
The Necessity of Teaching Asian American Literature
in Southern American Schools

Amanda Reynolds, University of Houston

A few days ago my five year old went outside to check the mail. She had the March 2011 issue of *National Geographic* out of its plastic covering before she made it back into the house. While searching for photos of insects and animals, she came across a large, pull-out poster titled “The Face of Seven Billion.” The caption on the poster posed this question: “On a planet of seven billion people – the population we’ll reach in 2011 – who is the most typical human? According to statistics: a 28-year-old Han Chinese male” (Tomanio). The local implications of these global statistics are not difficult to predict. According to the census bureau, in the year 2000 there were approximately 12 million people living in the U.S. who identified themselves as at least part Asian. And, in 2010, 3.8% of Texans claimed Asian-American ethnicity. Although this may seem like a small number, it represents a 71.5% increase in a single decade (United States Census Bureau).

As the face of our world, nation, and state changes, so does the face of our local schools. But, what effect is this having (or should this have) on literacy and pedagogy? Due to the substantial rise in the number of Asian Americans living in the South over the past several decades, it seems logical that Asian American literature would find a place in the secondary classroom. However, that is hardly the case. Traditionally, African American and Mexican American authors are used to fulfill the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) requirement of multicultural literature in Texas public schools. While these are certainly important literary and historical parts of any secondary English curriculum, in today’s classroom we must question whether or not they truly fulfill the indented purpose of the State’s original mandate.

When reading literature from a culture different than one’s own, comprehension is achieved through inference and conclusion, as well as through the application of secondary information. For example, the very title of Andrew X. Pham’s novel *Catfish and Mandala* might require one to employ some, if not all, of these tactics to decipher its full meaning. While most students are aware of the stereotypical association of Asians and fish, students from the South can possibly take this association one step further, as catfish is a popular food in many Southern households. Some may be able, from their personal experiences, to conclude that catfish is a food of the common or poor man rather than the wealthy. The word “mandala,” however, will likely take a bit of investigation. One would probably have to consult a secondary source to discover its religious and metaphorical associations. And, because this is not a term that is ever discussed (or is even present) in the novel, inferences and conclusions will not suffice. Understanding the term “mandala” is like a key to unlocking the major theme of the novel before the first page is even read.

If the goal of introducing students to literature from other cultures is to promote the application of such skills, then teachers must make a point of assigning texts with which students cannot readily identify. I realize that this goes against the very grain of what many of us were taught in our education courses. For, weren’t we repeatedly told that for a student to be engaged, she must be able to personally identify with the literature being read? Granted, there is an important place for that in any English class. That is why those of us who teach generally get drafted into the classroom in the first place, right? We love to read, so we become English majors. We have to make money, so we become English teachers. And, the only way to foster that love of literature in our students is to find texts with which

they can truly become engaged. However, we know that English teachers have a responsibility beyond that, and even beyond teaching the skills of reading comprehension. All educators are expected to teach the basic social skills necessary for students to be productive beyond high school.

One of the most important social skills for a student to learn is the understanding of Otherness. I pointedly avoid saying the “tolerance” of Otherness, because it is imperative that students realize we are all Other in some aspect. There is an interesting pedagogical technique proposed by Gregory Jay for helping students to achieve this understanding of Otherness. He calls it “Disorientation” (628). When readers first encounter Otherness in literature, or in any other realm, they often feel confused or uncomfortable. Rather than turning tail and running away from these encounters, students should acknowledge their disorientation, thus opening themselves up to the unknown. If we can teach students to discuss and work through their disorientation, they may begin to see Identity and Otherness as ever-changing, multi-faceted aspects of everyone’s lives, regardless of such things as race, gender, and culture. And, once this is achieved, they can then begin to interact with and engage in the text (Center 230).

More importantly, though, students who engage in such disorientation are practicing a skill that will likely prove to be vital in their post-secondary lives. As students graduate high school and move from home to enter the workforce or the university system, the size of their personal worlds are increased. As their world-views change, their encounters with Otherness will increase, altering their definitions of normality. A student who has learned to accept such differences without fear or judgement – one who can embrace and move beyond his/her disorientation – will find the transition much less difficult. These students may even discover something about their own identities, specifically when they find themselves in the position of being Other. How each reacts to such situations can impact his overall success in virtually any endeavor. To one who is unafraid of that which is different, the world is an open door.

To achieve disorientation through literature, the authors and texts assigned must be representative of a culture that is not dominant in the classroom or even in the community. Although there are multiple definitions of the word “multicultural,” it most commonly denotes a focus on racial and ethnic issues in texts written by minority authors. African American and Mexican American authors do meet that requirement when looking at the demographics of the entire United States. In that sense, they do fulfill the TEKS requirement of multicultural literature. However, in many Texas schools, African American and Mexican American students are no longer the minority. In these instances, although multicultural literature is being taught, disorientation is never truly achieved because the students are reading about either their own cultures or ones which they encounter on a daily basis. We must ask ourselves, then, if our students are getting the most out of what they’re reading if we’re not forcing them (or at least providing them with opportunities) to be disoriented.

Based on the aforementioned statistical data, it seems logical to assume that the Asian culture is one which students will increasingly encounter when entering the world of adulthood and moving beyond their own cultural enclaves. By currently teaching Asian-American literature in Southern classrooms, teachers can achieve the desired effects of disorientation while introducing students to the largest population world-wide. While one author’s presentation of a culture is obviously not a reflection of an entire culture or ethnic group, reading such literature can at least provide students with a point of reference, thus diminishing the extent of disorientation from future encounters.

The primary reason that literature by Asian American authors encourages disorientation is its portrayal of Otherness. For example, the themes of language barriers and religious differences which are foundational to many Asian American texts often do not find a place in African American or

Mexican American literature. This is due primarily to the historical timeline of assimilation. Generally speaking, it takes two or three generations beyond the initial immigration before a culture assimilates enough into American society to begin producing literature. Take, for example, a husband and wife who move from India. The couple will be so focused on merely surviving the transition that art of any form is not likely to be a priority. The children of that couple, although born in the States, will be fluent in the language of their parents' homeland and likely follow the same religion. Although American, any literature written by them is likely to strongly reflect their Indian heritage. In *Catfish and Mandala* we see how language can set someone apart when Pham writes, "I sit on a bench, dumbstruck and lonely. Maybe this is how my sister felt on the streets of San Francisco, poor, hungry, cold. Grasping the tails of an incomprehensible language" (43). As a Vietnamese American visiting Japan, he truly feels like the Other for the first time in his life. Shirley Lim explains the importance of language to identity in her article, "The Ambivalent American." She writes, "Language gives indiscriminately to every human inherent abilities to shape, manipulate, express, inform; to protest, to empower one's self in the world" (18). Without the ability to communicate, all of that is lost.

This is the very reason that language and religion are generally not elements of Otherness in literature by authors of African American descent. Most first generation African Americans were forced through slavery to give-up their native languages and religions. This signified the loss of both power and identity for African American slaves. Even by the second generation, English was their primary language and Christianity their dominant religion (out of necessity, if not by choice).

Likewise, when religion and language are present in Mexican American literature, they are generally not a cause of disorientation for students living in the South. Catholicism, the most common religion among Mexican Americans, is quite popular in the United States even outside of the Mexican American culture. And, because of the large Mexican American population in the South, Spanish is fluently spoken here.

Many Asian American authors also deal with the Identity issues of masculinity, femininity, and homosexuality. Just mentioning these topics makes the hair on the backs of many educators' necks stand on end. Now, I'm certainly not promoting that teachers use their classrooms as political or religious platforms. I am, however, advocating a curriculum that will encourage the open discussion of the various elements of Identity and Otherness. Gender issues not only set people apart, but are often the cause of animosity due to lack of understanding. One doesn't have to look beyond the local newspapers to find examples of hate crimes against those who do not fit within the gender norm. Because of the Asian culture's historically definitive gender lines, including arranged marriages and the desire to produce male heirs, the assimilation process into American culture brings the issues surrounding gender to the forefront. Consequently, they are freely discussed in Asian American literature.

For an example, we again look to *Catfish and Mandala*. A student reading Pham's memoir may be disoriented by his discussion about his openly gay brothers and his transgendered sister. Hopefully, however, these initial feelings of disorientation (or more specifically: disgust, anger, fear) will give way to understanding as Pham recounts the turmoil surrounding his sister's Otherness. While dealing with the pressures of being a first generation immigrant, Pham's sister, Chi, also had to come to terms with her homosexuality. Unable to gain acceptance because of her Otherness, she eventually ran away from home and lived on the streets until she was able to establish a new, male, identity. Even then, though, Chi was never able to overcome the scars of her previous life. Like so many others who struggle because society refuses to see them as anything but Other, Chi eventually committed suicide. Unfortunately this is an all-too-common option for teens dealing with identity issues. With Tokyo

hailed as the suicide capital of the world, the Asian nation is more than familiar with this trend. Consequently, this is yet another important issue that finds a place in Asian American literature.

While secondary teachers often shy away from these topics, the rise of openly gay students has led to a rise in bullying and a dropout rate that is three times greater than that of non-gay students (Mayo 113). These things are so prevalent in today's media and society that they should no longer be ignored in the classroom. Teaching Asian American literature can offer both teachers and students a venue through which to discuss and deal with these problems. By encouraging disorientation through literature, students are given the opportunity to work through their own fears and prejudices and, hopefully, eventually reach an understanding of Otherness. To make this happen, it is becoming increasingly necessary to teach Asian American literature in Southern American schools.

Works Consulted

- Center, Carol. "‘Desperately Looking for Meaning’: Reading Multiethnic Texts’." *MELUS* 30.2 (2005): 225-241. Web. 1 Dec 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029857>>.
- Gilton, Donna L. *Multicultural and Ethnic Children’s Literature in the United States*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007. Print.
- Gunn, Giles. "American Literature and the Imagination of Otherness." *The Journal of Religious Ethics*. 3.2 (1975): 193-215. Web. 1 Dec 2010. <<http://www.jstore.org/stable/40014895>>.
- Gurevitch, Z.D. "The Other Side of Dialogue: On Making the Other Strange and the Experience of Otherness." *The American Journal of Sociology*. 93.5 (Mar., 1988): 1179-1199. Web. 1 Dec 2010. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2780369>>.
- Jay, Gregory. "Taking Multiculturalism Personally: Ethnos and Ethos in the Classroom." *American Literary History* 6.4 (1994): 613-32. PDF.
- Laine, June-Elleni. *Mandala, the Art of Creating Future*. Brooklyn: O Books, 2009. 5-15. Print.
- Lim, Shirley Geok-lin. "The Ambivalent American: Asian American Literature on the Cusp." *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Eds. Shi Geok-lin and Amy Ling. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992. 13-32.
- Mayo, Cris. *Disputing the Subject of Sex: Sexuality and Public School Controversies*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004. 97-118. Print.
- Pham, Andrew X. *Catfish and Mandala*. New York: Picador, 1999. Print.
- Porter, J.R. and R.E. Washington. "Minority Identity and Self-Esteem." *Annual Review of Sociology*. Vol. 19 (1993): 139-161. Web. 1 Dec 2010. <<http://jstor.org/stable/2083384>>.
- Tomanio, John. "The Face of Seven Billion." Supplement to *National Geographic*. Mar 2011. Print.
- United States Census Bureau. *2010 Census Data*. Suitland, MD: 2011. Web. 5 Feb 2011. <<http://2010.census.gov/2010census/data/>>.