Teaching Humanity? The Cultural Work of Literature Instruction in the United States

Proposed Special Session for 2020 MLA Convention, Seattle January 9-12

Description and Abstracts

Presider: Rachel Sagner Buurma (Swarthmore College)

The “New English” and the “Ultimate Purpose of Literary Education”
Andrew Newman (Stony Brook University)

Insurgent Knowledge: Teaching, Literature, and Social Change in the Work of Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich
Danica Savonick (SUNY Cortland)

Teaching through Travesía: the Urgency of Testimonio as Anti-racist Pedagogy
Molly Appel (Nevada State College)

Respondent: Laura Fisher (Ryerson University)

Description

The concept of “cultural work” gained traction in literary studies during the era of the New Historicism. In Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Literature (1985), Jane Tompkins urged scholars to take up “the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them” (200). The premise of the proposed panel is that a great deal of such work has taken place in pedagogical contexts, in which teachers and students do cultural work with texts (without necessarily recognizing it as such). Inspired by the Presidential theme, the panel also engages with the idea that literary study, as the National Council of Teachers of English declared in 1961, entails participation in “what is most essentially human” (16). “We tell our students to study literature because it will make them better human beings,” Kevin Birmingham suggested more recently in The Chronicle of Higher Education, “that in our classrooms they will learn empathy and wisdom, thoughtfulness and understanding.” The presentations address the ambivalence of this view, as a universalist ideology (Newman) that has implications for access and social justice (Savonick and Appel).

The “New English” and the “Ultimate Purpose of Literary Education”
Andrew Newman (Stony Brook University)

In the summer of 1966, leading American and British college and secondary-school educators convened at Dartmouth College for the Carnegie-Foundation-sponsored “Anglo-American Conference on the Teaching and Learning of English.” The so-called Dartmouth Seminar, co-directed by James Squire, the
Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English, and Albert Marckwardt of Princeton University, set an agenda for reform in the teaching of writing, language and literature. At the high school level, the “New English” marked a turn away from the intellectual, elitist focus of the New Criticism, towards a more inclusive emphasis on reader-response. Squire declared that the “ultimate purpose of literary education in the secondary schools is to deepen and extend the response of young people to literature of many kinds” (91-92). The literature teacher’s principal learning objective was to supply an experience – tantamount to life experience, albeit without the risks – although in the New English the stated purposes of this “literary experience” remained vague and difficult to assess: fostering “inner growth,” sparking creativity, helping “young human beings form themselves” (Wilhelms 67). The proposed presentation examines the trove of publications stemming from the Dartmouth Seminar as a valuable assessment of the state of the discipline in that era and as an unusually explicit, still-relevant expression of the ideologies underlying literature instruction. Furthermore, it briefly draws on published lesson plans and contemporary classroom editions to investigate the implementation of “The New English” in the teaching of specific works.

Insurgent Knowledge: Teaching, Literature, and Social Change in the Work of Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Adrienne Rich

Danica Savonick (SUNY Cortland)

This paper draws on my current book project to analyze the cultural work of literature instruction in the late twentieth century. In 1968, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Women’s Movement, and protests against the Vietnam War, four of the twentieth century’s most important authors - Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Toni Cade Bambara, and Adrienne Rich - were teaching down the hall from one another at Harlem’s City College, in the SEEK educational opportunity program and during Open Admissions. While scholars have analyzed the impact of these social movements on curricula and the literary canon, the work of these teacher-poets demonstrates how they also catalyzed activist revisions of literary pedagogy.

In a moment when conservative politicians were demonizing activist students and calling art education an “intellectual luxury,” these teacher-poets were part of a grassroots movement of educators who understood language and literature instruction as a crucial skill for navigating and transforming the world. Best articulated by Lorde, the study of literature — in community college, Open Admissions, and remedial writing classrooms; in community centers; in weekend workshops; and around the kitchen table — was never understood as a “luxury,” but as a way of improving “the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives,” (36) a necessary undertaking for those rendered vulnerable by the social order. As educators, Jordan, Lorde, Bambara, and Rich used literary texts as “learning devices” to help students better understand culture as a terrain of power struggle and a key site for intervening in the status quo. At the same time, the experience of teaching fundamentally altered their writing and, with it, the course of twentieth-century American literature. Considered together, their work suggests that literature instruction has not only passed down “the best which has been thought and said,” but has engaged students in imagining and building a more just, equitable, and pleasurable world.
Teaching through *Travesía*: the Urgency of *Testimonio* as Anti-racist Pedagogy

**Molly Appel** (Nevada-State University)

This paper explores how works of *testimonio* can theorize and model an anti-racist pedagogical practice for the college literature classroom. Though definitions of *testimonios* are fairly fluid, the Latin American genre is known for subverting traditional representative structures and categories of literary work and their associated indicators of truth and authenticity. While many scholars have addressed the juridical and historical role that testimonio has had over the past few decades, I argue for the urgency of turning to *testimonio* as a model of pedagogical praxis for educational communities invested in anti-racist work. I frame this research within my own classroom practice of using *testimonio* as a roadmap for anti-racist pedagogy.

For the past few decades, educators and scholars have debated the ways in which *testimonio* should enter into U.S. classrooms, from Allen Carey-Webb and Stephen Benz’s *Teaching and Testimony: Rigoberta Menchú and the American Classroom* (1996) to Dolores Delgado Bernal, Rebeca Burciaga and Judith Flores Carmona’s *Chicana/Latina Testimonios as Pedagogical, Methodological, and Activist Approaches to Social Justice* (2016). I argue that the theoretical and pedagogical trends related to *testimonio* illustrate that it is *testimonio*’s literary qualities that enable it to have the potential to “connect people across social positions and build solidarity among both those who are familiar and unfamiliar with the experiences of the testimonio” (Delgado Bernal, et al. 6). Throughout the paper, I discuss how I have used *testimonio* as a roadmap for antiracist pedagogy in my own literature classrooms. I compare my approaches in two very different settings: that of a predominantly white and affluent large, public university, and that of a small, public college serving predominantly first-generation and non-traditional students. As an anti-instrumental and polyphonic aesthetic space, *testimonio* can teach literary educators how to both support students of color in their classrooms invite students from predominantly white and suburban backgrounds to confront the invisibilities of whiteness and begin a path toward their own *conscientización*.

Works Cited


