

Objectives

This course is designed to introduce students to critical approaches to the study of ethnic literatures and cultures from the long twentieth century. In its different iterations, the course will take a comparative approach, surveying a wide range of literary genres by authors from Asian American, Black, Chicana, Latina, multi-racial, Native American and other diverse communities. Students will build an analytical foundation for examining literary production and learn to link form, artistry, and concept to histories and politics of colonialism, identity, migration, nationhood, race, and segregation

Lecture 1:

Minority Literature

The United States has grown remarkably diverse over the past fifty years. In 1965, the U.S population was 84% white, 11% black, 4% Latina and 1% Asian. Less than 5% of the population was born in another country. In the years that followed, waves of immigration changed the makeup of the United States; from 1965 to 2015, half of all U.S immigrants came from Latin America and one quarter came from Asia. As a result, in 2015 the U.S population was 62% White, 18% Latina, 12% Black, 6% Asian and 2% other races. There is still a long way to go before the United States gives full status to all of its people; however, more and more Americans are in favor of the country's growing diversity and say it makes the U.S a better place to live in.

1. Minor

The Random House dictionary defines "minor" as, "1. lesser as in size extent, amount or importance; 2. under legal age ..". Connotatively, this definition implies a connection between minority status and worth. Commonly, readers believe a minor work is one less valuable than a work of the majority or canon. The second part of the definition that calls attention to age and its relation to minor status also has interesting implications for literature. If a work is minor, it can then be understood to be childish or under-developed.

2. Ethnicity

The origin and definition of ethnicity is complex by its interrelations with race, nation, culture, geography, by migration, immigration, discrimination, dominance and control, and by historical and cultural values of the times.

There are two sources from which the word “ethnic” is derived. From the Greek *ethnos*, meaning “nation” or “people”. In this context we have the sense of community. Another Greek word *ethnikos*, however, has the designation of “heathen” or “other”. In English usage the word first emerged in the fifteenth century and meant 'pertaining to nations not Christian or Jewish; Gentile, heathen or pagan' (OED). In other words, ethnic meant foreigners.

Werner Sollors finds that the contrast between heathen and chosen people in traditional Christianity, when used in the American context, becomes ethnic versus American. An “ethnic” then is “nonstandard” or in America...not fully American”. In other words, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants are the norm and ethnics are the “others”.

Meanings we associate with the word today emerged in the late nineteenth century: “pertaining to or having common racial, cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics, especially designating a racial or other group within a larger system” (Oxford English Dictionary). Since World War II, the term has come to mean racial and cultural difference, as the term ethnic minority refers to “a group of people differentiated from the rest of the community by racial origins or cultural background, and usually claiming or enjoying official recognition of their group identity”.

It seems thus that the terminology to be used can be problematic when we discuss who is or what is “an American”. In a sense, the difficulty with the word lies in its “ethnic” inclusiveness. In a way, all American writers are ethnic, the sons of immigrants, since - with the exception of the Indian - there is no basic American stock. In other words, all Americans were at one time strangers to the American shores. But if we understand the word “ethnic” to mean immigrant groups speaking a language and possessing a culture other than English or belonging to a race other than the Caucasian, then it is evident that the distinction between American culture and its ethnic sub-cultures has been a very real one since colonial times. Indeed, during the colonial period the open spaces allowed those immigrants who wished to cling to their own language and customs to do so without seriously disturbing the established American community. Blacks - living in bondage, widely dispersed throughout the agrarian South, and without unifying leadership - did not then seem likely to disturb the traditional features of American life. But in the last decades of the nineteenth century, huge tides of foreign immigration flowed into America's big cities. At about the same time, large numbers of Blacks emigrated to urban settings. These movements produced the first massive confrontations between the Native Americans and the newest ethnic communities at the very time when the early industrial capitalists were producing nation-wide economic instability. Living in increasingly congested cities with these new ethnic communities, the Native American often felt that his heritage and his way of life were being threatened. Nativist

organizations were quick to declare their hostility to the larger of these ethnic groups - e.g., the Irish, the Jews, and the Negroes.

There is a debate surrounding multiculturalism and its meaning in American society. Indeed, when the founders of the United States selected “E pluribus unum” as the motto on the new nation’s Great Seal, they were very likely thinking of 13 different colonies being bound together into a single nation; this nation was constituted, as J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur wrote in 1782, of a “mixture of English, Scotch, Irish French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes.” “From this promiscuous breed,” Crèvecoeur continued, “that race now called Americans have arisen.” These people were differing in language, religion and attitudes toward the land and they were often engaged in struggles over power, property, and cultural authority. By the time the United States was constituted as a nation in 1776, about 10 percent of its population came from Africa. These people, too, came from differing nations or tribes in west and central Africa, and carried with them differing languages, customs and religions.

Today, in the United States, multiculturalism needs to be seen in the displacement and often, extermination of native peoples, the capture, transportation, and enslavement of Africans; the struggles over land ownership also occurred between Spanish- and English-speaking peoples in the Southwest and in California among many other events.

Arthur Schlesinger Jr, a critic of multiculturalism among many, calls for the reaffirmation of Anglo-Saxon culture and the silencing of differences. In his essay “The Cult of Ethnicity, Good and Bad” (1991), he argues that non-Anglo whites and non-white minorities have created a 'cult of ethnicity' in order to denounce the idea of a melting pot and promote ethnic and racial separation. Claiming that 'the ethnic interpretation of American history' remains 'fatally misleading and wrong when presented as the whole picture', Schlesinger finds especially disturbing the notion that ethnic studies reverse 'the historic theory of America as one people - the theory that has thus far managed to keep American society whole'. However, Schlesinger also recognizes that ethnic histories are 'therapies' that raise minority 'self-esteem'.

In *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1998), Schlesinger recognizes that there can be both benefits and dangers in ethnicity awareness. The benefits include the new recognition of minorities in academic and cultural spheres. “But pressed too far, the cult of ethnicity has bad consequences too.... Its underlying philosophy is that America is not a nation of individuals at all but a nation of groups, that ethnicity is the defining experience for Americans...”. He goes on to say that “The multiethnic dogma abandons historic purposes, replacing assimilation by fragmentation, integration by separatism. It belittles “unum” and glorifies “pluribus”.

Despite general references to the cultural contributions of various ethnic groups to the formation of the United States, he reveals a strong bias in his presentation of

history. When he claims that few African-Americans have left any cultural tie to Africa, he ignores the 500,000 imported slaves who were uprooted and denied their normal lives in this country. We may wonder whether he seriously believes that all connection to their African culture died out before they could pass it on to their children. Moreover, in his efforts to justify cultural assimilation on the grounds of chosen immigration, Schlesinger Jr fails to acknowledge that Native Americans and many Hispanics did not immigrate to the United States. They neither sought Anglo-America nor desired assimilation. Rather, the United States demanded conformity and compliance with their socio-political establishment.

The author also evokes the ethnic divisions happening around the world, even in democratic countries like Britain, France, Belgium, Spain and Canada and says, "In a world savagely rent by ethnic and racial antagonisms, it is all the more essential that the United States continues as an example of how a highly differentiated society holds itself together". He devotes a chapter to the use of history as a weapon and claims "The result has been a reconstruction of American history partly on the merits and partly in response to gender and ethnic pressures". Further, he reminds us that what has held the American people together was "a common adherence to ideals of democracy and human rights", quoting Theodore Roosevelt when he said:

The one absolutely certain way of bringing this nation to ruin, of preventing all possibility of its continuing to be a nation at all, would be to permit it to become a tangle of squabbling nationalities, an intricate knot of German-Americans, Irish-Americans, English-Americans....each preserving its separate nationality".

Obviously, Schlesinger Jr fears that the "cult of ethnicity" manifested in ethnic awareness and the continuing attack on the historical and literary canons will lead to increasing racial hostility, a loss of common values, and national disintegration. I think that the case is rather the opposite. In their efforts to undermine the original notion of the United States as a nation governed by and for a certain class of white men, multicultural scholars, feminists, and others are trying to heal the wounds that truly disunite America.

3. Ethnic/minor literature

It refers to stories, and poems that relate to groups that have been traditionally marginalized or disenfranchised in American society-- African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asian Pacific Americans. It is a literature that authentically reflects non-Western cultures, with characters and content other than those of mainstream society.

Ethnic American literature deals with issues of identity in relation to an American mainstream. People in such literature are represented to be desperately seeking meaning as minorities, and struggling to maintain a balance between an ethnic heritage of the past and their identities while adapting to the mainstream culture. Whereas ethnic heritage is represented through the shared historical past as in the circulation of folk-tales, myths or legends, and the passing on of different cultural values, the adaptation to mainstream culture is expressed through a multicultural approach that accepts the American ideals also.

The earliest ethnic writers wrote primarily for their own people. Later, when they began to write for the American public, they had a common tendency to cast themselves in the role of good-will ambassadors.

During the Depression, it was ethnic writers like Mike Gold, James T. Farrell, and Richard Wright who were in the vanguard of proletarian literature, in which they articulated their common hardships. Yet, later, in the 1950's and 1960's, ethnic writers like Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow and James F. Powers were similarly preoccupied with the search for identity in a world nearly vacant of genuine community, and they used their ethnic experience in America to conduct that search definitively.

If the 1960s were characterized as a decade of social movements for change and justice, then the 1970s was surely the decade that witnessed the first fruits of those struggles. In the context of academia and scholarship, many radical changes began to take place. One of the most significant tasks in the 1970s was the recovery of "lost" or "forgotten" texts by scholars. Feminist scholars in particular played an important role in unearthing and republishing works like Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron Mills* ([1861]1971), Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* ([1892]1973), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* ([1860]1973), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* ([1937]1978), and many others. By republishing these works, scholars brought into focus the social and sexual politics that had been largely responsible for the demise of these works in the past.

Gradually, publishers both large and small started publishing more works by minority writers, some who have gained canonical status today. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Childhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1972) were published. In addition, The Feminist Press and Broadside Press dedicated themselves to publishing works by minority writers. Quinto Sol publishers did much to promote Chicano literature and published.

3.1 Characteristics of Ethnic /Minor Writings

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari list three characteristics of minor literature: “in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization” ; “everything in [a minor literature] is political”; and “in it everything takes on a collective value”. Via the first characteristic the concept of minor literature engages the “language question,” which has been at the centre of many discussions.

Deleuze and Guattari use the term ‘Deterritorialization’ to explain that a minor writer uses the language of the majority to subvert from within the culture created and supported by that language. With this subversive power, the minor writer has control over that language by imprinting it with minor stylistic features, form and ideas.

Deleuze and Guattari's idea that a minority can create new linguistic forms “within a major language” as happens with Spanglish, for instance, can help us to arrive at a better understanding of the way “minor literature” functions within the mainstream culture.

This is also very applicable to African American literature. Novels such as *The Bluest Eye* are a good example to the ways Deleuze and Guattari conceive ‘deterritorialization’. Toni Morrison is writing from within a minority group that faces racism and segregation. Yet that same group lives within the larger society. It is a story that can only be told from this group and that can only be told in the language of the oppressor.

Bilingualism, something that Deleuze and Guattari mention only in passing, is an important element in Minority literature. The question generally posed by ethnic writers is that of language itself: whether to write in his/her mother tongue, in the “adopted” language or even in both. All the writers to be discussed in this lecture subvert the language of the oppressor either by using dialect (like in the case of Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston, Zitkala Sa and Leslie Marmon Silko), or incorporate words in Spanish like for Cleofas Jaramillo and Norma Elia Cantu.

Most of the time, the question of language choice has a lot more to do with one's affective relations to a language than with linguistic competence. According to Gustavo Pérez Firmat: “The true bilingual is not someone who possesses 'native competence' in two languages, but someone who is equally attached to, or torn between, competing tongues”.

Bilingualism can be seen as a means of expression that has been an important and ever-present element in the production of ethnic literature in the United States.

In particular, bilingualism in ethnic literature documents the processes by which determined communities change/adapt to and learn or negotiate their new lives. By the same token, bilingual literature in the United States also documents the clashes between the minor/ethnic groups those who have lived in the United States for many generations, and the mainstream Anglo culture. In the end, bilingualism contests mainstream efforts

to eradicate the mother tongue from those communities. Or in many cases, that which has become the second tongue, as second and third generations of U.S.-born minorities oftentimes learn their parents' and grandparents' mother tongue as a second language.

In any case, U.S. ethnic writers from different backgrounds have countered for decades (purposely or not) "English only" efforts by expressing themselves in their literature with words that are "foreign" to the English language, but are reflective of their ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, American ethnic literature provides a unique perspective by using English in conjunction with another distinct language and by sometimes merging both languages, as in the case of Spanglish. In many cases, the texts are written primarily in English with some passages in Spanish. In these instances, the words in Spanish used by the authors are meant to establish two specific links: first, a connection with a specific ethnic group at a personal level (and thus establishing a particular heritage); and second, a broader cultural connection between the author, the community to which he or she belongs, and their heritage.

Bilingualism, consequently, serves to highlight the paradox by which these authors belong to two distinctive cultures, yet they also belong to neither.

Bilingualism in U.S. ethnic literature also documents the creation and maintenance of a new hybrid culture that communicates using a "new" language, a language that reflects the experiences of this in-between culture. An illustration of this phenomenon is the poetry of Lorna Dee Cervantes. In her poem "Poema para los californios muertos" (Poem for the dead Californios), Cervantes writes in English and Spanish, using Spanish mainly to emphasize the historical commotion and sense of loss of the original Mexican settlement in the state of California. For instance, she uses Spanish when talking about the land: "Husbands de la tierra" (husbands of the land) and "tierra madre" (mother land). She also uses it when talking about ancestors and their struggles (Greenwood Encyclopedia 99). Finally, bilingualism (as a practice in U.S. ethnic literature) provides a tool by which the lives of the members of ethnic communities are highlighted and the reality they live within the broader society is problematized.

The second attribute of a minor literature is its production of political themes. Political literature is not just that which addresses immediate political concerns. Instead, it concentrates on the needs of the whole minority group. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, rarely portrayed blacks as victims of the oppression and racist attitudes held by white society and instead represented blacks as autonomous beings, proud of their folk culture. Nonetheless, this representation was an anomaly in Black literature at that time, and Hurston was severely criticized throughout the 1930s and 1940s by writers such as Richard Wright who experienced a more common upbringing in the segregated South and whose work spoke to the inequalities inherent in American society.

The last attribute of minor literature is its collective value. Indeed, a minor literature does not have much freedom in terms of individuality. It is only thus that any literature can actually become a tool for collective expression; only thus it is able to address issues properly.