Understanding the Questions: A Community-Centered Approach to the Teaching of Multicultural Literature

"*The Birchbark House*."
"*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*."
"*A Step from Heaven*."

When I ask my English education students about the role multicultural literature will play in their future classrooms, they frequently respond by identifying texts and authors they want to teach. Usually these texts, like those listed above, are written by nonwhite authors and feature similarly nonwhite protagonists such as Erdrich's Omakayas (Native American: Ojibwa), Taylor's Cassie (African American) and Na's Young Ju (Korean).

These novels, my students assert, are important because they paint a portrait of American experience that is much more complicated than the one traditionally offered to middle and high school students in their literature textbooks. And, they argue, "multicultural" novels expose students to new stories, new voices, new ideas, and new cultures. According to my students, teaching multicultural literature helps them help their students understand a country (and a world) much larger than the space of their own experiences.When I ask my students why these texts are multicultural, what they mean by culture, and how they will endeavor to teach both to their students, they often furrow their brows, become quiet and, after an awkward moment or two, ask hesitantly, "What do you mean?"

Question of Relation

As my preservice teachers encounter authors who write about diverse young adult characters, they become excited about the possibility of sharing these texts with their students. In addition to Erdrich, Taylor, and Na, my students are often deeply moved by the work of Jacqueline Woodson, Christopher Paul Curtis, Karen Hesse, Jerry Spinelli, Pam Muñoz Ryan, Sharon Flake, Joan Bower, James Howe, and others. However, for many students, not all of these authors are "multicultural" authors. Perhaps what is called for is an expansion of the definition of *multicultural*. If *multicultural* refers only to things nonwhite, then we miss the rich complexity of the word *culture*. Karen Hesse and Joan Bower are rarely identified as multicultural, and Jerry Spinelli and James Howe aren't either, despite having written *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli) and *The Misfits* (Howe), two books that feature a cast of heterogeneous, multiracial characters.

In general, my preservice teachers' "multicultural" choices are racially specific choices in which the experiences of African American, Native American, Mexican American, and/or Asian American (etc.) characters are narrated by authors of similar racial backgrounds. Conversely, my students do not identify as multicultural stories written by white authors about white, heterosexual, middle class characters—unless, of course, these characters, like Joe Bunch in *Totally Joe*, James Howe's sequel to *The Misfits*, are homosexual. Then they still count.

When my students imagine their choices in this way, even though they are attempting to include authors and characters who, unfortunately,

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both continue to be underrepresented in school curricula, they are actually engaging in a form of segregation that continues to *other* the very groups or communities they mean to include. Instead of envisioning these groups in relation to each other—instead of envisioning American society as *multi*-cultural—their vision of these texts and authors suggests that the communities described by these texts are discrete, distinct, and insular. In their efforts to provide their students with opportunities to learn about other cultures, my students often forget to acknowledge the ways in which these groups are imbricated—how they overlap with as well as inform and influence each other.

This interrelationship is particularly important if teachers hope to teach their students about power, specifically who has it, who does not, why, and to what effect. Lisa Delpit (1988) defines "the culture of power" as the unequal power relationships that become manifest in classrooms when, unspoken and unacknowledged, white, middle class values serve to exclude African American children from access to not only equitable learning experience, but also power itself. According to Delpit, these inequitable classroom experiences reflect inequitable power relations—inequitable access to power—in society at large. If my students are going to use multicultural texts to address these inequities, they must learn how to examine not only the characters' experiences, but also the communities' experiences relationally.

For example, although Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* narrates the experiences of an African American family, her novel is also about the violence of social and institutional racism and cannot be read without carefully examining how both are perpetuated as a result of white supremacist ideologies. Such an examination requires that careful attention be paid to the white community in the novel as well as the African American community to which Cassie belongs. Similarly, if my students are to understand Young Ju's struggles in *A Step from Heaven* as well as those of her parents, they must ask questions not only about what it means in her family to be Korean, but how these expectations come into conflict with the white, middle-class American norms she encounters on a daily basis. Even a book like David Levithan's *Boy Meets Boy* in which Paul, the novel's homosexual protagonist, lives in a virtual gaytopia cannot be read without attending to the larger homophobic and heterosexist cultural norms to which it is talking back.

I challenge my preservice teachers to interrogate their use of race, sexuality, or any particular identity category to define, identify, and/or select multicultural literature. This challenges them to explore how the community explicitly depicted in the book is in conversation with other related communities that may not be immediately visible.

Question of Culture

In addition to challenging how my students conceive of the term *multicultural* and then apply it to their curricular choices, I work to expand the ways they use these texts to think and teach about culture itself. *Culture* is a term with which I am constantly doing battle. It is widely used and yet rarely defined. Even at the college at which I work, although every English major is required to take a course called "Multicultural Literature," none of my colleagues can agree upon what that title means or, for that matter, what the course should do.

In my own classes, when my preservice teachers refer to a character's "culture," again they most often mean his or her race and the associated experiences and ideologies they ascribe to it. They desperately want culture to be something fixed, something static, something to be identified, inspected, and understood. They want culture to help them make sense of the character's choices, the character's worldview, and the character's desires. For some of my students, reading texts in which the experiences and struggles of the characters are unfamiliar prompts them to become "culture hunters." If they can find culture and capture it, then they will be able to explain not only what the book means, but also what having a particular racial identity means.

Unfortunately, it's just not that easy. Instead of envisioning culture as something essential—and by essential I mean something authentic or inher-

ent—I encourage them to examine the ways in which culture is always *contextual* as it changes in and over time. I encourage them to consider how a character's experiences and the meaning this character makes of these experiences are both historically and geographically situated. And, I encourage them to refrain from assuming that any racial identity—that any identity for that matter—has any "true" meaning outside of the various contexts in and through which that meaning is made.

For example, rather than reading a novel like *The Birchbark House* as a novel about "the Native American experience," my students are challenged to approach the novel as a story about one Ojibwa girl's experiences within a particular Ojibwa community that is situated within a particular geographical and historical context. Rather than reading *A Step from Heaven* as a depiction of "the immigrant experience" or, more specifically, "the Korean immigrant experience," they examine Young Ju's struggles by looking closely at her family's unique desires, needs, and gender dynamics as they relate to their experiences in Korea and in their new community in Southern California.

For my students (and for me), it is easier and more productive to think in terms of specific communities to which the characters in texts do and do not belong than it is to speak in terms of culture. By focusing their attention on these communities—their values, their beliefs, the ways in which behavior and identities are sanctioned and condemned—we are less likely to stereotype and more likely to construct meaning about these texts that are, like the experiences and identities of the characters they're encountering, complex.

Question of Questions

My third challenge with regard to my students' engagement with multicultural literature has more to do with their developing pedagogy than it does with the literature itself. As I observe them in the field, I often encounter two approaches to the teaching of multicultural literature: (1) either the approach does not differ in any substantial way from methods applied to other texts or (2) it does. Usually this means that either the approach is one in which knowledge and comprehension are privileged over inquiry and analysis (for example, my students might pose the following questions: "Who are the main characters in Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Esperanza Rising*?" "Where is the novel set?" as opposed to a question like "How does Esperanza both perpetuate and experience discrimination?") or it is one in which questions of culture become central to the discussion in ways they haven't been with other texts (such as "How does culture play a central role in Esperanza's experience in the novel?" Rarely do I hear this question about texts such as *Because of Winn-Dixie* or *Of Mice and Men*). Both approaches, I think, have their limitations.

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The first approach assumes that if students understand the facts of the book, the book's message or use as an inclusive tool will become self-evident. Reading books about African Americans or Asian immigrants or Native Americans will be enough. Students will be exposed to multiple perspectives, and as they see themselves and each other represented in the curriculum, they will (somehow) understand that their experiences are valued and valuable. The second approach assumes only certain texts actually contain useful, tangible examples of culture—*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* does; *Out of the Dust* does not. (Or, if you believe *Out of the Dust* does, then some other text does not . . .). Neither does justice to the text, nor does either approach sufficiently disrupt the two problems of segregation and essentialism.

To address this concern, I push my preservice teachers to think carefully about the questions they will ask. We develop questions based on a number of theoretical approaches that enable us to look carefully at representations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. And we continually question our own reading practices, analyzing our individual and collective transactions with the texts (Rosenblatt).

Better Questions: A Community-Based Approach

To provide my students with support as they work to teach literature in ways that are relational as well as context-specific, I have developed a scaffolded series of community-based questions in my young adult literature course that begin by focusing on the text's protagonist and move increasingly toward a closer analysis of the various contextual (local, regional, national, racial, religious, language, etc.) communities to which the protagonist belongs and with which she or he identifies. Once these communities have been identified and examined, we look at the extended communities to which she or he does *not* belong and analyze their significance in the text as well as in the protagonist's experiences. We consider which communities have the most social and institutional power, why, and how that power is either challenged or maintained. Having moved progressively away from the protagonist to build a complex portrait of the world in which she or he lives, we then return to this character and discuss the ways in which all of these communities have impacted his or her understanding of personal identity and agency. Figure 1 offers a graphic representation of what this looks like.

Reflecting on the Questions

Approaching texts—all texts—in this way has numerous benefits. It enables students to peel back the complex layers of any one character's experience. Instead of jumping immediately to cultural causalities (for example, Omakayas believes ____ because she is Native American or Young Ju feels ___ because she is an immigrant), they proceed slowly and try to understand how it is that the character makes meaning of his or her experience by looking at the specific community contexts in which that experience takes place. Continuing to use Omakayas as an example, her immediate and extended family, the larger Ojibwa community in which she lives, the encroaching white hunters and settlers (or *chimookoman)*, the Christian church, and the white educational system all affect to greater or lesser degree her worldview as well as her sense of self. Yes, she is Native American, but what this identity means to her (and to us) cannot be reduced to an objective or stereotypical list of traditions, beliefs, or behaviors. The same assertion could be made if she were white, female, African American, gay, Mexican, poor, Jewish, or any combination of the essentializing identity categories readers use to make meaning of characters' experiences.

Using these questions also makes it possible for students to understand how their own experiences are similarly layered. Like the characters, they are struggling to figure out who they are, what they believe, where they fit in, and what they are capable of accomplishing. And like all of these characters, the communities to which they belong have helped shape their experiences. If, as my students assert, one of the reasons for teaching literature is to provide opportunities for students to examine and reflect on their own identities, to explore and understand their own beliefs, these question can also provide a model for how to do so. Instead of beginning with a character, their inquiry can begin with themselves.

More important, as students use these questions to situate their experiences alongside those of the characters they are studying, they are challenged to move beyond seeing the two sets of experiences as merely parallel. Additionally, they are encouraged to consider whether or not the communities with which they are affiliated are connected or not by history, geography, membership, language, and beliefs to those described in the text.

This, then, opens up an avenue for talking about privilege and unequal access to power. As students examine why they, like characters they are studying, belong to certain communities as well as how they became members, they are required to identify the often unspoken and exclusionary expectations or norms that serve to perpetuate some groups' control or status over others. Are they, like Cassie, subject to unfair treatment and expected to accept inequitable school facilities because of the color of their skin? Do they believe, as Esperanza initially does, that Miguel (the

Individual → Affiliated Communities → Outsider Communities → Society → Individual

Individual

- How does the character describe him or herself?

Affiliated Communities

- To what communities does s/he belong (or with what communities does s/he identify)?
- How did s/he become a member of these communities? (For example: born into, shared beliefs, particular behaviors, physical attributes, similar language, financial contribution)
- What are the community's rules (or norms or expectations or values)?
- How are these rules (norms/expectations/values) enacted?
- What are the consequences if these rules (norms/expectations/values) are violated?
- What role does s/he play in these communities?
- Who has power within these communities?
- How is this power expressed?
- How does a person in this community acquire power?

Outsider Communities

- Are there other communities to which s/he does not belong that are also present in the book?
- How do you know?
- Who belongs to these communities?
- How did they become members?
- Who is excluded? Why?

Society

- How do these communities view each other?
- How do they behave toward each other?
- Which communities have more or the most (social, political, institutional) power?
- Which communities have less power?
- How do you know?

Individual

- What effect(s) does this have on the character's experiences?
- What effect(s) does this have on the character's understanding of him or herself and the world in which s/he lives?
- What would s/he like to change?
- What challenges does s/he face? Why?

Figure 1. An approach to the study of how an individual is affected by membership in multiple communities

son of her family's cook and gardener) is not worthy of her because he is of a lower social class than she? Must they, like Omakayas, consider learning the language of an unfamiliar people in order to protect their land and livelihood? As they use these questions to examine the inequitable effects of racial, socioeconomic, and language differences, they are, as Lisa Delpit advocates, making the rules of "the culture of power" explicit. In doing so, they are better prepared to confront and challenge it.

References

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