the Spanish-American War. The mountaineer just smiled and replied, “The war between the states.”]

Living in a situation where the whites they encounter are generally people of some authority, many of my students imagined white culture as the homogeneous monolith of TV depiction—even those with troubles having houses and cars, good jobs and security. So, the last question on my survey was, “Has this course changed any of your attitudes towards Appalachian culture?” Responses included, “I see that people who are in the Appalachian culture had the same struggles as any other American who was not ‘privileged’ as some other Americans”; “I came here 3 years ago and I can say that first time I realized that there is a

division between white cultures in the U.S.”; “This course has changed my entire attitude towards Appalachian culture because it has exposed me to the individuality that they possess”; “Yes a little bit. I now see that all are not the same just like all Spanish people are not the same.” Many others said that their attitudes hadn’t changed—simply because they hadn’t had “attitudes” before the start of the term.

Though my specific purpose in planning the course had been to teach what I like, what interests me, so that the students could benefit from my enthusiasm, I took away quite a bit more from the experience. First, I saw how parochial my students were becoming through the narrow universe of text choice based on the rather condescending assumption that they cannot find interest in anything outside of their own immediate experience. The lack of exposure to cultures outside of the city, outside of minority and immigrant experience, had allowed many of them to fall into a belief that white culture is some privileged, gated estate that they could never enter, a powerful and alien, undifferentiated monolith.

More important than that, however, was the pleasant surprise that my students were able to use exploration of Appalachian culture to achieve greater understanding of their own. On the last day of classes, one student, the child of immigrants, came up to me and told me, wonderingly and surprised, that reading about Appalachia had made her better able to understand the stories her parents told about her grandparents’ lives back in China.

There may have been a reason, thirty or forty years ago, to try to find readings that did reflect the cultures of the students. But there is reason, also, to show them that, quite often, cultural differences can hide basic similarities, that the markers we use to distinguish ourselves

from others are often little more than masks. When we manage to take them off, we often find that looking at others is not so different from looking in a mirror.

From my experience, studying the literature of another culture, especially one that shares essential—not superficial—features with that of the students, allows students whose own backgrounds have been limited by circumstance to begin to contextualize theirs and their families' experiences in ways that texts chosen because they somehow reflect something within the specific cultures of the students can never do. It also avoids the sorts of condescension we often see in choice of text for students whose backgrounds have been deemed "disadvantaged." Perhaps, then, were I teaching in Appalachia, I would attempt a course featuring the Caribbean literature of Danticat, Naipaul, and Rhys. After all, our job is to expand our students' outlooks, not to cater to the worlds they are already in.