Multicultural Hybridity

Transforming American Literary Scholarship & Pedagogy

Laurie Grobman

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Introduction: The Difference Paradox in/and Multicultural Literature

In one of my first courses as a PhD student, I was introduced to the multicultural debates in American literary studies. Here I was, a fairly new graduate student, expecting to read texts by diverse authors but also expecting to read them as I had read any literature: I was anticipating vigorous conversations about form, structure, syntax, style, language, and meaning. I was surprised to learn that our professor was also assigning readings *about* multicultural literature and literacy, as well as on topics such as cultural literacy, the canon, national culture, bilingualism, Americanness, and political correctness. We were told we would try to read the texts in the class *differently,* although what that meant was still unclear to all of us in that room, including our professor, who expressed his unfamiliarity with the multicultural endeavor and his excitement and trepidation about teaching this literature for the first time.

As I think back on that class, I am struck by the emphasis on *difference*. Today, this question of difference haunts multicultural literary studies.[1] On the one hand, multicultural texts are still seen as somehow *different*—on the margins of, apart from, other than mainstream American literature. For too long, texts by writers of color have been unrepresented or, at best, underrepresented in the American literary canon. To put it another way, these texts have been treated as *unequal* in American literary studies.[2]

On the other hand, as multiculturalists we must recognize and value difference, partly because we realize that difference has long been used as justification for exclusionary and oppressive practices and partly because individual and collective differences enrich the United States and the world. Debates over the balance between

difference and universality, difference and unity, and difference and essentialism are ongoing, and these unresolved controversies only highlight the existence and significance of difference.

Thus we are faced with the difference paradox, the seemingly inescapable contradiction between two competing impulses: How do we acknowledge difference when it comes to multicultural literature but simultaneously treat all texts equally and as equal parts of the body of work and the discipline long referred to as American literature?

In *Multicultural Hybridity: Transforming American Literary Scholarship and Pedagogy,* I explore this paradox by theorizing hybridity. Drawing on work of Homi K. Bhabha, Cyrus Patell, Iris Marion Young, and others, I argue that texts by writers of color are multiply inflected hybrids that blur, but do not erase, cultural difference, thereby allowing for multiple crossings, or intersections, of meaning. I will argue that this notion of hybridity does not privilege or subsume competing forms, and that it enables readers to escape limiting binaries by considering the countless relationships among a text's many variables, both within the text itself and with other texts. The hybrid text is a volatile mixture of parts that work against, within, and among one another and it is fraught with tensions and conflicts. However, these very qualities offer transformative possibilities for reading, interpretation, appreciation, politics, and pedagogy.

From this perspective, the multicultural text offers a model through which we must refigure our understanding of difference and/in American literature. By looking at American literature through the lens of multicultural hybridity, we can understand "American literature" as itself a hybrid, a dynamic mixture of literary and cultural forms, genres, styles, languages, motifs, tropes, and so forth. To consider multicultural literature auxiliary to or separate from "American" literature is to misunderstand the entire American literary tradition. Within the framework that I will present, multicultural texts move from the margins but do not displace canonical texts, because *all* of these texts are equal components of the American literary hybrid. A theory of the hybridity of multicultural literature provides the tools we need to resee *all* of American literature as an intercultural, interconnected nexus.[3]

Multicultural Literature and Literary Studies

In its short but formidable history, multiculturalism in literary studies has responded to demands by racialized ethnic groups to be represented in the literary, cultural, and social history of the United States through the expansion of the traditional canon of American literature. Since its emergence in literary studies in the 1970s, multiculturalism has transformed the teaching of literature and how we understand what it means to study literature. Curricula and syllabi have become more diverse and inclusive, and writers of color and their texts have received significant scholarly and popular attention. Moreover, multiculturalism has influenced literary study more generally, bringing about opportunities for critical reflection on theoretical perspectives, critical methods, pedagogies, curricula, disciplinary structures, and other institutional issues. Canonical texts are often approached in new, fruitful ways, often, as Mark Eaton points out, "with self-conscious attentiveness to Western colonialism and globalization" (309). The canon's "*ideological* content" has "undergone a profound transformation" (309, emphasis in original). Changes wrought by multicultural literary studies have helped us to advance knowledge about social justice and injustice in our classrooms.

Yet these extraordinary changes have been accompanied by serious critical and pedagogical questions, in large part hinging on issues of difference, identity, and Americanness. To embrace multicultural texts as different is to simultaneously reinscribe them on the margins of American literature, yet to ignore difference is to erase it altogether, reinforcing an uncritical and untenable assimilation. These complications manifest themselves as we lead our day-to-day lives on our campuses and in our classrooms. As Kathleen Dixon and William Archibald assert, "Both students and professors are confused and conflicted as groups and as individuals" (x). As teachers, we try to support a multiplicity of perspectives in our classrooms but discourage offensive or unethical attitudes and statements. We profess ethics while recognizing the socially constructed nature of truth values. We try to speak frankly about racism and ways of knowing without essentializing groups and thus reinforcing stereotypes, and we attempt to draw the line between

the cultural stories texts might tell and the dangers of students' seeing the *whole* cultural story in those texts. We try to promote national pride without arrogance and with critical scrutiny; we encourage students to work hard to achieve, yet simultaneously acknowledge the limitations of individualist ideologies and the systemic injustices that work against many students; and we hope to convince them that they have agency and can foster change in the world. Balancing these concerns is challenging, to say the least.

Issues of difference also have direct implications for the interpretation and value of texts. As *different,* multicultural texts demand new critical approaches, but as *equal,* they also benefit from traditional approaches. As *different,* multicultural texts cannot be judged exclusively by traditional aesthetic criteria and instead demand new aesthetic categories, but as *equal*, they do not absolutely eschew the aesthetics traditionally applied to an androcentric and patriarchal canon. Multiculturalists must invent or discover new critical approaches and aesthetic categories that account for rich, multicultural art forms, without reinscribing exclusionary value judgments.

The implications of difference for politics and pedagogy are far-reaching. What does it mean to be "political" in multicultural literature classrooms? Should the politics of multicultural literature and literary study belie or overshadow aesthetic concerns, or can the "literariness" of multicultural texts itself advance social justice? Do texts by writers of color need to advance a political agenda at all? Moreover, how might multicultural literature influence curricular design, course categories, and disciplinary structures? Should multicultural literature be taught differently and/or should it be segregated into specific courses, such as African American literature, Chicana literature, etc.? Finally, how can the larger rubric of American literature embrace texts by writers of color without erasing difference *and* without marginalizing them?

Methodology and Organization

My theoretical approach in *Multicultural Hybridity* is also something of an amalgam. This is no surprise, given the numerous

theoretical positions within the discipline. Contemporary multicultural literary theory explores countless arenas, including the ways discourses shape texts; the social, political, cultural, and historical contexts in which texts are situated; and the American culture(s) they represent. Traditional presumptions about consensus in literary study and teaching have given way to debates about "value, interpretation, education, canonicity, and culture" (Graff, "Why Theory?" 20). The purposes, objects, subjects, methods, and processes of literary study are now seen as negotiable, and questions and outcomes no longer rest with a homogenous group of white, male humanists. Authority itself has been dissolved and redistributed.

These dramatic turns in literary studies open up rich new possibilities for reading and teaching multicultural literature and expand the possibilities for fruitful strategies and practices for understanding texts, readers, interpretation, and culture. In this book I engage in an array of diverse theoretical positions, including postcolonial hybridity, border theory, feminist theory, aesthetic theory, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, and postpositivist realism. I develop my argument mainly within the background of multicultural literary theory, but my work is nonetheless informed by research in multicultural education, including that of James Banks, Carl Grant, Peter McLaren, and Christine Sleeter.

Furthermore, I integrate theory with pedagogical concerns, acknowledging the mutually enriching connection between theory and practice in the multicultural literature classroom. It is my belief that my scholarship and teaching are reciprocally informing. Chapters 2 through 5 intermix theory, critical practice, and pedagogy so that the theoretical concepts I delineate are readily transferable to classroom practice.

I have written *Multicultural Hybridity* primarily for college and university teacher-scholars of multicultural literature, including specialists in multicultural literature, specific ethnic literatures (e.g., African American, Asian American, etc.), and American literature. Although my central focus is teachers of multicultural literature courses, survey courses, advanced genre courses, women writers courses, and other specialized courses, because I argue that a hybrid approach to literature by writers of color informs

all literature under a broader multicultural umbrella, I hope that scholar-teachers of literature of other categories of difference will also find the book useful.

I also invite a more generalist readership among scholar-teachers of American literature as I cross and blur boundaries between "mainstream" and multicultural literature. I believe that most current scholar-teachers of American literature teach texts by nonwhite writers, even if not regularly or in large numbers. I hope to persuade American literature faculty who do not typically see themselves as multiculturalists that a broadened, hybrid conception of literature is applicable to all American literary texts. I would like to think that the ideas developed here are part of an effort to heal some of the discipline's divisions of "us versus them" as it attempts to construct a hybrid form without centers or margins.

Thus, although my focus is on race and ethnicity, my argument reverberates outward to multiculturalism's acknowledgment of exclusions based on gender, class, sexual orientation, disability, and other categories of difference. Indeed, these categories can never be wholly separated. *Multicultural Hybridity* can contribute to the work of reconceptualizing the practice and promise of a more egalitarian American literature.

Chapter 1, "Multiculturalism, Difference, and Hybridity," outlines the difference debates in cultural politics and multicultural literature studies, beginning with the central tenets of a *politics of equal treatment* and a *politics of difference*. I argue that three significant challenges within cultural politics inform issues of difference in multicultural literature: unity, universality, and essentialism. I then describe the implications of these debates and explore the vexing questions of interpretation, value, aesthetics, politics, and identity politics. I situate these debates within both liberal and critical versions of multiculturalism.

Drawing on features of a politics of equal treatment and a politics of difference, I argue for a notion of multiculturalism that integrates difference and commonality, and theorize this position through the work of political philosopher Iris Marion Young. From the perspective of Young's concept of *relational* difference, I introduce the notion of *hybridity* as both a site of cultural

exchange and a theoretical framework, and examine the historical legacy of hybridity and current critiques of it.

Chapter 2, "Hybrid Multiculturalism: Literary Theory and Critical Practice," theorizes the multicultural text as a multiply inflected hybrid in which constituent parts meet, mix, conflict, and compete, but neither privilege nor subsume one another. Fraught with tensions and conflicts among and between its constituent parts, the multicultural text-as-hybrid is likewise a transformative space that generates new possibilities for reading, interpretation, appreciation, politics, and pedagogy, as well as for American literary studies itself. I suggest that the multicultural hybrid works dialogically as it takes from and gives back to the multiple traditions—cultural, literary, aesthetic, political—of which it is constituted.

I develop this hybrid literary theory and critical practice within the landscape of multicultural theory. To illustrate my critical position, I present a reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* as a hybrid text that promotes cross-cultural understanding without diminishing or erasing cultural specificity. My final section of the chapter, "Into the Classroom," considers various instructional strategies for N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* as a hybrid text, centering on multiple social categories and cultural systems and, hence, the possibilities for recovering histories and for developing relational, fluid self-definitions.

My argument in Chapter 3, "Hybrid Aesthetics and/of Multicultural Literature," is that as an intertextual, intercultural hybrid, multicultural literature contributes to broader, expanded understandings of the aesthetics of all literature. The multicultural text is a transformative space in which diverse aesthetic and cultural forms intersect and cross-pollinate; through this hybrid space, readers' literary and aesthetic sensibilities can expand. I will draw from African American criticism and literature to offer an analysis of the hybrid aesthetics operating in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Next, I recommend various pedagogical strategies for teaching Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing: A Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood* as an aesthetic hybrid.

Chapter 4, "Hybrid Politics and/of Multicultural Literature," addresses current debates about the relevance of multicultural

literature to advancing social reform, in light of English studies' concerns about its cultural capital and multiculturalists' concerns with advancing social justice in our scholarship and classrooms. Expanding on my argument from Chapter 3, I suggest that the valuable role that multicultural literature can play within a movement for social change (both within and outside the classroom) lies in its imaginative capacities. Drawing on work by Martha Nussbaum and the aesthetic theories of Satya Mohanty and Murray Krieger, and returning to issues of difference and universality, I argue that hybrid aesthetics serve social justice. It is through the creative power of hybrid spaces that new possibilities for aesthetics and politics arise. I illustrate this position by examining Tomás Rivera's *. . . y no se lo tragó la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* as an aesthetic hybrid that serves the goals of social justice. I conclude the chapter with specific pedagogical strategies for integrating aesthetics and politics in Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone*.

In Chapter 5, "Refiguring American Literature," I argue that U.S. literature as a whole should be viewed as a multicultural hybrid. I suggest retaining a national model of literature (no longer called "American" literature) that, informed by pan-Americanism, recognizes U.S. literature's transculturalism and transnationalism. From this perspective, no text is centered or marginalized. Finally, I offer strategies for implementing the model of U.S. hybridity in both general education courses and courses in the English major. In so doing, I illustrate the transformative nature of multicultural hybridity in U.S. literary studies and pedagogy and in the ongoing (re)construction of national culture.

Notes

1. As has been customary in literary studies (see, for example, Alberti; Bizzell, "Negotiating Difference"; Bjork; Goebel and Hall, *Teaching;* Jay, *American Literature* and "End,"; Nancy Peterson; and Trimmer), I use the term *multicultural literature* to refer to literature by nonwhite ethnic minorities in the United States. I will use the terms *literature by racialized ethnic minorities, literature by people of color,* and *multiethnic literature* synonymously with *multicultural literature*. The MLA Committee on the Literatures of People of Color in the United States and Canada, which focuses on research and teaching in African American,

American Indian, Asian and Pacific American, Chicano and Chicana, and Puerto Rican literatures, uses the term *people of color* to "refer to groups that historically have been considered to be racialized minorities in the United States and Canada" (229).

2. Many multiculturalists have expressed their desire that "American" literature should one day incorporate inclusivity and diversity based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexual orientation. But, as Betsy Erkkila reminds us, we have not yet achieved such a goal, as "White studies" remains the "dominant model of American literary and cultural studies," with ethnic and women writers simply "added on to traditional models of American literature and culture" (587).

3. Conceptually, my argument might extend to all of literary history; however, to keep this study within manageable scope I limit it to American literature, although I will expand this body's boundaries in my final chapter.

"The fact that *Multicultural Hybridity* sparked my own rethinking of issues of multiculturalism and pedagogy speaks strongly for its useful contribution to the field."

— John Alberti, Editor of *The Canon in the Classroom: The Pedagogical Implications of Canon Revision in American Literature*

Multicultural Hybridity explores the difference paradox in multicultural literary studies, the seemingly inescapable contradiction between two competing impulses: how do we acknowledge difference when it comes to multicultural literature but simultaneously treat all texts equally and as equal parts of the body of work and discipline long referred to as American literature? Laurie Grobman addresses this paradox by arguing that texts by writers of color are multiply inflected hybrids that blur, but do not erase, cultural difference, thereby allowing for multiple crossings, or intersections, of meaning. The multicultural text offers a model enabling us to refigure our understanding of difference and/in American literature and to resee all of American literature as an intercultural, interconnected nexus.

Drawing on diverse theoretical positions, including postcolonial hybridity, border theory, political philosophy, feminist theory, aesthetic theory, poststructuralist and postmodernist theories, and postpositivist realism, *Multicultural Hybridity* situates itself within multicultural literary theory and is informed by research in multicultural education as well. Grobman integrates theory with pedagogy, acknowledging the mutually enriching connection between theory and practice in the multicultural literature classroom. After an introduction to the difference paradox and its ramifications for multicultural literature, chapters address multiculturalism, difference, and hybridity; hybrid multiculturalism in literary theory and critical practice; the hybrid aesthetics and/of multicultural literature; the hybrid politics of multicultural literature; and finally, refiguring American literature. Several chapters intermix theory, critical practice, and pedagogy, discussing texts such as *The Bluest Eye, House Made of Dawn, The Color Purple, Bone, Silent Dancing,* and *. . . y no se lo trago la tierra / And the Earth Did Not Devour Him,* so that the theoretical concepts are readily transferable to classroom practice.

Refiguring ENGLISH STUDIES

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801-1096
800-369-6283 or 217-328-3870 • www.ncte.org

ISBN 978-0-8141-5497-7
90000
9 780814 154977

ISSN 1073-9637