Teaching the American Literature Survey Course: A Heath Anthology Newsletter Colloquy

Guest Editor: Todd Onderdonk

This issue of the Heath Anthology Newsletter grew out of a visit by Paul Lauter to the University of Texas at Austin in October of 2004. The visit was sponsored by the American Literatures Group (an organization of graduate students and faculty from UT’s English Department), and included a packed-half public lecture by Professor Lauter, a panel discussion the next day, and a handful of smaller events. My own role in Professor Lauter’s visit was to coordinate the panel discussion, “Teaching the American Literature Survey Course,” which was conceived as an opportunity for both teachers and students to reflect on their experiences with this at once most basic, and yet to teachers, often most challenging, of college English courses. The event was timely for me, since I was engaged in creating my own American literature survey syllabus in preparation for entering the job market, and I was wrestling with questions about classroom activism and the politics of pedagogy. Most pressing and painful to me in that 2004 election season was the problem of how to share power with students in a way that would allow the classroom to be a space of exploration and communal cultural analysis, not a microcosm of the fractured American political scene, with its static and antagonistic reds and blues becoming ever redder and bluer as we approached November. I was searching for a way to talk about values with students without abusing the institutional power with which my words are inevitably invested when I step into the college classroom; and I was especially concerned about not imposing on students my views and values, however uncontroversial they may seem to me.

The Heath’s very inclusiveness, however, makes visible, and thus open to classroom discussion, just such questions of power and pedagogy—questions that for decades have been overlooked or elided by anthologists and instructors of literature. By including, for example, Native American oral literatures, or the narratives of non-Anglo American colonizers and explorers by side with letters, blues lyrics, political writings, abolitionist newspaper editorials, and corridos, the Heath calls into question such seemingly concrete and once-irreducible terms as “American” and “literature,” allowing us to openly discuss with students what the goals of an anthology—or a literature survey course—should or could be. To involve students so intimately in the project of their own critical education is to strive for a kind of political transparency, however difficult this ideal may be to achieve.

Where once students encountered in the survey course those supposedly apolitical and practically ahistorical “monuments of unageing intellect,” to borrow Yeats’ ringing phrase, they now find a proliferation of texts and voices, materials embedded deeply in specific...
material, historical contexts. This diversity and historical specificity not only more fully represent our communal, conflictual American past, but can help students contextualize and thus form their own educated judgments about the values enshrined in those “monuments.”

...using the Heath tends to inspire teachers to pursue more self-conscious pedagogies.

In organizing the panel discussion, I found that instructors who used the Heath were inspired by its practices to interrogate and problematize their own teaching practices. The following articles represent some of the approaches we discussed—a discussion, I might add, that took place in full view of students from ongoing courses of some of the panelists. Thus the event also served as a purposeful dismantling of that ethic of seamless “production values” that we anxious teachers sometimes project to our classes, in favor of a more self-interrogatory display of the human “stage machinery” behind humanities pedagogy.

If revealing the contingency of literary taste and critical authority is to be part of classroom practice, then talking about differing anthologies with students might be one of the best ways to explore how the anthology institutionalizes historical, human choices of literary and social value. For this reason, we begin with Sylvia Gale’s “Anthologizing the Future: The Lessons of Oral Literatures,” which examines the presentation of Native American oral literatures in three widely used American literature anthologies (including the Heath), to reveal the disparate attitudes and assumptions embedded in those presentations. In “Uncovering the Heart of American Literature,” Joanna Brooks suggests we abandon the pretense of “coverage” of the American literary canon in favor of a more celebratory process of “uncovery,” a collaborative and purposefully uncompelling approach in which teachers and students might together pursue “the critically and expansively humane vision at the heart of the humanities.” Noah Mass’s “Cultures, Contacts, and Communities,” and Heidi Juel’s “What Does an American Literature Survey Course DO?” both explore the pedagogy of Native American materials in order to suggest we move beyond mere “inclusiveness,” and find ways to connect and integrate past and present, and marginal and mainstream voices in our teaching.

In “Un-American Teaching with the Heath Anthology,” Ann Cvetkovich weighs in as a “a non-specialist, non-American, canon-busting, queer feminist” for whom the Heath provided unique ways to introduce students to cultural studies and issues of canon revision in her first year teaching the survey course. We end with some pedagogic consciousness-raising in Paul Lauter’s article, “Some Questions,” which wonders, “Is less more?” and explores the balance between teaching “American” and “literature” in the American literature survey course. “Consciousness-raising,” indeed, may be one overlooked impact of the Heath’s ongoing project. As I hope these articles demonstrate, using the Heath tends to inspire teachers to pursue more self-conscious pedagogies. In this way the anthology advances what Joanna Brooks calls the mission of the humanities: “to learn to see the invisible, to appreciate the difficult, and to cultivate a richer sense of what it means to be human.”

Anthologizing the Future: The Lessons of Oral Literatures

By Sylvia Gale


Like many who have critiqued anthologies, I have come to believe that making the anthology’s apparatus visible to our students is a powerful way to invite them into the meta-conversations that inform our discipline. Any anthology can, with coaxing and set in the right extended frame, provide us with a chance to rub literatures together, and can help us to expose the seams of the American literary canon. Yet the way an anthology itself contextualizes its literatures has important implications for our experience of that literature—and, I would argue, for the future of anthologizing more generally.

I say this because I have just spent a year studying the presentation of the selections of Native American oral texts that open most contemporary anthologies of American literature. While scrutinizing the prefaces, headnotes, footnotes, and tables of contents of the most recent, shorter editions of three major anthologies—the Harper, Norton, and Heath—I have learned a lot about how the apparatus of the anthology reflects and inflects the values of its anthology makers. And, more particularly, I have come to understand some of the lessons that Native American oral literatures hold for the anthology’s form itself.

Consider, first, the very different discussions of cultural context offered in these three anthologies’ opening units. The two-paragraph headnote to “A Story-telling Stone,” the Seneca narrative that is one of two stories included in The Harper American Literature’s sec-
tion of “Native American Narratives,” explains the story’s importance this way: “As this myth dramatically portrays, the enchantment of stories can easily sidetrack us from day to day obligations and can illuminate our lives and heritage” (17). By condensing the meaning of the story into this kind of universalized moral, the Harper anthology is attempting to make the story as un-intimidating a read as possible. There is no need to explain anything about Seneca culture or about the transmission of this particular version of the story, since it can apparently best be understood as a timeless statement about human experience. The kind of interaction that the Harper’s framing materials encourage at moments like this is based on an assertion of similarities that severely simplifies oral literatures.

The frame at work in The Norton Anthology of American Literature’s “Stories of the Beginning of the World” could not be more different. By attending to the facts about the particular narratives it anthologizes (when, by whom, and how these texts traveled to the page), and by consistently emphasizing the narratives’ difference, pointing out the ways they vary generically and culturally from Euro-American conventions and traditions, the Norton gives very little ground to parallels or generalizations. The meaning of the Native stories is thus not explained in universals, but by way of specific cultural references. The Norton’s lengthy headnote to an “Iroquois Creation Story,” for example, one of the three stories included in this unit, expands on the story by summarizing several other, related Iroquois stories. The effect of this kind of contextualizing is to complicate and destabilize the narratives in the anthology, reminding readers that the text that follows is not the only version of this story, not the only story the Iroquois tell, and does not in itself sum up or explain Iroquois culture or belief. In this way, the Norton framework reinforces the importance of understanding Native narratives from within Native cultural contexts, contexts only available, to most readers, through the editor’s mediation.

Like the Norton, The Heath Anthology aims to open Native American contexts to its readers, but it does so quite differently. Since the anthology has no headnotes to individual stories (instead offering longer, detailed introductions to oral narrative and poetic types and conventions), the explanation of cultural features that arise in individual stories occurs in the footnotes. Many of these footnotes move from a general statement about a tribe’s culture, to a translation of specific words and concepts, and then to an explicit statement about how this understanding informs events in the story. It is the Heath’s willingness to provide explicitly interpretive connections between its explanations of cultural beliefs and practices and the narratives themselves that most distinguishes the anthology’s use of cultural context. This effort at offering points of access to the stories is accompanied by an emphasis on the reader’s own encounter with the texts. In the section’s general introduction, editor Andrew Wiget warns readers that this encounter will require significant work: “Understanding character motivation, image, or theme...requires expending some effort to understand cultural values and beliefs about the shape of the world and human nature, often very different from the reader’s own, as an appropriate context for interpretation” (13). Reading these narratives in this frame is not only about glimpsing a Native worldview; it involves confronting the ethnocentric limits of our own assumptions and knowledge.

These three approaches to the issue of cultural context reflect three different ways of valuing oral literatures, values which permeate the anthologies’ presentations of the Native oral texts. The Harper’s scanty headnotes and breezy summations suggest that it values accessibility above all else: students do not need much additional information in order to “get” the story. The Norton’s complication of these narratives with discussion of alternative textual versions and additional stories indicates that the anthology values mediation of the texts: students need the Norton’s fine print in order to access and understand the stories. The Heath’s provision of interpretive cultural references and its simultaneous caution about assuming too much common ground suggest that the Heath values most of all the reader’s own encounter with the texts: students cannot safely assume that the work of accessing the stories has been done by the editor. Not incidentally, in its emphasis on the interaction between story and audience, in this case readers of the anthology, the Heath’s framework comes closest to enacting a fundamental feature of the oral tradition itself: its openness to invention, re-creation, and interplay.

We might disagree about the impact of these differences on our reading experience (how carefully do students read these headnotes, anyway?), but I would argue that these distinctions have real implications for the anthology’s form. Put simply, I have noticed that the more responsibly and thoroughly the anthologies treat Native American oral literatures, the more they depart from their own anthological conventions. The counterexample to this observation is the Harper: quite literally, as the Harper hammers the familiar headnote form down around the oral texts, substituting tribal history for literary biography and condensed meanings for literary context, the characteristics that distinguish Native American oral literatures are chipped off. It is because the Harper anthology tries to fit the oral texts into its anthological form, and does not accommodate that form to the texts, that the anthology fails to convey much of use about these materials.

...making the anthology’s apparatus visible to our students is a powerful way to invite them into the meta-conversations that inform our discipline.
In contrast, the *Heath* and the *Norton* both to some extent depart from their own conventions in these opening units. In the *Norton* this plays out as a tension between the *Norton*’s general preference for stable, “authentic” texts, and its insistence on issues of textual instability in its presentation of the oral narratives. For the *Heath*, the departure lies most significantly in the tone of editorial caution and confession that accompanies the anthology’s emphasis on the interaction between reader and text. The *Heath*’s unit not only warns readers about relaxing into their own habits of mind, but also opens up the challenge editor Andrew Wiget faced in selecting and presenting this sample of Native oral literatures. Wiget describes the process by which various values have been “weighed and balanced,” (13) and in the longer version of this headnote in the *Heath*’s two-volume fourth edition (2002), explains his desire to avoid developing a “critical apparatus so extensive and cumbersome that it would overshadow the literature” (20). This is a level of editorializing unusual even in the *Heath*, and the unconventional presence of the headnote writer reminds readers that these texts have been packaged for a particular reason with a particular set of goals in mind.

In foregrounding its editorial choices and admitting abiding difficulties, the *Heath*’s treatment of Native American oral texts is an example of what critics of the anthology’s current form have called for: more overt editorial decision-making, with what Jeffrey Williams calls the anthology’s “narrative investment” laid bare (291). One principle behind such critiques is that a more self-conscious approach to anthologizing would subvert the claim to ultimate authority that tends to emanate from the form. In reflecting on his own headnote writing for the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, John McGowan asks:

Would it merely be a kind of bad faith to write headnotes that tried to abstract away from the authority of the anthologized figure and the authority of the teacherly headnote writer to gesture to a place where figure, teacher, and student slugged it out on roughly equal terms? (189)

These questions are a step beyond asking how classroom users can capitalize on or make an end run around an anthology’s deficiencies. A collection of texts that strives to stimulate student interaction should, in fact, “abstract away” from the anthology’s pretense to authority. And this is the alternative that the more responsible moments within the anthologies’ framing of Native oral literatures allow us to glimpse. These texts give us the opportunity to re-create, invent, and talk back to the anthological form as we know it. Of these three anthologies, *Heath*’s treatment comes closest to realizing this opportunity, precisely by straying farthest from anthological convention.

*...the Heath’s framework comes closest to enacting a fundamental feature of the oral tradition: its openness to invention, re-creation, and interplay.*

The *Heath* could do even more to stimulate an interactive reading experience in its opening pages. What if, for example, the *Heath* included contemporary renditions of the oral narratives—renditions recorded or transcribed by contemporary Native storytellers? Such versions would of course be no more “authentic” than their nineteenth-century counterparts, and would be subject to the same cautions about the influence of audience on the text that the *Heath* already provides. But narratives told in a modern context would likely include instances of “narrative commenting”—moments when a storyteller explains or relates an incident in the story to a present circumstance (Sarris Slug 184). These narratives might read more like stories in semi-autobiographical compilations like Leslie Silko’s *Storyteller*, or Greg Sarris’s *Mabel McKay or Slug Woman*, compilations in which family stories, personal narrative, and “traditional” narratives are woven together in a fluid representation of the way stories rise in daily life.

This kind of presentation would pull the anthology even farther from the conventions of the form—further leveling the ground between text and reader—while at the same time more faithfully reflecting the oral tradition that these texts represent. Other such innovations might follow the lead of the second edition of the *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (2004), which prizes its “strengthened vernacular tradition” and is sold with a two-CD set including speeches, music, readings, and oral performances. Whatever the inventions of the future, we can be sure that the more an anthology respects the characteristics of oral literatures and aims to recreate the dynamics of the oral tradition within its boundaries, the more those boundaries will be stretched and re-drawn.

---


Uncovering the Heart of American Literature

By Joanna Brooks

Joanna Brooks learned how to “do” American literature at UCLA from Richard Yarborough, the Associate General Editor of the Heath Anthology. Now in the English department at the University of Texas, she has published American Lazarus: Religion and the Rise of African-American and Native American Literature, Face Zion Forward: First Writers of the Black Atlantic, and is presently completing a collection of the writings of 18th century American Indian author Samson Occom.

The Heath Anthology for me captures the promise and the difficulty of teaching literature in an expanding American universe. To this point, I’d like to share some compelling new pedagogies put forward by Randy Bass and the Visible Knowledge Project (http://crossroads.georgetown.edu/vkp/) of the American Studies Association. The Visible Knowledge Project vision, essentially, is to redefine learning as a reflective process of guided exploration structured around collaborative, productive tasks which embrace the inherent instability and complexity of meaning in the digital age. In simpler terms, Bass recommends that we think of learning as the “uncoverage” of complex cultural phenomena rather than the “coverage” of the canon. I like very much this idea of abandoning the pretense of “coverage” in the American literature survey in favor of “uncoverage.” It speaks for me to a deeper conviction that love rather than obligation should be the basis of our pedagogical work. The literature I love is the literature that engages my imagination, my compassion, my sense of conviction, and my belief in the human capacity for making meaning in difficult and even desperate circumstances. What I love is William Bradford, Phillis Wheatley, David Walker, William Apess, Henry David Thoreau, and Harriet Jacobs, among others. When I teach out of a sense of love rather than a sense of abstract obligation to the canon, I can better communicate to my students my sense of the mission of the humanities: to learn to see the invisible, to appreciate the difficult, and to cultivate a richer sense of what it means to be human.

It can be challenging to engage the same sense in my students. By the time our students reach the university classroom—especially in a large public institution like the University of Texas—love and pleasure have been drilled out of their lives as learners. They have been trained to be good workers, but not always good thinkers. Being a good thinker requires a willingness to take risks, to undertake independent exploration, and to love ideas. I try to encourage students to exercise some independent agency, some desire, in an effort to reclaim their own education. I build into the syllabus small assignments which encourage them to work experimentally from their own sense of love, curiosity, and pleasure: for example, I ask students to choose a text from the Heath Anthology which is not on the syllabus, a text which drew their interest or attention, and to introduce it to the class through an oral presentation or written paper. At the end of the semester, I organize the students into groups to deliberate and propose new texts for inclusion on the syllabus. What did you love reading? Why did you love it? Why should we love it as well? Asking these questions helps us reorient our work as a class around “uncovering” the critically and expansively humane vision at the heart of the humanities.

Cultures, Contacts, and Communities: Connecting Past and Present in the Literature Survey Course

By Noah Mass

Noah Mass is a second-year graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin, concentrating on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American literatures. He was a teaching assistant for “Masterworks of American Literature” in the fall of 2003.

Paul Lauter’s recent visit to the University of Texas at Austin brought to mind, for those of us who were involved in organizing his appearance as well as for all those who attended his presentation, a host of issues about the curriculum of an American Literature survey course. In the interest of full disclosure, I should mention that I am a graduate student, and so my particular experience with survey courses is limited to the time I spent as a teaching assistant in one such course, and the planning I am doing now for a potential survey course of my own. However, both my actual experience as an interpreter of someone else’s curriculum as well as my vision for a hypothetical curriculum for my own class are informed by a sense of the unique nature of the survey course itself and its student population. For many of my students, a survey course may be, and probably will be, the last time that they will ever take an English course in their lives; it will be the last time that they will ever read literature that they did not choose to read on their own. How I consider what I do and how I do it comes from a sense of urgency: the knowledge that I have a limited window of time in which to introduce my students to voices and stories that are powerful and meaningful. When I consider
which sorts of readings to include and which to exclude, it is with the certain knowledge that the students I will be working with might well have only this opportunity to come into contact with the narratives of cultures and communities with which they would otherwise be only superficially connected.

With this in mind, I’ve been trying to conceive of how to build on the theme of “cultures in contact” in ways that ask students to continue their consideration of inter-cultural negotiation beyond the confines of the course itself. I want to give my students the opportunity to engage with literature in a way that connects them to some larger community, by encouraging them to investigate the connections between the centuries-old narratives that we examine and the contemporary peoples and cultures for whom those narratives are an inheritance. My hope is that I will help students to see those literatures as starting points for further investigation by asking them to consider the present-day lives of the Native tribes whose early legends and tales we read.

I had the misfortune, while a T.A., to be saddled with an anthology other than the Heath. The professor under whom I served was aware that the particular volume he assigned to his students gave inadequate representation to the writings and histories of peoples of color in general, and that its selection of writings from canonical authors of all genders and races was suspect, at best. However, he believed that his own lectures and supplements to the text would help to overcome the anthology’s insufficiencies. My role in relation to his lectures and assigned readings, as I saw it, was to lead the students in the discussion sections I oversaw from the parochialism of the assigned readings to a fuller understanding of how the texts functioned in relation to one another historically—how the various voices and stories we encountered, particularly those of Native Americans, represented negotiations among various communities which are ongoing.

However, I discovered early on that the unique nature of my student population would require me to come up with pedagogical strategies that I had not foreseen. On my very first day as a teaching assistant, in fact, a student asked if I could summarize a somewhat confusing Native American origin story for her (a Seneca story, “How The World Was Made”). I gamely attempted to do just that, but I felt that there was the implication in her question that the story was something to be “understood” quickly, and then moved on from. My students were generally (although not exclusively) white freshmen, and it seemed that their previous experience of writings by non-whites and whites alike in their high school classes was one in which they were encouraged to see literature as medicine: they would be “better” if they read certain things. They were used to being exposed to an apologetic leavening of African American, Hispanic, and occasionally Native and Asian American authors amongst the more canonical Caucasian choices, and they knew how they were supposed to approach writings by peoples of color—as though it was simply good to sample a different ethnic dish.

It has become my challenge to make the readings in my prospective survey course more than mere menu samplings of different cultural expressions. I want the readings to be opportunities for my students, whatever their own ethnic backgrounds, to engage with the communities from which the literatures emerge. Andrew Wiget’s essay in the Spring 1993 Heath Newsletter regarding teaching strategies for the Zuni “Talk Concerning the First Beginning” (among other narratives), demonstrates how teachers can use the Heath’s selections of early Native American writings to open a discussion on the nature of cultural encounters, presuppositions, prejudices, and colonizations, and also on how becoming familiar with the particular tribal tradition behind a piece of Native American writing is crucial to an understanding of its meaning. Of course, it is also true that the Heath allows for exactly that sort of an approach, partially because of the diverse selection of readings that it presents, and partially because of the on-line complement to the anthology, which allows students and instructors the opportunity to connect what they have read to a wider cultural context.

My own impulse is to try to add to Professor Wiget’s prescription, and ask my students to see the Native American literatures that we explore as coming from tribal peoples and communities that exist now, are in no way deceased, and whose people continue to experience the same sorts of struggles, and undertake the same sorts of cultural negotiations, as their ancestors did. There are, in fact, a wide variety of on-line resources concerning the present state of the Zuni, often written by Zuni, just to take that particular people as an example. It is sometimes the temptation, for many instructors, to treat the survey course as a chronological movement forward from one period of “discovery” or “encounter” to the present day. My hope is to help my students see the readings as part of an historical continuum, one in which they are implicated. Why not incorporate on-line resources concerning the present state of the Zuni with the sort of complex discussion of their origin narrative that Professor Wiget outlines, and ask the students to see this particular text, collected in 1930 and considered in most anthologies as concomitant with the era of colonial settlement, as emerging from a people whose story continues today?

My hope is that I will help students to see those literatures as starting points for further investigation by asking them to consider the present-day lives of the Native tribes whose early legends and tales we read.
I am not saying that my students will necessarily have to do more than complement a series of discussions and exercises about the nature of Native American culture and storytelling, such as those that Professor Wiget suggests, with a brief web research assignment on the present state of the people to whom a particular narrative is attributed (in a survey course, after all, we can only spend a limited amount of time exploring any one theme). However, an examination of contemporary web resources, such as the on-line forum for the Zuni newspaper, The Shiwi Messenger, can help to lead us into discussions of the nature of cultural tourism, and of what the relationship of college students ought to be to the stories of Native peoples. One article posted to that website, by Wells Mahkee, Jr., “Has Our Religion Lost Its Value?,” would make for an interesting discussion were we to contrast it with the “Talk Concerning The Beginning,” dealing as it does with how the Zuni today struggle to maintain their tribal identity. My hope is that such discussions, especially during the first few class meetings, will allow my students to eventually leave the course with a sense that narratives like the Zuni “Talk” are not simply part of a particular early unit in a greater survey course, but are intimately connected to an ongoing story, one that is not finished, and behind which are actual people who continue to struggle with the legacy of colonization.

I have restricted myself to commenting on the relationship between Native American origin stories and contemporary Native Americans, and I realize that my prescription is a rather generalized one (I am still exploring these issues and resources myself, after all). However, I think that the principle of helping students form cultural connections in this manner is valid for what ever communities—ethnic, engendered, and social—that the literatures we read ask us to assume. Given the brief time that our students have in a survey course, and the possibility that many of them will never take another English class, asking our students to make connections between past narratives and present peoples seems more a necessity in this course than it might be in any other.

http://www.georgetown.edu/tamlit/essays/native_am.html

What Does an American Literature Survey Course DO?

By Heidi Juel

Heidi Juel recently completed her Master’s Degree at the University of Texas at Austin and is currently working on her Ph.D.. She taught high school English for ten years, the last three of which she also served as department chair and participated in the discussion and selection of curriculum for the district.

“You won’t catch me dating no Sitting Bull.” I was horrified to hear this declaration from a ninth-grader in South Dakota because I knew that American Indian students were sitting in the room. I didn’t know what to say. How do you take on a value system that incorporates stereotypes and demeanes other people? I heard similar comments from other students. After a local group of American Indians danced for the students, I overheard one boy say how pretty one of the female dancers was. The response he got? “Yeah, she’s pretty. . .for an Indian.” I was troubled by the caveat. Can’t pretty simply be pretty? The truly challenging comment, however, came from an eleventh-grader who responded to the Crazy Horse Monument in the Black Hills of South Dakota: “I don’t understand it. They LOST the war. Why would anyone spend money on a monument to the losers?” A sea of young faces looked to me for a response.

I fumbled my way through something I can’t now recall, but the lingering effect on me was that I needed to do something to address these comments made so blatantly in front of students who admittedly did not appear to be American Indian because they blended into the American mainstream culture.

They didn’t look like Sitting Bull or Crazy Horse. Then it occurred to me that while voicing many strong opinions, most of my students did not “see” the American Indians around them. I wondered who else was obscured in their vision. And as I looked out at their predominantly white faces, I wondered how much visual experience these students had even had with other cultures and races; it was quite clear that they had little up-to-date knowledge or personal experience. All the reasons and emotions that drew me into teaching now flowed into a new obligation: I was going to teach these students to recognize and respond to their own and others’ cultural experiences in America and I was going to use literature to do it.

At the time, I taught a year-long American Literature survey course to eleventh-graders and had some flexibility in the curriculum. As I looked through the anthology approved by the school district, I saw American Indian literature represented only in the historical past—primarily through creation stories and romanticized views of Indians and nature. There was nothing to suggest that American Indians live, write, and act amongst us today. Is it any surprise that students still view Indians as “losers”? For more information, consult college.hmco.com.
When I was in Potsdam, Germany on a teacher exchange, the German students hounded me: what is your government doing for Leonard Peltier? Why hasn’t he been given a new trial or pardoned altogether? Upon my return, I asked class after class in South Dakota, who has heard of Leonard Peltier? In all, one student had, despite the fact that the event leading to Peltier’s arrest occurred in their home state of South Dakota. So I added to the curriculum some articles, poems, and stories on the events surrounding Wounded Knee and we watched the film Incident at Oglala: the Leonard Peltier Story. A student brought in a number of artifacts that had been in her family’s possession for decades, and she told the class what each item represented and how it was used. The reality of her presence in the classroom as a living, breathing American Indian who looked like everyone else in the room quieted the class into respect and sincere curiosity. The moment that did it for me as a teacher, however, was when one girl raised her hand and simply said, “Why haven’t we ever been taught this before?”

That question has guided my planning and instruction ever since and I challenge others to ask themselves: what is American Literature supposed to do? We, as educators, need to recognize and analyze the many functions of the American Literature survey course. On the most basic level, one of these functions is to improve literacy—emphasized by states, and the nation as a whole. Because of our education and experience, it is also assumed that we will introduce students to material that they might not otherwise pick up on their own. I believe we could also agree that a primary function of an American Literature survey course is to teach the American experience. These three functions have, for some time, driven the construction of anthologies and curricula. Two additional functions that must be recognized and that deserve more attention are the ways in which American Literature categorizes and perpetuates cultural identities and values, and provides a context for understanding self and nation that in turn has bearing on how students negotiate with different cultures.

Improving literacy, introducing students to new material, and teaching the American experience should remain significant goals, but they should be pursued with the clear recognition that a sense of cultural identities is being disseminated to developing young minds as well. The means by which literacy is achieved can serve the function of teaching students more about the cultural worlds around them—in the smaller context of their home states or in terms of national cultural identities. What are we giving our students to read? If literacy means better reading skills through, amongst other things, close reading, synthesis, analysis, and understanding point of view, how can we situate the development of those skills in a context that also helps students to recognize their cultural perspective as it stands in relation to someone else’s? If students become aware of voices other than their own and incorporate those voices into the discussion and interpretation of the American experience, they are improving their literacy, their discussion skills, and their real-world critical-thinking skills. Our task is also to instill in students an interest in reading and learning by developing in students a motivation to read—not for an exam or paper, but for what can be learned and applied from the reading experience, including cultural values. Therefore the reading material we choose is an important responsibility; students need from the literature and discussions we provide more than a conversation that the mainstream culture, over time and space, holds with itself.

Anthologies for some time now have been working to introduce American voices that are either not a part of the white mainstream culture, or that speak from an unrecognized, unacknowledged, yet shared space with the mainstream. Often, however, the presentation of material from these “Other” voices has been categorized according to race or culture: within the genre of poetry are the Harlem Renaissance poets, but where is the representation in poetry of the African-American experience outside of that time and place? Similarly, the American Indian experience is most often confined and categorized as pre-American history. The marginalization of racially or culturally diverse American authors into special categories or featured sections serves to amplify in students’ minds that sense of difference, of otherness. The analysis of the American experience has opened to include voices from the margins, but their experience is presented as separate and different, which ultimately perpetuates a strong, white, mainstream American cultural presence that alone transcends time and space to appear at every moment of experience in American Literature. While the white American experience may dominate in this country, I think it is important to be aware of the additional functions that American Literature serves. Through these views—or erasures—of other cultural identities, what do our students internalize, if only subconsciously, about power dynamics in America and negotiation strategies with other cultures?

Rather than categorizing the American experience according to racial or cultural difference, one option for inclusion and a step toward a more systematic and comprehensive analysis of American Literature would be to organize studies around certain themes, such as war, class systems, landscapes,
survival, stereotypes, gender identities, heroes, relationships, migration/relocation and education. For example, students could read Dorothy West’s *The Wedding*, Julia Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, and Linda Hogan’s *Mean Spirit* to discuss, within various American cultural contexts, economic and social class differences, as well as stereotypes about culture and class. In another example, students might discuss landscapes, change, and survival, again in various American cultural contexts, by reading N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*, Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* and Nasdijj’s *The Boy and the Dog Are Sleeping*. (I offer novels as examples; a similar curriculum could be developed using short stories, plays, and poems.) A concurrent study through close reading of multiple cultural perceptions, experiences, and values would help to engage students in discussions and analyses based on a more comprehensive collection of American voices than usually occurs in American Literature survey courses. As for literacy, students will develop their ability to recognize and discuss styles, themes, and issues in ways that may better prepare them for a future in a globalized yet diverse world.

At this point, I would argue that for most students, reading *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, or any other “classic” American text, is like reading about a foreign experience because, generally speaking, students' more urban and technological milieu today is rather removed from the settings, speech, experiences, and even values that these great works depict. Still, these texts are chosen to represent the American experience. I would argue that these classics are no more culturally similar for students today than any other culturally “foreign” text except that the texts mentioned speak of the predominantly white American experience. If we want to represent to our students the American experience as it more accurately reflects the diverse population of Americans on this continent, then and now, why not include in the canon of American Literature such texts as John Joseph Mathews’ *Talking to the Moon* (1945), Ella Cara Deloria’s *Waterlily* (1944) or any number of more contemporary American Indian writings? If students have few other texts than Chief Joseph’s “I Will Fight No More Forever” speech, is it any wonder students today think of American Indians as an ancient culture that lost the war and is no more?

And consider the ways in which my high school students in South Dakota negotiated with cultural difference: they held it in a categorized frame of reference and demeaned the members of that cultural category. Prejudice is born of ignorance and stereotypes, but I believe our organization and presentation of American Literature as racial and cultural categories has encouraged their way of thinking. We have made some solid gains in analyzing and better representing the myriad voices of the American experience. But we must move beyond inclusion to consider the ways in which we include culturally diverse voices, and we must recognize that American Literature has the power to shape and perpetuate cultural identities and values. An American Literature survey course is important because it does something: it teaches our students to be literate, to be critical thinkers in a culturally diverse world by asking them to read, recognize, and discuss their own and others’ historical and contemporary cultural experiences as Americans.

---

**Un-American Teaching with the Heath Anthology**

By Ann Cvetkovich

Ann Cvetkovich is a professor of English and Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. She just published *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, is an associate editor of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, and is currently teaching “Masterworks of American Literature” in UT’s Longhorn Scholars program.

I have great affection for the *Heath Anthology* because it has made it possible for me—a non-specialist, non-American, canon-busting, queer feminist—to teach an American literature survey course—and to do so with enthusiasm and even pride! In recent years more and more faculty in my department have been pressed into service to teach the lower-division, one-semester survey course required of all students at the University of Texas (and still called “Masterworks of” either British, American, or World literature). I decided that, despite my lack of formal training in the field, I would do the American literature version because my research on the politics of affect has drawn me to the sentimental and domestic novel, slave narrative, and ethnic studies, and I was interested in approaching the history of American literature as an archive of national trauma. I was also emboldened by the fact that the *Heath* makes learning by teaching no cause for shame and even a necessity because it includes so many materials that are likely to be new even to specialists.

In making this decision, however, I had some emotional and ideological resistance to overcome; I grew up in Canada, without the education in national history and politics that most American students can probably take for granted, and instead, with a healthy dose of anti-American sentiment that made me feel like a traitor for teaching American literature. Yet, by expanding the American literary tradition, the *Heath* also broadens the category of those who can teach it,
making it possible for even un-American anti-imperialists to teach American literature, and offering a critical perspective on American studies that was essential for me to teach the course in good faith. I’ve taught “Masterworks of American Literature” twice now to small and medium-size sections and am preparing to teach it as a large lecture course next year. As my syllabus continues to evolve (helped tremendously by the new one-volume edition), there are many things I’ve come to love about the Heath.

Not only does it blast open the canon by providing a huge and extremely diverse array of authors, but it blasts open the conception of literature by providing materials from a wide range of genres and by asking questions about what counts as literature and how it gets produced. As someone who works on popular culture and who came to American literature via debates about sentimentality and the status of women’s writing, I appreciate the chance to get students to think about the many reasons why people write beyond that of producing elite culture in recognizable genres such as poetry and fiction. I appreciate the mention of why frontier cultures don’t produce conventional literature, the inclusion of the corrido, the Declaration of Independence, and travel narratives by early European colonizers, and the discussion of oral performance and tradition in relation to early Native American literature. It is possible to do cultural studies with the Heath.

And, of course, as a Canadian, I appreciate the acknowledgement of the French presence in the Americas, but even more importantly, as someone who teaches in Texas, I also appreciate the attention to Spanish colonialism, and to regional specificity and the provisional and shifting nature of borders and boundaries. The multinational and multilingual histories that are represented in the anthology make it possible to keep Texas and the Southwest in the picture. Moreover, the Heath moves well beyond a simple black/white picture of race, warding off a tendency to let African American culture stand in for discussions of racialized histories. I have tried to make the Heath’s representation of Native American and Mexican American literature more visible by combining them, emphasizing the indigenous origins of American culture and its ongoing survival in a range of places, including Mexican American culture, which shows the mestizo legacy of a different kind of encounter between European and indigenous cultures.

One of the Heath’s most important revisionist contributions is its effort to change the origin story of American literature by beginning with indigenous cultures rather than the Puritans. As Sylvia Gale’s presentation on our panel reveals, this move creates as many problems as it solves, but those problems can provide productive pedagogical lessons. I have sought to foreground the editorial challenges of anthologizing Native American texts, stressing the performative nature of storytelling and the way aesthetic genres are embedded in everyday life. Rather than assimilating Native American culture into the history of American literature by gestures of inclusion, I use the opening of the Heath as a lesson in cultural studies that problematizes the meanings of “literature” and “origins.”

Paul Lauter’s visit to our campus last fall, the occasion for the panel discussion documented here, was particularly valuable because he made the process of constructing the Heath visible to the undergraduate students attending the events. I make the anthology itself part of our course, asking students to read the editorial materials and to think about the work of reconstruction that has gone into it. We may think that non-English majors or lower-division students are not interested in such issues, but I found many of them impressed with Lauter’s account, saying they didn’t realize so much work went into assembling an anthology of new materials. In web-based exercises, I have them comment on the significance of the revision of the canon for their own education, and also asks them to read at least one item not on the syllabus and make a case for its inclusion, so that they understand that the syllabus is not a fixed structure.

This semester I was particularly proud to teach the course because my students were Longhorn Scholars, students from historically underrepresented high schools in Texas, who were all Mexican American and African American. Our project of canon revision was very meaningful to them, and they could relate to Lauter’s accounts of the early origins of the Heath in Mississippi summer teaching programs. The origins of the Heath in this experience remain relevant to our institutions of higher learning, which, even as they have changed syllabi, have yet to open their doors fully to students of all backgrounds, especially because class combines with race to keep universities from being fully accessible. I hope to carry the lessons I learned from these students into the classroom next year, when I will seek to make the significance of redesigning the American literature anthology visible to an even broader range of students.
Some Questions
by Paul Lauter

My contribution to the wonderful discussion that has led to the contributions in this Newsletter was mostly to listen and learn. For the speakers provided me with a view of my own work on the *Heath Anthology* that one can seldom obtain: a view from the perspective of those who use, but are not involved in shaping, a tool for learning like an anthology. It was a consciousness-raising experience that enabled me to understand differently, and better, what I was doing.

The discussion led me to certain questions, for which I do not have fixed answers, and I want to share those questions here. First, is less, more? My own approach to configuring assignments using the *Heath* is to ask students to read a significant number of texts for any one day of class. For example, one of my assignments on the New Negro Renaissance contains Alain Locke’s “The New Negro,” Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Sterling Brown’s “Strong Men” and “Ma Rainey,” and Gwendolyn Bennett’s “Heritage.” I use “Ma Rainey” as a theoretical poem to contrast with the poetic theory enunciated in a prior assignment of T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Brown, it seems to me, in the figure of Ma Rainey presents a very different conception from Eliot’s of the nature of the artist, her functions, the traditions on which she draws, her relationship to an audience, as well as the constitution of that audience. But working deeply into “Ma Rainey,” I seldom actually get to discuss both the Locke and Hughes pieces, and sometimes neither. Would it be better to limit the assignment to the three poems and focus class examining those in detail? Or is it better to give students texts like these to digest themselves? Similarly, in a unit about Vietnam-era politically charged writing, I assign Tim O’Brien’s “In the Field,” a group of poems by Robert Bly, including “The Teeth-Mother Naked at Last,” and poems by Yusef Komunyakaa and Carolyn Forché. But almost all of these need not only close analysis but a good deal of historical contextualization. Bly’s poem must also, I think, be heard in the ear as well as read on the page, and its montage technique, with which students are familiar from looking at movies, can be very effective once its strategy is grasped. But that takes a lot of time. Again, is it wiser to focus the assignment on fewer works to begin with or to give students more to chew through by themselves?

...is it wiser to focus the assignment on fewer works to begin with or to give students more to chew through by themselves?

To some extent one can deal with this problem by using a comparative method with a group of texts. For example, in an assignment focused on Indian removal in the first half of the survey course I have students read anti-removal poems by Lydia Sigourney as well as William Cullen Bryant’s “The Prairies,” some of Timothy Dwight’s “Greenfield Hill,” Philip Freneau’s “The Indian Burying Ground” (all of which wax nostalgic over the “disappearance” of Native Americans), and then Elias Boudinot’s (Cherokee) “An Address to the Whites,” which, among other things, denies that Cherokees are “disappearing” at all. The contrasts in content and tone and, most of all, in the cultural work being done by these texts can, I think, be enlightening. All the same, it’s a reasonably heavy assignment, again in part because the historical circumstances underlying the works are not part of most people’s working knowledge, however much they may be interested in things Indian. Would it be better to provide a brief historical piece on removal, like some in the new edition of the *Heath*, and to limit the rest of the assignment, say, just to Sigourney’s “Indian Names” and the Boudinot essay, bringing in the other material in class handouts? One always needs to consider that when students feel overwhelmed by a set of readings they may shut down, reading the words on the page but not their meanings.

The second question I raised derives from the name generally given to the kinds of survey courses to which the panel was addressed: American Literature. Is the course really about “American” or about “Literature”? It may not at first seem that there need be a contradiction between these terms, but in practice one focus can crowd out or at least attenuate the other. For example, I devote a good deal of time in the second half of the survey to the fundamental literary strategy of “point of view.” I use the beginning of Hemingway’s “The Killers” to begin defining point of view (one needs only the first sentence, really). Then I get into it at length in connection with James’s use of it in “Daisy Miller” as well as Charles Chesnutt’s rather more political deployment of point of view in “The Passing of Grandison.” I also use an understanding of it, for example, as a key to unpacking Helena Viramontes’ wonderful but quite demanding story “The Cariboo Café.” Point of view is, in short, a steady presence for much of the last half of the course. Obviously, however, there’s nothing peculiarly “American” about point of view or the uses to which this literary device can be put. In emphasizing it as strongly as I do, I think I somewhat diminish possible discussions of how ideas of what is
“American” are constructed, shift over time, remain a source of conflict, and underlie the “point of view” (in another sense) that students bring to texts.

To some extent the problem has to do with time—obviously, there’s never time for everything one wants to do. Students do, after all, have other classes, jobs, and, yes, even lives outside “American Literature.” But it is also a function of emphasis. One needs to reiterate, repeatedly come back to significant points, make them nodes for discussion and rationales for choosing particular texts and linkages rather than others. Once upon a time, I liked to signify on Trotsky’s remark (I think) that you cannot build socialism in one country: you cannot build “American literature” in one class. You are always caught among choices of what to leave undone.

I do not think there are absolute answers to the questions I’ve been trying to raise. What is important, I believe, as with most questions of consciousness, is to be aware of the full dimensions of the issues involved. That way, one can at least make better-informed choices about how one might want to balance assignments and goals. And also one can better deal with the guilt attendant on never being able to complete one’s ideal syllabus.

CONTRIBUTE TO THE HEATH ANTHOLOGY NEWSLETTER

The Heath Anthology Newsletter provides a forum for American literature and American studies instructors to share their Heath teaching experiences. We are always in search of contributions to the newsletter.

If you would like to contribute an article, please get in touch via email at college_english@hmco.com (be sure to use the words “Heath newsletter article” in the subject line of your email) or via letter to College Literature, 6th Floor, Houghton Mifflin, 222 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA, 02116. Articles should not exceed 4000 words, and should be accompanied by a brief (2-3 line) biography of the author. Thank you!

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN
New Ways to Know®

Editorial and International Offices
222 Berkeley Street
Boston, MA 02116

In Canada
Nelson, Thomson Canada Ltd.
1120 Birchmount Road
Toronto, Ontario
Canada M1K 5G4
Phone: 800/668-0671
Orders: 800/268-2222
E-mail: canada@hmco.com

In the United Kingdom, Europe, and the Middle East
Corinthian Court
80 Milton Park
Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RY
United Kingdom
Phone: 44 (0) 1235 838827
Fax: 44 (0) 1235 838829
E-mail: info@hmcouk.co.uk