Thinking Differently about *Difference*: Multicultural Literature and Service-Learning

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Combining service-learning with multicultural literature study in a general education first-year course can encourage students to theorize difference from multiple perspectives.

Questions of *difference*, embroiled in identity politics, a politics of difference, cultural identity(ies) and democracy, are among multicultural literary studies' most pressing and controversial issues and affect all of us who teach literature by writers of multicultural backgrounds, especially in introductory and survey courses.[1] What does difference mean? To what extent does recognizing difference serve social justice? Can we expect students to ascertain the central belief systems of cultures different from their own? How do we distinguish difference from stereotype? To what extent is unity needed for democracy? To what extent, if at all, do difference-based identities hinder unity and thus democracy? What role do literary texts play in teaching students about difference? These are questions with which I struggle—in teaching, in scholarship, and in my personal and familial life.

Problems of difference take two general forms in teaching multicultural literature. The first is what Rosemary Weatherston calls the "ethnographic impulse." Students often read multicultural literature as a search for "facts" about cultures different from their own, leading them to base their entire understanding of an ethnic, cultural, or racial group on a single imaginative text. As a result, students tend to homogenize or exoticize such groups and ignore "issues of cultural hybridity, heterogeneity, power relations, context, and individuality" (Weatherston). After reading a text such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, for example, students from other ethnic groups might conclude that all African American men abuse women.

The second crucial issue involves students' (and most readers') tendencies to universalize texts by writers of color. As students move from one ethnic group to another, making comparisons and contrasts about such broad themes as love, family, and gender relations, they often conclude that "underneath we're all the same," failing to recognize the multiple cultural systems at play in these texts. Multicultural anthologies, often used in introductory literature as well as writing classes, are particularly vulnerable to erasing difference.[2]

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Because issues of difference are, in my view, crucial to effective multicultural pedagogies, I am always trying out new methods and approaches to these issues in my multicultural literature classes. For the past two years, I have experimented with service-learning in women's and multicultural literature courses. Although increasingly common in numerous disciplines, service-learning occurs less frequently in literature courses. My work with service-learning in literary studies suggests, however, that community service work and the reading and teaching of multicultural literature may indeed be replete with pedagogical potential.[3]

In this article, I will describe how service-learning, in combination with multicultural literature, encourages students to *theorize* difference. I hope to demonstrate that students' writing in a first-year seminar in multicultural literature evidences a fluid, continual negotiation of difference and commonality, especially with regard to understanding the constructed nature of stereotypes and beliefs about the Other.

Theorizing Difference in a Multicultural Literature/Service-Learning Course

My decision to include service-learning in a multicultural literature class stemmed from my sense that service-learning and multicultural literature seem to share a special kinship. Multicultural studies emerged out of the recognition of oppression and privilege and the need for social and political change, and, like service-learning practitioners, multiculturalists see change as integral to their mission. While researchers and practitioners have only begun to explore the exciting intersection of service-learning and multicultural education, most laud its possibilities. Richard Battistoni argues that "even the best" of multicultural curricula can be "abstract" for students (30) but that service experiences, however problematic in some respects, "serv[e] to render the concept of diversity much more complex than at first glance" (34). Carolyn O'Grady views an alliance between service-learning and multicultural education as reciprocal and transformative, for "academic work that seeks to deconstruct these norms regarding race and culture without providing a community-based touchstone isolates students and schools from the realities of the larger communities of which they are a part" (xiv). Sonia Nieto argues that because community service-learning frequently involves relatively privileged (and often white) students working with disadvantaged, impoverished, and, often, minority community members, critical attention to difference must be integral to service-learning (ix–x).

Like service-learning practitioners, multiculturalists see change as integral to their mission.

Thus, in fall 2002, I incorporated service-learning into two sections of a general education multicultural literature course for first-year students. Research by Ernest Pascarella, Betsy Palmer, Melinda Moye, and Christopher Pierson indi-

cates that we should be "front-loading students' encounters with diversity in their first years of college," an apparent "window of opportunity for promoting the development of college students" (270). Students in my classes participated as a requirement of the course in approximately twenty hours of community service work at the Police Athletic League (PAL) of Reading, Pennsylvania, an organization providing recreational, educational, vocational, and counseling programs to economically disadvantaged children and youths. Students read and studied multicultural literature and led group literature sessions with children and adolescents at PAL.[4]

In the best cases, students in my classes worked in teams with PAL children or teens on a weekly basis for nine weeks. During their weekly sessions at PAL, students read books to/with children, led discussions of stories, and implemented a related crafts or food activity. Students spent Friday class periods choosing literature and preparing for their sessions with PAL children. We also spent time as a class discussing some of the issues and obstacles faced at PAL, and students sometimes shared their journal writings with the class to initiate discussions. During class on Mondays and Wednesdays, we discussed, analyzed, and interpreted multicultural literary texts, often focusing our attention on questions of difference. Students' written work consisted of weekly reflective, critical journals relating the issues of multiculturalism and literature to service experiences. Additionally, students wrote what I called "class-preparation writings," responses to my prompts about assigned literary readings.

As I turn to my students' written work in the class—informal, reflective, critical writing rather than "finished" products—I want to discuss my own views on *difference*, at least as I understand difference at the moment. I am not referring to simplistic expressions of "embracing," "respecting," "tolerating," "appreciating," or "celebrating" difference, words which I have come to abhor. Rather, I am concerned with theorizing difference in all its complexity, although I continue to wrestle with the challenges of difference. I encourage students to balance cultural difference *and* sameness in an effort to achieve social justice while remaining vigilant about the possibility of universalizing and appropriating experience, although I believe that balance is not only difficult to define but also hard to strike. I want students to attempt to understand difference and to be critical of it when appropriate.

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In the pages that follow, I hope to illustrate the ways in which students' writing evidences their struggles to theorize the multilayered notion of difference. I want to emphasize that while I will attempt to theorize students' writing, I am aware that their written work constitutes small steps in a substantial continuum of thought.

Finding Common Ground

We began the course by examining stereotypes, first through literature and then through service. Marcela Christine Lucero-Trujillo's "Roseville, Minn., U.S.A.," Sharon Olds's "On the Subway," and Diane Burns's "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question" were among the poems and stories I assigned. Students easily recognize the challenges these poems pose to unexamined assumptions and stereotypes, such as the speaker's fear of the black boy on the subway in "On the Subway." Additionally, the literature conveyed to them the hurt and damage inflicted by stereotypes and prejudice. As one student, Lacey, writes about Gloria Naylor's powerful "Mommy, What Does 'Nigger' Mean?" "I mean, I've heard that word [nigger] before, but have never read a piece like Gloria Naylor's that actually talked about finding out what it meant, and more importantly, the impact it had on her as a child."

The literature conveyed . . . the hurt and damage inflicted by stereotypes and prejudice.

As I expected, literature that unravels stereotypes simultaneously leads many students to altogether dismiss difference. Quoting from "Roseville, Minn., U.S.A."—"[C]lose the windows on a summer day,/ 'cause the neighbors might say,/ 'Do they eat beans every day, even on Sundays?'"—Lacey writes, "Just because these people look different than most of those who live in Roseville, Minn., it doesn't mean that they really *are* different, but the people of Roseville don't understand this." It is not surprising that an intelligent, compassionate student such as Lacey, in her efforts to denounce stereotypes, would miss the speaker's comments on difference in its final lines:

> My modus vivendi
> of New Mexico piñon and green chili
> and my Colorado Southwest mentality
> are another reality
> in ROSEVILLE, U.S.A. (ll. 29–34)

The gesture toward commonality exemplified by Lacey's comments extended to meeting the children at PAL. Nicole describes that she "think[s] the literature is teaching me not to believe stereotypes that I may have thought were true. Now visiting the children at PAL, I look at them differently after reading the literature because I know they aren't really that different than I am." Indeed, this notion of commonality was quite prevalent in the beginning of the semester. Again and again, students insisted that the children at PAL—Hispanic and African American children from disadvantaged communities and families in an urban setting—were no different from themselves or from other children they knew from their home communities. For their first service-learning journal, I asked students to examine the stereotypes and assumptions they brought with them to PAL and what, if anything, challenged those assumptions. Kirsten's and Craig's comments are representative of most students in the classes:

> Growing up in a suburban town that was predominantly white, [. . .] there was an unspoken understanding that those who lived in the city were not safe even in their own bed. More likely than not, they had some affiliation with illegal substances and their family life was a little on the rocky side. [. . .] I had no direct contact with urban city dwellers to prove these assumptions wrong. [. . .] However, when I entered PAL what I encountered was totally different from what I had expected. The kids at PAL were just like any other kids. (Kirsten)

> When the term 'urban' is brought to my attention, I think the following: poverty, black, Hispanic, thieves, eating food from garbage cans, violence, murderers, gangsta rap, guns, knives, drugs, and everything else that falls under those lines. What I failed to see was that they are still human beings that have families [. . .]. The kids at PAL are just as normal as the kids that have more privileges and advantages than they do. They like to draw obscure pictures on scratch paper, they watch wrestling and attempt to perform moves on almost anybody they come in contact with, they watch cartoon Dragonball Z and play with action figures in class when the teacher isn't looking. (Craig)

I am not criticizing my students, for what else would I want from them, most from suburban, largely white, middle-class communities, when they meet and interact with children from racialized, working-class, and poor communities? Most important, I see this gesture toward commonality in line with Susan Jones and Kathleen Hill's finding that students develop relationships with individuals different from themselves "initially through finding common ground" (207).

Theorizing Difference

As students read more literature, and as they got to know the children at PAL better, their views became more multifaceted, although I do not mean to suggest that the majority let go of the view that the kids and they were ultimately more similar than different, nor do I think they should have. As I demonstrate below, students' multiply inflected examination of difference through literature and service involved four main elements: explicit efforts to ascertain difference in value systems; movement toward identifying difference within difference; engagement with the constructed nature of stereotypes, behaviors, and belief systems; and experience with *othered* subject positions.

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To move students beyond commonality, I encouraged them to mine the literature and their service experiences for difference. By using literature, I was able to provide students with practice in interpreting value systems, which they could transfer to service experiences. For example, in Sandra Cisneros's "Woman Hollering Creek," students interrogated gender roles in Mexican and Mexican American cultures by examining the role of *telenovelas* and other factors that influenced

Cleófilas's beliefs about love, passion, and marriage. On their first reading, many students saw this element of the story similarly to the way one student, Nancy, expresses it, in universal terms: "[Cleófilas] had those fairytale dreams that every girl has about her future. She wanted to marry a man of her dreams, have money, children, and live like a movie star."

However, through group work, class discussion, and writing, students were able to dig deeper to uncover particularities in value systems and beliefs. Some students, such as Madeline, viewed the story through the lens of gender. She writes, "When Felice picks her up at the end, it seems that Cleófilas was realizing that she did not have to stay in the kind of life she had been in just because she was a woman." Lacey, furthermore, identifies what she perceives as specifically Mexican elements in Cleófilas's behavior:

> [W]hile Cleófilas is going home again, she is not going back to the same life she had before. She has children and she summoned the courage to leave her abusive husband. This is an outstanding accomplishment in her culture. [Mexican] women were not allowed to leave their husbands, as shown in this passage: "Sometimes she would think of her father's house. But how could she go back there? What a disgrace. What would the neighbors say?" (50).

John's writing also evidences cultural contextualization: "In the story, the woman thought to have drowned her children, La Llorona, was calling to Cleófilas. [. . .] Cleófilas went back over the creek to escape from the pain *with* her children." Students made important inroads in examining difference in this and other texts.

I pressed students to investigate differences between their home cultures and the various cultures represented by the children at PAL. How do the children speak to one another? What kinds of games do they play? What is the dynamic among them? In class, we discussed some of the characteristics students might describe as representative of their own cultures. I led the discussion by referring to one of my own cultural groups, suggesting that Jews tend to be outspoken. Some students spoke about the expectations of their religious affiliations, while others suggested that Berks County was a hotbed of hunters.

Many students pointed to what one student called "street smarts" in the kids at PAL. Kirsten observed that the kids "value kindness, honesty, respect, and hard work," but that they tend "to use more violent and aggressive language" than she is accustomed to. Madeline commented on how the children are "very educated in matters like swearing and name-calling, and just things that I did not know about at eight years old. [. . .] This could be their different culture. It could be because they are city kids. Or it just could be that they are a new generation with different habits from mine." Madeline attempts to theorize a difference she has identified rather than simply respect or appreciate it.

We examined *difference within difference* as a crucial component of a more complex understanding.

But when do "representative characteristics" become stereotypes? Is it when we stop seeing individuals *as* individuals but as *only* members of particular groups? This was a crucial question of the course, and one that troubled my students. Thus we examined *difference within difference* as a crucial component of a more complex understanding. In their study of students' understandings of diversity in an education course with a community service component, Susan Jones and Kathleen Hill write,

> [Our] students began to view the community members and clients whom they served as unique individuals, rather than categories of difference or only as members of particular groups. Students began to appreciate that all people of a certain race, social class, sexual orientation, or HIV status should not be essentialized, but instead, should be understood through their unique characteristics, experiences, and backgrounds. (208)

Looking back to poems they had read earlier, my students were able to identify this nonessentialist perspective in some of the texts. Kirsten, for example, writes,

> There are so many things people assume about [the speaker in "Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question"] just by seeing her or finding out that she is Native American. People automatically consolidated everything they knew about a typical Native American and mindlessly believed that she would encompass all these characteristics. [. . .] Everyone is different, so it is ludicrous to associate every race with certain characteristics.

In this excerpt, Kirsten does more than denounce stereotypes. She also extends her understanding of difference to include the possibility that particular cultural or racial groups hold specific beliefs and engage in specific practices, but that not all members of the group identify with those beliefs or practices.

Moreover, students' investigations of difference led them to begin to understand the constructed nature of stereotypes, prejudices, beliefs, and actions. Carney Strange and Lorraine Alston assert that "the ability to achieve a multicultural society is dependent upon each individual's capacity to see beyond the intrapersonal borders of his or her current limited perspectives, models, and sets of interpretive constructs" (87). Quoting Jane Fried, et al. in *Shifting Paradigms in Student Affairs*, which examines student affairs and services within a diversity framework, Strange and Alston claim that one accomplishes this border crossing through "understand[ing] the role of culture in shaping individuals—their perceptions, beliefs and behavior" and of seeing and understanding multiple perspectives (qtd. in Strange and Alston 87). Again, literary study provided one means for such examination. Mitsuye Yamada's "Looking Out" encourages readers to understand that one's minority status is socially constructed, for the poem's speaker does not see herself in the same light as does the "he" who says, "It must be odd / to be a minority" (ll. 1–2). Tanya writes, "To [the speaker], she is not a minority, but instead she is like everyone else. We all call each other a minority if the opposite person's background is different than ours." In this short passage, Tanya articulates a level of understanding that the term

"minority" can connote not a quantitative measure of a cultural group within the United States but rather a socially constructed sense of status within society.

After reading August Wilson's *Fences*, most students were angry at Troy, not only for his infidelity but even more so for his treatment of Cory, his son. Many, however, were nonetheless able to understand how Troy's perspectives were shaped by the racial injustices he experienced. Larry writes, "[When Troy played baseball] the black people in sports got no recognition, no matter how good they were. In Troy's eyes, there was no way his son could make it in a mostly all white school playing football." Jacob affirms this view: "Troy did work hard, but he let his son down in life. I think Cory could have been good at football, but his father did not sign the papers for him. The cultural difference could be that if Cory and Troy were white, Troy might have signed the papers because Troy might know that Cory would have a chance in the major league."

Some students' writing illustrates that they were able to apply these lessons to their service experiences. Mary writes that from the literature, "[W]e have learned about discrimination of blacks and how it relates to the way they think and act. From PAL, I learn how to deal with people different from me [. . .] and to see the side of poverty. [. . .] the thing I take away most from PAL is learning about the cultures right around me." In particular, many students commented on the PAL children's attitudes toward education. Katy, for example, remarks that "many of the children at PAL do not want to go to college because it is a waste of time and money. They are very young kids, but they still said these things, most likely from hearing their parents say them." She contrasts this view with her belief that college is a necessity. Lacey concurs, stating "The only differences I see are the education (and probably family life), the ability to read well, and much of that came from my parents. Many of these children don't have the opportunity to be taught by their parents, and this shows me a different picture of humanity. It's just another side of the spectrum, people with different ideals and different beliefs." Lacey's remarks point once again to the complexities of difference, and we had lively conversations about these issues in class. First, if these beliefs about education are part of the belief systems of the families they encountered (and I am not assuming they are), then why are my students at PAL trying to encourage children to read and write and to excite them about education? Moreover, are students such as Lacey confusing difference with access?

Service experiences encouraged students to inhabit alternative, *othered* locations themselves.

Finally, service experiences encouraged students to inhabit alternative, *othered* locations themselves, further moving them toward more complex theorizing about difference. This was particularly apparent when students examined linguistic diversity. Students theorized difference through the perspective of *their* otherness when in the presence of children speaking languages they do not understand, especially Spanish. Craig describes a situation in which the child with whom he is working

engages in conversation in Spanish with another child: "They looked at me and giggled like school girls do when they 'know something you don't know.' They both spoke English flawlessly and yet spoke Spanish. I was quite impressed, but I also felt vulnerable to any more jokes that I can't defend on my part." Mollie describes a similar situation about the African American girls with whom she worked.

> When the girls spoke to each other, they broke into their slightly accented, and specific word chosen language. They were able to relate to each other with words like 'girl,' 'sista,' and 'fir real.' [. . .] Sometimes, I would get carried away and say, 'Girl, you got it,' and they would look at me funny, almost as if it's not acceptable for me to be talking like that. [. . .] When you get on their level, and become their equal they are more than willing to talk and be with you. However, if you cross the 'language barrier,' they may shut down slightly and definitely perceive you differently. [. . . I]t seems like a stepping on toes.

When these and other students shared such insights with the class, they conveyed their feelings and thoughts about being "different" or "other," for most had never before experienced these positionings in any serious way. Students were thus able to (re)consider the constructedness of some difference. Our conversations turned to the university-designated name of the course they were taking, "Alternative Voices in American Literature," and what the label connotes about center and margin, normal and different or alternative.

Conclusion: Finding Common Ground *and* Theorizing Difference

According to Carney and Alston, diversity encounters are "as much a process of thinking and experiencing as acquiring information" (97). I believe that students in my course began to think about difference differently, extending their theorizing beyond facile expressions of respecting and celebrating difference that have lost much of their meaning. Instead, students engaged in a continual process of negotiating sameness and difference as they experimented with different ways of thinking about difference.

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Perhaps even more important, students' struggles to understand and theorize difference further illuminate *difference*'s complexity and remind us that as scholars and teachers, we are still working through these issues ourselves. We can design courses and create assignments that push students to explore difference in all its complexities, but we must have reasonable expectations. Understanding difference is a lifelong process.

Finally, when we give students opportunities to explore difference through literature and service-learning, we give ourselves opportunities to learn from our

students, as I have, about the multiple intricacies of difference. My students' questions and comments were often both thought-provoking and troubling, simply because issues of difference are so difficult and challenging. I am grateful to my students for their deeply reflective and intellectual work, as it reminds me how much I have left to learn about difference.

Notes

1. As is customary in literary studies, I use the term *multicultural literature* to refer to literature by nonwhite ethnic minorities in the United States, although I recognize that the term often refers to other categories of difference.

2. For these reasons, I rarely use anthologies or readers in my literature courses. However, during the semester under discussion I used *New Worlds of Literature* (Beaty and Hunter) because of the complications of integrating service into the course. I do not believe I will use a reader in the future.

3. Because of space constraints, I am not discussing the many concerns about service-learning raised by scholar-teachers in other disciplines, including composition. However, I acknowledge that these issues, such as balancing benefits to students with benefits to community members to avoid the "missionary ideology" (Cushman 332), the problematics of personal gain through "service" (see Gorham), and the risk that service-learning will be co-opted by the institutions and structures it seeks to critique, are rife in this project as well. I continue to be mindful of these issues as I revise my service-learning/multicultural literature classes.

4. Again, because of space constraints, I have chosen to summarize the logistics of the course only to the extent that the reader needs such context to understand my focus on issues of difference.

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