

American Literature and Other Curricular Issues in Syria

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During the academic year 1998-1999, I was the Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Aleppo in Syria, where I taught American literature to third-year, fourth-year, and diploma students. Perhaps it is the nature of how I came to teach American literature in Syria, a stretch in terms of my background, that made me particularly aware of my environment in relation to who I am and what I was expected to teach. I had originally applied to do research on accessing pre-colonial British literature in a postcolonial context in Sri Lanka; in late spring of 1998, my assignment was changed to Syria. In teaching appointments in the United States as well as Denmark and Bulgaria, I have primarily taught Medieval and Renaissance literature; I have, though, taught one class specifically focused on American texts, namely, multicultural literature. In the course of my peripatetic twenty-year career I have also inevitably taught a number of American texts in introductory literature classes. It is the multicultural literature class, however, which I chose to adapt for my Diploma or first-year graduate class in Syria. The Diploma classes are the only ones in the curriculum in which teachers are given freedom to choose the required texts. I decided to teach multicultural literature for a number of reasons: I had experience teaching the course; I had published an article on teaching multicultural literature; I assumed students would be least familiar with multicultural American literature, in fact with any very recent literature; and, most importantly, it made the greatest sense to me within the context I found myself. This paper describes my experience teaching non-canonical American texts in a graduate class and canonical American texts in third-year and fourth-year classes. It also examines the sense of responsibility and obligation I felt teaching American literature in another culture.

Having taught in Denmark (Fulbright teacher 1989-1990) and Bulgaria (Visiting Associate Professor of English, 1992-1993), I had already confronted the issue of what it means to be an American teaching outside of the United States; I had studied students from a variety of cultures reading “alien” literature, and I had reflected on the implications of being an American teaching English language literature outside English language cultures. ^[1]The more I lived and taught in other cultures, the more I felt incumbent to contribute something substantive and concrete to which I had privileged access and my students did not. Not surprisingly, my Danish colleagues and students, like me, had privileged access to information; the Bulgarians and Syrians did not.

From my experience in Bulgaria and from what I had read of education in Syria, I assumed my students would be least familiar with recent texts. The United States Information

Agency had provided me with a catalogue description of Syria's undergraduate English curriculum, which appeared to be very conservative, comparable to what was available to Bulgaria students before the Velvet Revolution. In 1992-1993, at the American University in Bulgaria, students repeatedly complained about the unavailability of finding the works of twentieth-century writers such as T.S. Eliot and James Joyce, whose names they knew as those of important censored writers; very few students could identify any contemporary American or British writers, though they made it very clear to their American professors, including me, that they wanted to know everything about contemporary America as well as the censored literature of the past.

Syria and Bulgaria provided similar challenges because they share some significant history: they were under Ottoman rule for 600 plus years; they welcomed the same refugee culture, Armenians; they had close ties with the Soviet Union; they suffered economically and politically under extremely repressive, authoritarian regimes; they had major border conflicts whose resolution would result in problematic alliances; and both had very powerful censorship of literature involving the minority populations of the region as well as "decadent" western literature, albeit for very different reasons. In Bulgaria, there was no access to American television until after the Velvet Revolution—in 1992-1993, the American University in Bulgaria had only election day access to CNN via special satellite; in Syria, satellite dishes were still illegal during the time I was in resident, 1998-1999. Judging from the number of rooftop satellites seen from various points in the city, it was clear many chose to ignore the law, which was, by 1999, only sporadically enforced; even so, there was very limited access to American television except for CNN and CNBC. In Syria, American videos are heavily censored, and there was no internet access available, except illegally through Beirut. ^[2] Having experienced the expressed gratitude of my Bulgaria students whenever I provided what had been inaccessible to them, I decided my Syrian students might share similar inclinations to learn about what was not yet available to them. Later learning about the undergraduate English curriculum available in Syria confirmed me in my decision to offer something "new."

The curriculum for first-year students and the percentage of success on exams for all students suggest how unprepared in English the students pursuing the degree are; it may also suggest how uninspiring the curriculum is. During the first year, students are required to take composition, grammar, and phonetics. The composition text assigned is *Paragraph Sense: Basic Rhetoric* (1978). In a course called Introduction to the Novel, only one novel was required, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Hemingway. Hemingway is also one of four choices in the fourth-year novel class: *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is one choice, along with *The Scarlet Letter*, *Billy Budd*, and *Huck Finn*. In first-year and second-year classes at the American University of Bulgaria, I assigned more reading in my Arthurian literature class (including *The Wasteland*) and my Introduction to Literature class (including Joyce) than is required in all of Syria's first-year classes combined; in Denmark, I taught more English language texts in various gymnasia and seminaria in six weeks, than I did in an entire semester of third-year American poetry or fourth-year novel in Syria. Yet, in Syria, eighty percent of first-year students will fail one or more of their examinations.

The second-year curriculum was equally basic: again grammar, phonetics and composition are required; in addition, there is Shakespeare (two plays), Renaissance drama (one play by Marlowe and one by Jonson), Renaissance poetry (selections from *The Golden Treasury* only), and the novel (*Joseph Andrews* and *Emma*). In third-year, a reprise of grammar and composition as well as linguistics, History of Thought and Literature (the 1958 *English Literature* by Burgess), Shakespeare (two plays), Poetry (the same Renaissance anthology of poetry), The Novel (*Wuthering Heights* and *Jude the Obscure*). Among the two American literature classes offered, one in third year and one in fourth year, the choices were unsurprisingly canonical yet without articulated objectives, goals or rationales for the specific choices: two American plays are assigned, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman*; when one of my colleagues expressed an interest in teaching this class, I agreed to concentrate on American Poetry while he taught the dramatic texts. For American Poetry, the book is prescribed as well: an anthology of canonical texts marred by rampant typographical errors as well as errors of fact. For the fourth-year class, the American Novel, I was told I would have a choice of four possible texts: but *Huck Finn* was unavailable in the bookstore and could not be ordered, so I was told to choose something else, and I negotiated to teach “Bartleby” rather than the more typically assigned *Billy Budd*, both appearing in the authorized Melville anthology. In the fourth year, the 1938 *Understanding Poetry* was required for the senior level poetry class and one text, *Contexts for Criticism* (1987), for the class on literary criticism; the class on Comparative Literature required *The Comparative Perspective on Literature* (1988), while a second class on Comparative Literature required *Oresteia* and *The Flies*. The British novel class offered *Women in Love* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* while the drama class assigned *Major Barbara* and *Waiting for Godot*.

By contrast to the constraints imposed by the undergraduate curriculum, the diploma curriculum was wide open, making it possible to design a class with specific goals and objectives in mind, with a rationale partly based on the specific situation—an American teaching in Syria at the end of the millenium. The more I got to know Syria, Aleppo, and the University, the more my choice to teach Multicultural American literature made sense to me. Few students had ever met African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, Chinese-Americans, or Native-Americans, or knowingly met any ethnic Americans, for example a Jewish-American such as myself. Most Syrians have very limited exposure to Americans.

Therefore, it was particularly satisfying to introduce students to works written by authors from a range of ethnicities, including those familiar to the students. For example, I chose works by Palestinian-American Shahib Nye and Armenian-American, Peter Balakian, whose subject, his grandmother, lived in Aleppo. Using texts by Americans who write about their Middle Eastern heritage not only offered the students a way into the literature but gave them a sense of authority as readers: they knew the environment better than Balakian could, from experience rather than documents; Nye’s experimental prose poems were more accessible than they might have been because the cultural world invoked was a familiar one. Additionally, the students could look at the experience of the immigrant from a point of view that would have a particular resonance to them: the myth of the homeland as against the myth of the “golden land”—America. In the American multicultural texts, the homeland is the myth

and America the familiar reality. To students in Syria, the opposite is true: America is the myth, their own land the reality.

In other words, by choosing multicultural literature, I challenged students to reconsider the contributions of the minority cultures of their own environment. While students are aware of Syria's remarkable heterogeneity, their education privileges the majority culture or consciously neglects discussion of any of the marginalized cultures: the most predominant of which are Palestinian, Kurdish, and Armenian. Although the three major religions are represented--Jewish, Christian, and Muslim--the required religion classes in high school are divided by the various faiths: Muslim students are provided with Islamic instruction, Christians with the doctrines of their faith; and Jews with theirs. Privileged Muslim students learn about Christianity by attending private Christian schools, where only instruction in the particular denomination is offered, typically Orthodox or Catholic; there is a high demand to attend these schools, which parents feel offer a superior education, especially in French and English. By having a dialogue about multiculturalism in the United States, I hoped it might be possible to start a dialogue about Syria's many cultures, both past and present. Focusing on U. S. multicultural texts provided one means to make students more aware of the way different cultures represent themselves, of drawing attention to local texts, both written and unwritten: Tergeman's *Gates of Damascus*, Idlibi's *Grandfather's Tale*, and Agayian, *Chimes from a Wooden Bell*. Although the students were aware of their country's diversity and intrigued by the thought of examining the varied written records more closely, none opted to write papers on any Syrian writers.

Early on, I discovered the students' contempt for the English curriculum they had so successfully passed and for the approach to texts they dismissed as superficial; this contempt extended to perceptions of former American Fulbrighters who offered standard, canonical texts and primarily new critical approaches, even in graduate classes where they were free to do otherwise. I was to learn how the best and the brightest in English dealt with their boredom, if not contempt. One indication was attendance: I showed up on what was rumored to be the first day of classes for both undergraduates and graduates; about ten appeared at my first undergraduate lecture, a number that would swell to more than 200 by the next class period, the word having gotten out that I was holding classes; it would be some weeks, however, before my graduate students appeared, though I had tried to communicate through other professors and the bulletin board that I would be holding class. The second indication involved the students' attitude to doing assignments, their preparedness: nothing had been assigned for the first day since I had not had an opportunity to distribute a syllabus before that class, but the assignment for the second week was Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Having no idea of the level of the students, I began with the fundamentals of reading, asking each individual to identify "Plot," "Setting," "Characters," "Motifs," and "Themes," of the short story. When it became apparent that only one student had done the reading, I dismissed the class. One student stayed behind and told me what he thought of my approach that day: "too easy," "too traditional," and "unchallenging." I responded that I had to know what students could do, and, based on the class's lack of preparation, so far as I could tell, no one could even read English, never mind analyze with the most basic approach. I had thrown the gauntlet, and the students promptly took it up: after that first day, no student ever again came

unprepared for class. Moreover, the students volunteered to read more than I assigned: I had trepidatiously assigned one excerpt from Albert Goldbarth's experimental poem "Ancient Music"; as a group, all five students asked for copies of the entire poem, which is quite difficult. Before I assigned that poem, I had asked if anyone would feel uncomfortable reading an American Jewish poet, or if they feared any of the assigned literature could get them into trouble. To my surprise, none expressed concern about the consequences: they wanted to read everything. Especially compelling to the students were the theoretical texts I assigned, including Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and excerpts from Rey Chow's *Ethics After Idealism*.

The Diploma class represents the top 2% of undergraduate students. They are critical thinkers and readers, often very sophisticated in their understanding both of their reading and their professors, what is offered to them and what is not. The situation is very different at the undergraduate level. Rare is the student who chooses to pursue an English degree; this is the degree with the least selectivity and, therefore, lowest prestige. Fewer than 50 percent of the students attend lectures; many who are enrolled do not even live in Syria. At the end of each semester, students buy and study notes from courses held during the semester or past semesters; if asked, they will freely admit that they have not read a single assigned text. That 60% regularly fail surprises no one; only if more than 80% fail an examination is the professor required to write a note of explanation to the Dean, the same requirement holds if more than 60% pass. While I taught at the University, I knew more than one professor who had to justify an 81% or greater fail rate. Perhaps it would not matter what one taught or how, but the numbers of complaints that any new or foreign faculty member hears begs the question. I wanted to do something, though what I could do was limited: I was not allowed to introduce any text not represented in the required books. So I decided to focus on the representation of the East in the texts I could assign, and I introduced alternative pedagogies as the end of my tenure drew near.

Not being an Americanist, I was initially at a loss with what to do with the blockbusters of American literature, how to make sense of Bradstreet, Poe, and Hawthorne, in Aleppo. Regardless of whether the students questioned why they were reading these texts and not others, I had to, if only to find a way to teach them. I could not take for granted the value of these works in this environment, even if my Syrian colleagues could. I was not so committed to the literature that I felt it spoke for itself. I could not pretend the works provided an introduction to American culture, at least in the present, the culture about which most students expressed the most active interest.

Having done some research before leaving the United States, I knew that Poe, Whitman, Bradstreet, Hughes, all invoke the East. Unfortunately, when I got a copy of the anthology used by the University, I discovered that only one of the poems that refer to the East were included in the required book, an anthology compiled by an Arab-American, a one time Fulbrighter to Aleppo. I could, therefore, only tell the students about Poe's lyrics "Song from Al Aaraaf" and "Israfael," Langston Hughes's poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," and

Bradstreet's long poem *Quaternions* whose title page offers "an exact Epitome of the three first *Monarches*" identified as "Assyrian, Persian, and Grecian." That left Whitman's poem "Facing West from California's Shores." In this poem the speaker faces his own death globally, "starting westward from Hindustan, from the vales of Kashmere, / From Asia, from the north, from the God." Discussions focused on the mythic East, on the way the west "uses" the East to situate itself, to shape an "other" identity, to reflect on life itself, born East and dying West. Finding a familiar geography in an unfamiliar context makes possible thinking about the "reverse," American poetry's unfamiliar geography in a familiar context. Moreover, examining poetry that invokes the East may offer one antidote to contemporary stereotypes and marginalizing. For while it is a commonplace now to see the "Orient" as a western construction, as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes," Said makes clear this invention is European, and that Americans "will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East" (1). Yet the uses to which the "Orient" are put, even in American literature, enable the teacher to discuss historic archeological adventures, thefts, museum construction—in short, colonialism—all of which directly and indirectly inform the poem.

Allusions to the East in the nineteenth century appear in even such a canonical text as Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Examining the references to the East in this novel, brings up the issue of how authors construct fictional and real worlds, how they use the shortcut of familiar references to make meaning, and how the East itself becomes a mythic place serving romance and allegory. There are implicit and explicit references used structurally, as a means of characterization, and as part of the setting. Among the contributing structural influences that could have been taken from Eastern literature is the "Custom House," the introduction to the novel that students tackle skeptically, finding little connection to the novel that follows. The connection, though, is one that they know but are unlikely to think of; that is, the "Custom House" functions as a frame tale not unlike *The 1001 Arabian Nights*. Like *The Arabian Nights*—and a later work like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to which Hawthorne refers—the frame provides a "source" for what follows, and in so doing it transfers responsibility, if not authority, from writer to voices and characters independent of the writer, whether of Sherazade keeping herself alive in the Sultan's palace, Chaucer's pilgrims trying to win a prize for storytelling, or Hawthorne finding an "historical" document. All rely on others to give credibility to what is to follow, to excuse what might offend, and justify what may seem unjustifiable to the ruling culture under which they write. Based on the contemporary critical response Hawthorne's audience felt uncomfortable by a work that considers adulterers ^[3]; but the frame tale enables him to deflect censure by making it clear that the story is not his, that it was "found" among government documents in a government building—in short, that it has been authorized and saved officially. For Syrian students, suffice it to say, official authorization, like the circuitous routes around censorship, was a familiar issue that provoked private discussions in my office if not in the more public situation of class.

Like *The Scarlet Letter*, "Bartleby" uses the East to reveal characters and culture. But this time, the comparison is specific: for example, Wall Street in New York City is compared to Petra, in what is now Jordan. James C. Wilson has noted the significance of this image. The comparison of Wall Street to Petra is an informed one, based less on associations, on the idea

of the East, as in Hawthorne, then on a historical place that shares something in common with the New World capital of commercialism. As Wilson explains, “Petra was a great commercial center located at the hub of a network of ancient trade routes from the Orient to the Mid-East.” Both Wall Street and Petra, as Wilson explains, represent “the principle of acquisition, of gross materialism.” Here, then, the East does not serve as “other” but as “brother.” The pyramids are also used to reinforce the image of materiality and its insufficiency in the face of death and what can’t be known. The west builds on the foundation of the east, conflating the latter to reflect on the limitations of the other—in both senses of other.

As I can only hope is not too obvious, I lack training in either African-American literature, American literature or Middle Eastern Studies. Therefore, my forays into unknown territory, that is American literature at the University of Aleppo in Syria, make me vulnerable to the accusations of African-American scholar Nellie Y. McKay who recently fumed at people like me, untutored and untrained in the discipline, teaching African-American studies at all. There are a number of possible repostes of course: from the personally defensive (I studied African-American literature in High School, circa 1969, and have read voraciously ever since) to the *quid pro quo* offense (people teach Shakespeare who have no training) or belligerent threat of total neglect (fine, then those works will never find their way into the canon of institutions that cannot afford a specialist, which means much of Eastern Europe and non-western universities in general). I may be equally open to Said’s concerns that considering these books resituated in Syria perpetuates the East-West dualism and artificial distinctions from the “other side.”

In focusing on the East in canonical western literature, I chose to follow Toni Morrison’s lead when she questions the historic lack of discussion of the Black presence in American literature. I sought to open the discussion, to provoke my undergraduate students into thinking about a literature they were not intrinsically motivated to read. I wanted a response to the literature, and I thought the most likely way of getting something that was not rote was in pointing to familiar images and allusions, to what they might know far better than this teacher. Unfortunately, I cannot say how well my approach worked: my pass rate was no greater than my colleagues, and those who discussed the literature privately with me didn’t always have the highest motives.

In the diploma class, on the other hand, my rationale for teaching works I have not been trained to read or teach was partly based on the fact that “minority discourse has become arguably the most prevalent and most productive conceptual model in U.S. cultural studies” (Chow xxii). In other words, I decided minority discourse is important enough to justify becoming a victim of attacks from any side. In response to the schism between the two sides identified by Chow—the adherents of cultural studies and the adherents of theory—I introduced students to both: from Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* to Chow’s warning words regarding the “prevalent idealism in contemporary cultural studies” (xxii). Finally, I leave these problems of negotiation to my students who I have tried to teach “to read arguments on their own terms rather than discarding them perfunctorily and prematurely—not in order to find out about authors’ original intent but in order to ask, . . . With what assumptions does it produce meaning? In what ways and to what extent does it legitimize certain kinds of cultures while subordinating or outlawing others?” (Chow 13). Ultimately, though, I find it is

their questions that matter most as they discover what to them is new and how who they are and where they are informs their own readings. As to who I am and how it informed my choices, that in and of itself could make another paper. Perhaps it is enough to say that my grandfather was from Baghdad and my other grandparents were from Eastern Europe, and none ever spoke of any other home but that of their adopted country, America.

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Works Cited

Chow, Roy. *Ethics After Idealism: Theory, Culture, Ethnicity Reading*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

^[1]See, for example, Sandy Feinstein, “‘Teehee’ and Teaching Chaucer Cross Culturally in Kansas, Denmark, and Bulgaria,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 7 (1999): 31-42. Also, I have published poetry on Denmark, Bulgaria, and Syria that specifically examines perception and the relation of I/eye to the seen, most recently in “Arabic Lesson,” *Princeton Arts Review* 1 (1999): 25; “New York to Damascus. Late Summer. 2 Rolls. 7 Shots” and “Corrected Vision,” *Facture* 1 (2000): 228-230; and “Three Ways to Look at the Balkans and Not a Blackbird Among Them,” *Disclosure* 8 (1999): 32.

^[2]In June of 1999, the Internet was made legal, though it is so highly regulated that few still have access to it.

^[3]See, for example, Anne W. Abbott and Arthur Cleveland Coxe cited in Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (Boston: Bedford, 1991), 206.

⁴I would like to acknowledge Maher Harami for his help in tracking down specific texts assigned during his four years, 1995-1999, as an undergraduate at Aleppo University.