

Represent

Teaching in the era of multiculturalism

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My friend sounded discouraged. He had just begun teaching his summer literature class when a female student complained about the dearth of women on the syllabus. I tried to sound supportive, reminding him that he had chosen writers he loved and could not please every student in a six-week term. Ironically, he had offered the same encouragement to me two weeks earlier as I prepared an introductory poetry class for the Yale Summer School. Yale's program attracts a variety of students, from ambitious high school graduates seeking college credit to undergraduates to adults taking the class purely for enrichment. I had assigned several masterpieces of English and American poetry along with some contemporary work, hoping to provide a foundation for novices and challenge more experienced readers. My list drew upon the standard source for courses of this kind, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and included Shakespeare, Keats, Hardy, Eliot, Frost, Auden, and Lowell. As the syllabus slid out of the printer the night before class, however, my confidence in my choices turned to worry. With few exceptions, the poets were all white, male, and dead.

I had read enough poetry by minority writers to compose a syllabus devoted exclusively to other traditions, but I still viewed Norton's anthologies of English and American literature as sacred texts, and believed that any serious study of poetry began between their covers. The next morning I paged through the *Norton* and other poetry books from my shelves in search of poems to supplement the handful by minorities. I found few candidates to replace my choices, especially dating from before the twentieth century. I don't consider myself a racist or misogynist; I simply believe that the best poems in English—the ones most worth knowing and studying and emulating—were, until the middle of the twentieth century, published primarily by white men, and that students, especially aspiring poets, should familiarize themselves with these poems first.

This view was formed during my own undergraduate and graduate English studies in the 1970s and 1980s, and has been reinforced by my reading and writing since then. However homogeneous my old student texts and syllabi may look to a contemporary eye, I don't feel that the quality of the literature has dated. As a teacher, I know that any meaningful curriculum must reflect the identities of my students, but I'm leery of making choices solely for the sake of diversity. My best strategy seems to be to teach the poems that I hold in highest regard.

In the other genre of writing that I teach, nonfiction, works such as Frederick Douglass's autobiography and Virginia Woolf's essays demand inclusion. But a six-week introductory poetry course, which covers roughly thirteen centuries of material, only gives me enough time to cover the best poems. I could see including Christina Rossetti or Elizabeth Barrett Browning alongside Emily Dickinson or Langston Hughes, but with Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Tennyson, Whitman, and Hardy already occupying the first two weeks, whom would I omit to make room?

In subsequent weeks of the syllabus, I had enthusiastically assigned Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks, Adrienne Rich, Derek Walcott, and Yusef Komunyakaa, but the overall percentage of women and writers of color remained relatively small. The minute I considered replacing one of my choices with a poet recruited solely for balance, however, I balked. What if one of my students went home at summer's end and was asked by an English teacher or literary friend what she had thought of W.H. Auden? Hearing that Auden—or Shakespeare or Pound or Frost—had been left off the syllabus, the questioner would exclaim, "What kind of introductory poetry class doesn't teach Auden?" My guilt from overrepresenting dead white males would be replaced by guilt from misrepresenting the art.

I considered expanding my syllabus, but this would prevent the class from reading and discussing each poem carefully. Featuring women and minority poets on a list of supplementary readings

might be interpreted as a token gesture. So my reading list, especially the early part of it, remained crowded with white males, even as several fixtures of the canon, such as Robert Browning and William Carlos Williams, didn't make the cut. I braced myself for the kind of complaint that my friend received.

I had first been alerted to my favoritism toward dead white males a few years earlier when I was teaching in an afternoon arts program for high school students in New Haven. My students had all survived a competitive admissions process and were prepared for a challenging curriculum. Having heard that they received only a cursory exposure to poetry in their schools, I constructed a syllabus that would, like my Yale class, systematically introduce them to the genre. On my way to class each day I passed studios where musicians practiced Mozart, dancers rehearsed Martha Graham, and painters copied Rembrandt. Poetry demanded the same rigorous technical grounding as these arts, I reasoned; my students deserved a similarly serious apprenticeship. My own literary mentors had insisted that young poets, even if they planned to write free verse, needed first to master the rudiments of their craft, particularly prosody and poetic form, and could do so only by studying the great poets of the English tradition.

"That's not the only tradition," said Sharon, a black high school sophomore, after I handed out the white male-dominated syllabus and explained my desire to give them a grounding in English and American literature. In my naiveté and eagerness to discuss my favorite poets with these dedicated youngsters, I had not even considered this fact. But when I thought of Sharon casting a glance first at me, a patrician-looking white man, and then at the term's reading, I could see how subjective my selection must have looked.

My approach to literary education had been shaped by my own teachers. The two-volume English *Norton* was the required text for the year-long survey course I took as a freshman English major in 1975, and every poetry workshop I enrolled in subsequently used the single-volume *Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Since graduating

from college and persevering in my desire to write, I had returned to these books constantly. The world of literature that they mapped was overwhelmingly white and masculine. Eight white male professors edited the 1974 English *Norton*, the first volume of which covers the years from 658 to 1798. Its 2,443 pages include one woman and no nonwhites. The second volume (1798–1974) contains seven women, mostly bunched in the twentieth century, and again, no nonwhites.

The situation is less extreme in my American *Norton*, though white men dominate. It took Norton until 1998—two years after Sharon’s comment—to recognize another tradition by publishing an anthology of African American literature. Since 1974, of course, Norton has updated its anthologies to reflect changing times, trends, and academic emphases. Many more works by African American writers appear in the 2003 American *Norton*, along with Native American trickster tales and chants and, according to the publicity material, “increased attention to multiethnic and regional traditions.” The current first volume of the English *Norton* lists two female editors and includes twenty-two female writers.

Even if I had traded in my Norton for an updated edition every few years, however, I would have had difficult choices to make. Would I replace Thomas Hardy’s “The Voice” with “Bury Me in a Free Land” by his female African American contemporary, Frances E.W. Harper?

Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me,
Saying that now you are not as you were
When you had changed from the one who was all to me,
But as at first, when our day was fair.

Can it be you that I hear? Let me view you, then,
Standing as when I drew near to the town
Where you would wait for me: yes, as I knew you then,
Even to the original air-blue gown!

(from “The Voice” by Thomas Hardy)

Make me a grave where'er you will,
In a lowly plain or a lofty hill;
Make it among earth's humblest graves,
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;
His shadow above my silent tomb
Would make it a place of fearful gloom.

(from “Bury Me in a Free Land” by Frances E.W. Harper)

I concluded that “The Voice” was a better poem than “Bury Me in a Free Land,” which strikes me as an historical artifact rather than a literary masterpiece. Including Harper would diversify my list, but that list would still lack Hispanic, Native American, and female poets; by incorporating more representatives from each of these groups, I might have to eliminate Eliot, Yeats, or Auden. An African American or Native American teacher, or a teacher who had been steeped in these literatures since high school, or one concerned with oral, sociological, or historical aspects of literature, might have chosen Harper or Anne Bradstreet or Joseph Bruchac over Hardy or A.E. Housman, but I was a white man educated in the 1970s. I wanted Sharon and the other students to identify with the poets on my syllabus and love their poems, but I did not want their appreciation to be tied too closely to gender or ethnicity. What I failed to take into account was that nowadays gender and ethnicity are often the most conspicuous and controversial features of a literature syllabus. Even though Sharon had not read any of the poems I had chosen, she seemed to know that objecting to them on the grounds of diversity would put me on the defensive, and she was right.

Then something happened that further complicated my thinking on this issue. After that first class, Sharon continued to challenge me, contradicting me, talking out of turn, giggling during discussions,

and neglecting to turn in assignments. Because she attended the arts program in the afternoons after her regular high school schedule, I knew nothing of her behavior in other classes. I couldn't tell if she was still protesting my syllabus (which I had begun to supplement with minority poets), didn't like me personally, or defied all her teachers. One day I was leading a discussion in one of the makeshift classrooms that the school prized for their informality. In a small auditorium, two sofas had been pushed together for student seating and I sat before the group in a folding chair. As the discussion began, Sharon kept giggling with one of her friends and I repeatedly asked her to stop. She started raising her hand incessantly to dispute my comments. When I stopped calling on her, she stood up in a fury and stormed out, saying "Go to hell with your stupid honky poems."

Eventually, with the intercession of her mother and the writing department chairwoman, Sharon apologized and we negotiated a nervous truce. Midway through the following year, when she worked with another teacher, the program expelled her for missing classes and failing to turn in work. By this time I had received another complaint about the preponderance of males on my syllabus. One of the more talented girls in my class had looked at the schedule of *Norton*-worthy poets and said, half-jokingly, "I don't know if I can handle all of these old poems by men." Once again I improvised, replacing one of my two-week units with readings from an anthology of women poets. I was a novice teacher then, and was learning that my own passions were not infallible guides to effective classes.

The incident with Sharon made me wonder if my upbringing and education had prejudiced me, or if my syllabus choices had more to do with personal sympathy than literary quality. Was my real reason for not wanting to displace T.S. Eliot or Robert Lowell that I had more in common with them than with minority poets? Maybe I felt lukewarm about the poems of one well-regarded African American woman because I couldn't relate to her, not because her poems were mediocre. Even my attempts to diversify looked suspect.

Did I focus on blacks and women just because students from these groups had spoken up? I wondered if I was a cultural anachronism, like the aging executive who believes that women have no head for business, then ends up being sued by those he has passed over for promotion.

The year after my run-in with Sharon I had a conflict with another black student in the program. Jermaine and I enjoyed a friendly, productive relationship, with him turning in copious amounts of poetry and me returning it with copious comments. Jermaine loved to declaim his colloquial poems about urban life and his classmates loved hearing them. His energetic and theatrical performances made him a beloved figure on campus. But Jermaine's talent for performing exceeded his skill as a writer and critic of poetry. His poems and essays were riddled with grammatical errors and he rarely contributed substantively to class discussions. One afternoon I arrived at school to find, tacked to the main bulletin board, a column that Jermaine had written for his high-school newspaper. The article, an account of his experience at the arts program, told of his battle to protect his racial integrity and natural literary voice against challenges from his white teacher—me. Jermaine described how I had urged him to cut all the slang and street language out of his poems and then lowered his grade when he refused. A stirring story of sticking to one's principles in the face of blatant discrimination, it would attract many readers in its conspicuous posting by the front door.

I went to class bewildered. I had never told Jermaine to clean up his slang—to do so would have been to massacre his poems. I corrected student poems sparingly for fear of quashing anyone's sense of creative freedom. Even when presented with unpunctuated or free-associative poems, I simply asked the workshop group whether the strategy worked. I might have circled an unintentional misspelling, added an apostrophe, or recommended that Jermaine untangle syntax, but the idea of whitewashing his blackness out of his writing

would have appalled me. As for reducing his grade, no one in the department graded individual papers—grades, along with detailed comments, were given for a term’s work. Thanks to his prolific output, enthusiasm, and dramatic skills, Jermaine was receiving an A—. Considering his trouble with writing mechanics and class discussions, this grade struck me as generous, but I felt obligated to evaluate him within the context of the program, which focused on artistic work, not formal grammar.

“Why did Jermaine say that stuff about you?” one of the other students asked when I arrived in class. I shrugged. Jermaine’s article did not seem to be a major topic of conversation among the early arrivals, though I imagined that everyone would read it and think me a racist at worst and someone who didn’t know how to handle students from different cultures at best. Jermaine came late to class that day and left in a hurry, but I heard other students congratulate him on his article—nothing about the tyrannical teacher part, just compliments on having his writing published and posted.

That night I called Jean, the head of the writing department, and expressed my dismay at Jermaine’s accusation and the administration’s decision to post the article. Why would they want this information displayed at the front entrance? I wouldn’t want to employ the kind of teacher Jermaine described. Had the program director even read it? Jean had and her first thought was that it didn’t sound like me; besides, she knew I didn’t grade individual poems. This woman had supported me vocally throughout the Sharon incident and cited Sharon’s expulsion as evidence that my curriculum merely provided a convenient target for her rebellion. Jean suggested that Jermaine had been dazzled by his status as a writing department celebrity and decided to burnish his legend by stretching the truth. She promised to clarify the situation to the director and ask him to remove the article, and I promised to speak to Jermaine. The next day I took him aside after class and told him how wronged I felt. He seemed surprised. When I reminded him that I had never graded

poems or asked him to edit his slang, he simply smiled and mumbled an apology. We then resumed our friendly relationship, as if the despicable teacher that he had created on paper had never existed.

Whether Jermaine lost his way navigating between fantasy and reality, never considered that an article written for his high school paper might turn up on his arts program bulletin board, or truly felt that my occasional corrections constituted an act of racial intolerance, I still felt lousy. I tried to reassure myself that while my whiteness, maleness, preppiness, and relative youth had helped precipitate these incidents, so had the times, the school, the circumstances, and the other individuals involved. The only way I could see to avoid recurrences would be to tailor my syllabus to my students’ ethnicities and genders, and excuse all writing errors as idiomatic. These strategies might have prevented my problems with Sharon and Jermaine, but they also threatened to turn me into a teacher of political correctness rather than of literature. I wanted to make some accommodations, but also wanted to remain true to my literary instincts.

Ironically, I was finding it much easier to diversify my curriculum at the predominantly white private school where I taught ninth-grade English in the mornings. At Foote School we read prose as well as poetry and concentrated on contemporary works, so I encountered no dearth of good writing by authors of all genders, races, and ethnicities. Also, because my students were only fourteen, I felt less responsible for exposing them to my beloved poetic canon. They could read Milton and Keats later; for now, I strove simply to get them to think favorably about poetry as a genre.

I brought many different kinds of poems and quasi-poems to class—formal verse, free verse, song and rap lyrics, slam poetry. One of their favorite sources was *The United States of Poetry*, an anthology given to me by a parent who admired my eclectic approach. It contained writings by populist, nonmainstream poets, men and women of many nationalities and races. The poems never failed to

ignite a passionate discussion and my students chose several of them to perform in a poetry revue at year's end. My success in exposing the kids to such diversity made me feel better about my conflicts with Sharon and Jermaine. So I felt all the more frustrated when the anthology precipitated yet another accusation of unfairness.

The most popular poem from *The United States of Poetry*—and one that previous classes had performed before parents, teachers, and students—was “It’s So Hot Today,” by the African American poet Ismail Azim El.

IT IS SO HOT TODAY
that ICE CUBE and BILLY D are SELLING
LIQUID CEMETERIES electronically TRANCEmitted
SPONSORED BY the C.I.A. formerly known as the S.S.

AND NIGGAZ THINK EVERYTHING
COOOOOOL
WHILE NEW BRUNSWICK SNOWS
STING MY FEET LIKE NUCLEAR WINTER.

IT IS SO HOT TODAY
THAT THOSE WHO DO NOT SUBMIT
WILL DWELL IN THE FIRE
WHOSE FUEL IS
MAN AND STONE.

(from “It’s So Hot Today,” by Ismail Azim El)

My students’ initial enthusiasm for this poem gave me the confidence to keep it in my curriculum. Early in my third year at Foote, I brought it in again, passing out copies and asking someone to read it aloud. According to our class custom, the students rated poems on a scale of one to ten, with their ratings providing the foundation for our discussion. The ratings for “It’s So Hot Today” ranged from eight to nine, a very strong response given that I had defined a rating of

ten as a poem that changed one’s life in some way. The students’ explanations for their ratings excited me. I had given them something they liked while alerting them that this English class would not settle for staid stereotypes of poetry.

When I arrived for class the next morning, one of these students, Rachel, met me outside the door, accompanied by her mother. Rachel and Tiffany were the only two black students in ninth grade that year. Although both had several close friends in the grade, I had heard from other teachers that they felt conspicuous. Tiffany was an outgoing girl, always friendly to me and eager to engage in the in-class games that I initiated and that made teaching ninth grade so enjoyable. From the start, Rachel had been much more wary, only speaking to me when necessary and keeping her eyes straight ahead when we passed in the hallways. She seemed bored with the assigned readings and reading in general, but also put herself down for being unable to fathom literature. She sighed an exasperated *I don’t know* whenever I asked for her opinion or interpretation of a poem.

When Rachel’s mother asked if she could have a word with me, I paused and smiled inquiringly. The classroom door was open and I was a few minutes late, and I sensed that the students observing from inside knew more than I did about the reason for the visit. Prompted by her mother, Rachel told me that the use of the word *niggaz* in “It’s So Hot Today” had made her uncomfortable. My stomach clenched. The flip side of attracting my students with streetwise poems was that I occasionally skirted too close to the line of propriety.

The day before, however, I hadn’t even considered propriety. Although “It’s So Hot Today” was one of the most graphic poems I had used or would ever use in ninth grade, no one had objected to it before—either in class or in the performance before parents, teachers, and administrators. I had also assumed, probably naively, that *niggaz* used in an undemeaning way in a poem by an African American would not offend African American readers. I wanted to remind Rachel that she had given “It’s So Hot Today” a rating of

nine. Her terse but positive explanation in class had indicated that she had liked the poem a great deal. In fact, one reason I had looked forward to introducing the poem was my awareness of Rachel's and Tiffany's isolation. We had begun the term reading a memoir with a white male protagonist and exclusively white characters. Poems from *The United States of Poetry* struck me as good complements to this book, not as provocative choices that might invite a parent visit. Once again I had offended a minority student without meaning to and once again I felt self-conscious and defensive. Even more worrisome than the pattern of complaints was my inability to anticipate them.

The classroom doorway was no place for an argument, especially with the other students listening, so I decided not to remind Rachel of her high rating. In retrospect, I could see why a fourteen-year-old might feel self-conscious reading the word *niggaz* in a classroom in which she was the sole black student. So while I knew that Rachel would have condemned the poem in class if she truly disapproved of it, I apologized profusely and spent the day scolding myself for being careless. I decided to remove several other popular poems from *The United States of Poetry* from the syllabus, at least for that year, even though their treatments of racial issues promised healthy discussions.

Rachel's mother spent that morning conferring with Laura, the English department's head. Laura told me that Tiffany's mother had also complained, which surprised me because Tiffany had dominated discussion of the poem in her section, displaying nothing but enthusiasm. If I could misread these girls' reactions so completely and prompt them to complain to their parents, then I really needed to second-guess my instincts.

The incident occupied my discussions with Laura for the rest of the fall. Poems such as "It's So Hot Today" had always made Laura nervous, but she knew how enthusiastically the students responded to them. Mainly, she dreaded dealing with disgruntled parents. She planned to meet with Rachel's mother to ask her how the English

department might improve its sensitivity to minority students in general. She knew that the woman was an avid reader and thought she might help us to avert missteps like mine in the future. Laura also wanted to warn Rachel's mother about another potentially controversial text. For the second year in a row, I was planning to teach Melba Patillo Beals's *Warriors Don't Cry*, a memoir of the school desegregation crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas in the 1950s.

In light of Rachel's complaint, *Warriors Don't Cry* began to look like a risky choice. Fifteen-year-old Melba and her eight black classmates suffered appalling abuse from their white classmates, who routinely taunted them with racial epithets such as *nigger* and *spook*. Laura asked me if we should skip the book this year, given that the grade's only black students had declared their self-consciousness as a minority. I agreed, wanting neither to field any more complaints nor to make Rachel or Tiffany uncomfortable. But I still wondered if the problem was me rather than any poem, book, or epithet.

As department head, Laura felt responsible for mediating between me and Rachel's mother, who apparently had no patience for my justifications for using "It's So Hot Today." In her view, that Ismail Azim El was black did not condone the use of *niggaz* in the classroom. "We don't use that word in our house," she stated flatly. I couldn't fault that policy; I made my son turn off his gangsta rap whenever I was within earshot for the same reason. I remembered the respect I felt for Richard Pryor when he announced that he would stop using *nigger* in his comedy routines. His decision was prompted by an epiphany during a visit to Africa where, he observed, blacks were such an overwhelming majority and occupied so many positions of political and economic importance that "there are no niggers."

Rachel's mother also asked why we always seemed to turn to African Americans to fill our diversity quota. Why not Latinos or Asian Americans or Native Americans? And when we did read about African American characters, they were either violent or downtrodden.

She acknowledged the value of *Warriors Don't Cry's* subject matter, but regretted that students had to read about a black girl of their own age being spat on and kicked and nearly blown up in school corridors. I reminded Laura that the book's primary themes were courage and principle, and that Melba Beals had survived the school year and gone on to college and a job as a journalist. But Rachel's mother was right. Another African American memoir that I had considered, Claude Brown's *Manchild in the Promised Land*, portrayed the pre-teen protagonist as a hooky-playing, drug-using criminal. Just then, the fact that Brown had later reformed, attended law school, and achieved literary success seemed beside the point.

In this context the next book on my syllabus looked like an unassailable choice. Lorene Cary's memoir *Black Ice* describes the author's experiences as one of the first African Americans and first females at St. Paul's, the elite New Hampshire boarding school. Cary came from a middle-class black family in Philadelphia, thrived at St. Paul's, returned to teach there after attending an Ivy League college, and has since served on the school's board of trustees. On the day that I assigned a chapter from Cary's memoir, Laura and I met in the library for one of our discussions about diversity and sensitivity. I had just cited *Black Ice* as one book of which Rachel's mother would definitely approve. Suddenly a paragraph from the assignment's last page swam before my eyes. "Damn it," I said, digging the book out of my briefcase. Cary had quoted some demeaning phrases about "niggers" that she had heard while growing up. Imagining Rachel reading this later that evening and appearing with her mother at the classroom door the next day, I started off across the campus to track her down. When I alerted her and Tiffany to the word, I couldn't tell if they appreciated the warning or not.

In the decade since this episode, I have received no further complaints about my curriculum, and attribute this in large part to the lessons I learned from my experiences with Rachel and Jermaine. At Foote, I always make sure to warn individual students who might take offense at racial, ethnic, or gender references, as when

the protagonist's friend shouts *yid* at a stranger in Tobias Wolff's *This Boy's Life*—though none has ever asked me to withdraw a book or poem. And I have continued my efforts to make my syllabi as diverse as possible. At my request, a librarian at Foote who specializes in young adult literature plied me with books ranging from Maya Angelou's memoirs to a novel set in Alaska with a young Inuit girl as the protagonist. I was amazed at the number of books spawned by the recent emphasis on multiculturalism in schools. Several of these books impressed me and I asked the avid readers among my students to try them. Some subsequently worked well in class. The rest, while refreshingly different from my syllabus fixtures, were also surprisingly similar to each other, especially in their undistinguished prose.

Sharon, Jermaine, and Rachel may have increased my sensitivity, but as my Yale summer class shows, I'm still capable of composing a syllabus that marginalizes women and minorities. Fifteen years into my teaching career, poetry remains a stubborn genre for me. I can endorse diverse slam poets for my ninth graders, and confidently place Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Dee Brown, and Maxine Hong Kingston next to Montaigne and Henry Adams in my college course in nonfiction. But when it comes to teaching aspiring poets, I still believe in the gospel according to my old Norton anthologies—not as the entire canon, but as the foundation. Few female or minority poets that I know of, including those recruited from earlier eras to diversify Norton's new editions, equal Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Tennyson, and Hardy, particularly in areas crucial to a young writer's training in the craft.

The content of my poetry syllabus may not have changed, but my classroom experiences have made me more sensitive to the impact of my choices. Given how strongly my standards are influenced by my upbringing and education, I realize that my students, coming from different backgrounds and growing up in a different era, should make up their own minds about what is and isn't worthy. To this end, I encourage them to supplement my curriculum by seeking

out poems that they admire and sharing them with the class. This both exposes me to writing I might have overlooked, and allows me to audition candidates for my syllabus. Any newcomers would still need to justify the removal of poems by Hardy, Eliot, or Frost, but I'm open to the possibility.