



Symposium

Cluelessness and Difference in the Literature Classroom

Clues toward an Introduction, or How We Are All Ethnographers

Marcy E. Schwartz

This symposium emerged from several panels chaired by the Division on the Teaching of Literature at the 2004 Modern Language Association convention in Philadelphia. The significant attendance at these panels and the lively discussion following the presentations demonstrate the professional interest in exchanging information on teaching literature in the context of difference. As the title of the symposium suggests, Gerald Graff's *Clueless in Academe* served as a conceptual and thematic point of departure. Our first panel commented on Graff's book, challenging the author and inviting his response. The next two panels sought to push Graff's views beyond the pedagogy of composition and rhetoric to the teaching of literature. Rather than contesting Graff, the presenters explored alternative "cluelessnesses" that arise in teaching literary texts around issues of difference. Expanded versions of two of those presentations follow here, revealing some of the conditions, pressures, and innovations of the literature classroom in the current arena of identity politics. Difference, whether posited as gender preference, cultural particularism, linguistic or religious or racial identification, or geopolitical hotspot,

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offers productive opportunities in the pedagogical process. While difference sometimes leads to bewilderment and confusion in the classroom, it also has the potential to break through stereotypes and unseat accepted notions. Radical teaching of difference challenges the boundaries of the text, the institution, and the self (student or instructor), not only calling into question individual subject positions, but also pushing us to redefine the broader power relationships in our society and our institutions. The scenarios outlined in the essays here, and the discussions they unleashed at the conference, reveal that rigorous and sensitive pedagogy includes effective strategies for these rich topics. Rather than being clueless in the face of difference, my colleagues here exploit difference as a tool for critical thinking, literary analysis, political consciousness raising, and individual growth in the classroom.

The concept of “difference” that loosely unifies these discussions leads to reconsiderations of multiculturalism, ethnicity, gender, gender preference, race, learning abilities and aptitudes, and physical ability. Difference as built into a literature curriculum also invites students and teachers to reexamine geopolitics, particularly the zones of contact and conflict that circumscribe not only literary texts but also the readers, consciously situating ourselves (students and instructors) within those zones. This examination points out how the literature simultaneously conditions these contexts, producing between them a continuous reciprocity of communication, modification, and critique. By considering the students and the classroom dynamic as well as the syllabus and materials, the essays that follow problematize difference from students’ initial attitudes about reading to training future literature teachers for their classrooms. Donald Hall calls for a “continuous and insistent interrogation of notions of the normal” through a consciously queer classroom pedagogy. Rajini Srikanth pushes her students to examine ethnic, religious, and international conflicts through the tension and violence of geopolitics. My brief discussion of teaching Hispanic literature in a large, urban state university points out the ethnographic twists in classrooms of ethnically diverse student groups. In this symposium, we recognize the pedagogical potential of difference for literary training as well as for the politics of and beyond the classroom.

From my perspective as a Latin Americanist, I notice how the demands and opportunities of the global circulation of culture have occasioned a reformulation of identity politics. Recent debates have redefined concepts such as race, culture, location, and nation in terms of the hybrid, the syncretic, and the mestizo. New forms of belonging reposition and undermine the assumption of a center. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah’s most

recent work (2006: 23) examines global cosmopolitanism for its gains and its losses: while “globalization can produce homogeneity . . . whatever loss of difference there has been, [enclaves of homogeneity] are constantly inventing new forms of difference.” Some critics even wonder whether concepts of identity and difference are outmoded (Moreiras 2001). This uncertainty and instability about difference, a sort of cluelessness produced by the predicaments of identity’s multiple definitions and shifting territory, affects my own teaching of literature. I will touch on some of my formative experiences teaching literature in Spanish to contribute another perspective to the discussion on difference in the literature classroom.

My own crash course in teaching literature and/in difference came in my first teaching assignment at Rutgers University as an assistant professor of Spanish more than a decade ago: an introductory survey course of literature in Spanish from both sides of the Atlantic, from medieval poetry to contemporary fiction. I originally approached this quick-paced, anthology-based introduction with doubts and disillusionment. How could a course that moves so quickly through the centuries and jumps so abruptly among writers and literary tendencies give the students anything but a distorted and incomplete exposure to literature in Spanish? However, despite the limitations of anthologies and the rush of the centuries, this survey course, more than any other course I have taught, educated me about the multicultural classroom and intercultural studies in public higher education.

The student population in these courses presents its own exercise in difference. Typical of a large, urban state university campus on the East Coast, our upper-level Spanish courses include the diverse community of Hispanic heritage speakers who make up an important percentage of each class section. The conversational intimidation felt by nonnative speakers in the initial weeks of the semester tends to be quickly buffered by the general goodwill and accepting attitude of the heritage speakers. Reciprocal respect and linguistic humility help dissipate the nonnative speakers’ panic and boost their comprehension skills. The ever-increasing global profile among the Rutgers students — our Newark campus was named the most diverse in the country several years ago — extends even further the multicultural dimension of our classes. Teaching Hispanic literatures in these contact zones, to use Mary Louise Pratt’s now famous concept, especially from my perspective as an Anglo-American academic in foreign languages and literatures, demands exactly the kind of strategies and awareness that my colleagues in the pieces to follow so eloquently outline. Rajini Srikanth notes in her essay that as educators we must be “scrupulous about recognizing our own subject

positions” not only vis-à-vis our students, but also with respect to the materials that we choose.

One selection from the anthology that I make sure to cover without fail in this introductory course especially illustrates the fascinating multi-cultural dynamics between the text and the classroom: Jorge Luis Borges’s “The Ethnographer” (from his collection *Elogio de la sombra* [1969]).¹ This very short tale introduces Fred Murdock, an Anglo-American college student who majors in Native American languages and cultures. To write his thesis, he spends a couple of years living on a reservation, where his professor hopes he will gain access to the secrets of the community’s rituals and beliefs. He returns having been initiated into their religion, and he even dreams in their language, but to his professor’s great disappointment, Fred will not reveal the secrets. His professor asks if he was sworn to secrecy, if he had to promise to never reveal certain aspects of their culture, but Fred admits that they required no such promise. Rather, he says, “the secret is not as important as the paths that led me to it. Each person has to walk those paths himself” (1998: 335).² The abrupt but ironic ending of the story announces that Fred got married, got divorced, and works as a librarian at Yale.

Here is a story included in what is the most commonly used introductory reader for Hispanic literatures across U.S. college campuses, *Aproximaciones al estudio de la literatura hispánica* (Friedman, Valdivieso, and Virgillo 2004), yet it is not about, at first glance, Hispanic cultures. Scholars such as Beatriz Sarlo and Mabel Moraña have commented on Borges’s consciousness of his own, and Argentina’s, intellectual peripheralness. Sarlo (1993) highlights the *orilla*, or the riverbanks, as an essential geographic marker of Borges’s Argentine identity. Moraña (2003: 267) considers this story, with its contact zones of linguistic and cultural difference, to be about the in-between more than about otherness. For her “The Ethnographer” admits the possibility of intercultural knowledge but reveals its obstacles (she calls them fractures, interruptions) in terms of deciphering and disseminating of that knowledge.³ Teaching this story in the context of a very mixed classroom of native and nonnative speakers is only the beginning of the scenario that so intrigues me. The students are also mixed in all kinds of other ways: geographical, linguistic, and racial. Many of our students are first-generation North Americans, while others are recent immigrants. Some are children of Hispanics who have married into another culture. Their own experiences as the other in the United States, in these more overt ways as well as in ways that we as their instructors are not even aware of, contribute to their reading. My students’ responses to this story take the anthropological

rethinking of the 1960s that Borges responds to in “The Ethnographer” in many new directions.

Borges’s ironic tale captures twentieth-century ethnography just as it is changing, and it registers the shift in focus away from the exotic, distant other. Typical of Borges’s games with references that serve as both narrative clues and private jokes, one of the many ironies of the story is Fred Murdock. This seemingly bland, nonexotic (from an Anglo-American point of view) protagonist’s surname is a direct reference to George Peter Murdock (1897–1985), the U.S. ethnographer famous for his atlases and classifications of cultures. He spent most of his career at Yale University, precisely where the fictional Fred Murdock ends up at the story’s conclusion.⁴ The south-north axis of Borges’s story (an Argentine writing in Spanish about a young U.S. ethnographer studying North American indigenous culture) hints at Murdock’s work on both North and South America. Murdock’s career spans significant moments in the development of modern anthropology. The anthropological turn toward urban areas and elite institutions in modernized societies since the last half of the twentieth century is a result of decades of questioning the power relations between observer and observed. Clifford Geertz (1997: 19) considers ethnography a constantly evolving practice that “has become increasingly wary of certain localizing strategies in the construction and representation of ‘cultures.’” Ethnographers became more and more aware that the concept of the local is always relative, and that “there is no politically innocent methodology for intercultural interpretation” (19). Other contemporary anthropologists such as Marc Augé (1995: 10) deliberate on this shift in focus toward an “ethnology of the near.” In “The Ethnographer,” the notions of near and far change places continually. The narration in Spanish begins from a distance both geographically and culturally between the Hispanic world referenced indirectly through language and North America. The displacement takes yet another step afar with Fred’s move to the reservation. The gaps in information, uncertainties communicated through a narrator unsure of the details of the story, remove the reader yet another step from the scene of the tale. The first world–third world tension is complicated by references to North American institutions of higher education juxtaposed with the internal colonialism and expected primitivism of the Native American community.

The presupposition of racism and exoticism in this story offers a rich opportunity for identifying and critiquing the anthropological gaze of the reader in “foreign” literature classes. When that literature is *not* foreign to more than half the students in the class, and when it is no more foreign than

the dominant culture surrounding the institutional setting and wider culture for many others, the assumptions must be revised. In this story, foreignness, rather than becoming irrelevant or ridiculous, gains even more force. One summer I taught this course to a group of eleven students, and only one of them was Anglo-American. That group included a pair of Brazilian twin sisters of Indian descent; other groups I have taught in this course had several Korean students, some Korean South Americans, and African Americans, along with Hispanics. The vast majority of these students have no identificatory experience with Fred Murdock, although he is the young university student in the story. To these students, Fred Murdock is the other.

Being the object of the anthropological gaze was new to Fred. As a directionless student, his haphazard decision to pursue Native American studies comes across as arbitrary and forced. When he does not deliver the community's "secrets" to his professor, the reader is surprised more by his newfound conviction than by his reticence. The story zeroes in on Fred, while the Native Americans remain a faceless collective, inaccessible to the reader (and to the disappointed professor). My students are often puzzled by the professor's insistence on the secret. They do not miss the irony that Fred moves from ethnography in the field to books in a library.

In the wake of postcolonial theory and the romanticization of otherness, "The Ethnographer" opens up enormous possibilities for discussion and awareness of difference. In fact, as Moraña (2003: 264) astutely points out, Latin American studies has seen the confluence of multiculturalism, subalternity, hybridization, and heterogeneity as emblems for cultural, linguistic, and racial difference. For many critics and theorists, difference then becomes *the* crucial axis of the discipline. Space does not allow for a thorough discussion of Borges's problematic position in Argentine, and more generally Hispanic, letters.⁵ That Borges is the author of this tale about difference, the Latin American writer frequently (albeit limitedly) associated with "universalizing" and "cosmopolitan" literary stances and known for his xenophobic response to modernization, contributes to the story's irony and simultaneously calls into question the very categories of the universal and the particular, the autochthonous and the imported, or in today's parlance, the local and the global.

Just as labels of ethnic or cultural otherness limit and constrict access, so does Fred Murdock's Anglo-Saxon identity, along with his nondescript appearance: "He was tall, as Americans are; his hair was neither blond nor dark, his features were sharp, and he spoke very little. There was nothing singular about him, not even that feigned singularity that young men affect. . . .

He was at that age when a man doesn't yet know who he is" (Borges 1998: 334).⁶ This initial yet double irony of the story gives us a protagonist who does not stand out, who looks average, who blends in to the crowd, who lacks self-knowledge and direction, but whose name references a famous ethnographer. Here is the Borgesian play on ethnographic otherness and exoticism in a character whose identification is other to the Argentine or Latin American reader but who sounds ordinary and is characterized as indecisive and lacking self-knowledge. Just as Fred denies his professor the desired inside information from the reservation, the narrator refuses to deliver to the reader not only the often expected magical realist narrative from Latin America but even the conventional expectations of a unique fictional protagonist. The narration leads logically to elicit frustration in the reader, through an unreliable narrator who is vague about many of the details of the story and then obscures the secret. Another lost promise of the brief narration is its *lack of* description in general. Studying culture ethnographically, according to Geertz, is an interpretive act in search of meaning. In fact, the first chapter of his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) is titled "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." However, Borges's narrator defers and desists in offering any description, the very product of ethnography. Surprisingly, this frustration often bypasses my students, who are very familiar with being on the outside. Accustomed to reading the culture around them from the perspectives of foreigners, adept at interpreting signals, attuned to watching human behavior and adapting (or not) their own to the surrounding cultural norms, they are well-trained ethnographers in New Jersey and are well versed in the relativism of cultures in general.

The extra twist in reading this story with Rutgers students comes from their readiness to recognize dominant codes as other. They have integrated their skills beyond Far Side cartoons; they have bypassed advanced theory courses on deconstruction and need no introduction to modern anthropology. Their reading of this story demonstrates that they are adept ethnographers themselves of Anglo-American dominant culture, or perhaps I should say what is left of it within the complex intercultural panorama that I see in my classrooms and across New Jersey. They cross over as informants as well, but informants with distance (difference?) who move among several worlds and cultures. "The Ethnographer" empowers readers, particularly the U.S. university student readers in introductory Hispanic literature classes, through its complicitous nods to relational thinking as Stuart Hall defines it. This relational thinking is what allows students to acknowledge their own skills as ethnographers. Rather than an ethnography of the classroom, read-

ing literature uncovers the ethnographers in our students and initiates them into the not-so-secret culture of difference.

This symposium respects the student learner as a vehicle of connection among diverse ways of thinking, reading, discussing, and experiencing the world. Graff takes on cluelessness in his recent book in order to make the academic enterprise less baffling and more legible.⁷ We have extended the discussion here, as we have in our literature classrooms, as a challenge and an opportunity with which we “engage passionately,” as Donald Hall writes in his article. We each examine the asymmetrical triad of teacher, student, and text through questioning the hegemonic authority of the teacher and the text and demanding that the students question their own positions. The messy shifting of classroom demographics encompasses the divisions of urban and rural, of social class, of regional rivalries as well as the racial and gendered positions already highlighted. All of the contributors reveal an increasing awareness of the campuses on which we teach, of our students’ positions and politics of location, of our own subjective positions, of the confusion and bewilderment of our students, sometimes, before very different positions and subjects than they are accustomed to, in order to offer possible maps, as Pennie Ticen (2004: n.p.) states, for “negotiat[ing] the terrains of difference” through literature. Srikanth encourages us to “teach the journey,” to underscore connections across nations and cultures outside the United States. As Hall mentions, teaching literature and/from difference is much more than reassessing value judgments on alternative lifestyles or “marginal” identities. As educators in difference, he says, we hope to warn against “hasty judgments and sloppy arguments based in prejudice, tradition and formulaic thinking.” The readings, performances, and film screenings that our students record in journals and debate in discussions generate reactions, the “stuff” of literary experience in the classroom. These experiences fuel intense reactions and unleash with unexpected clarity the panorama of differences at play in the learning process. Our job, as Barbara Schneider (2005: 209) mentions in her discussion of teaching against racism in composition classes, is to recognize that our reading assignments may in fact “encourage a logic of identity that defeats our attempts to engage difference because it is a logic that collapses difference.” We must therefore choose readings and engage students in activities around those readings that problematize difference and expand the possibilities and politics of identity awareness.

Questions linger in the ongoing conversation that these MLA panels launched. In teaching literature and difference, we ask the students to invest in reading in order to question assumptions and reassign categories of

understanding. While we do not work toward necessarily making the alien and the adversarial familiar, we do insist that the students interrogate their own subject positions and question the traditional and comfortable notions of self and other, and of here and elsewhere. Furthermore, literature may have immediate effects but often requires patience and time. An academic semester or quarter must be inadequate for measuring the impact literature has had on student readers. I once had a student respond at the end of a semester that she hated a difficult experimental novel about exile in Latin America we had read, but declared that she would never forget it. Liking the reading is not really the point. Rather, will the reading expand students' realm of otherness to encompass wider arenas of difference, such as those proposed by Srikanth outside the domain of the Anglo-American? If normalization is a form of violence, as Hall mentions in his essay (referring to Michael Warner), then our effectiveness in tapping the potential of difference can be assessed only through our students' ongoing learning and, as Srikanth encourages, our own continuing "interrogation" of our syllabi and classroom strategies.

How to recognize and mobilize positions of difference remains our challenge, and the essays that follow provoke us as educators to embrace that challenge and to tackle it from our own positions and locations, through student empowerment, via arguments and conversations that activate the texts in the classroom situation. In my title for these introductory remarks, I deliberately avoided "clueless," opting instead to pinpoint some "clues" that the MLA panels and subsequent conversations among the panelists have brought forward. An early mentor in my teaching career helped me recognize that education means confronting the new, inviting students into unfamiliar territory, pushing students and ourselves toward surprising responses, even learning to view the familiar from an unfamiliar angle, through literature. Resistance, bewilderment, sometimes belligerence are common responses, initially, to the challenge. Rather than being clueless, our classrooms are clued in to the comparative gestures that make new meanings out of difference.

In Borges's story, Fred Murdock seems unwilling to build a bridge between the reservation and the academic world. He keeps his professor in the dark about the secrets of the Native Americans he lived among, yet he ends up dedicating himself to helping others do research. Perhaps the story's unexpected conclusion — Fred's eventual career as a librarian at an Ivy League institution — accentuates the divide between knowledge and experience. Or perhaps his work as a librarian is that bridge, for he engages students, much as we aim to do, in their *different* explorations.

Notes

1. This story is one of two short prose pieces among the poetry in *Elogio de la sombra*. While it fits more logically into Borges's next book of fiction, *El informe de Brodie*, published just a year later, Borges is known for collections and editions that are rather random, and later editions that vary from the original. Borges himself refers to the potential "discordia" of mixing prose and poetry in a book that he states he would like to be read as a book of verse, and calls the prose pieces generic "divergencias" (1974: 976). The recognition by Borges that these narratives stand out in the collection adds another dimension to the otherness of "El etnógrafo."
2. "El secreto no vale lo que valen los caminos que me condujeron a él. Esos caminos hay que andarlos" (Borges 1974: 990).
3. "El relato no niega la posibilidad del conocimiento intercultural. Pero aborta, con el recurso del secreto, su desciframiento y diseminación" ("The story does not deny the possibility of intercultural knowledge. But it aborts, with the strategy of the secret, its decipherment and dissemination"; my translation).
4. Murdock first published his famous *Outline of World Cultures* in 1954, with many revised editions. He founded and served as president of the Society for Applied Anthropology.
5. See Balderston 1993, Sarlo 1993, and Fishburn 1998 for investigations into Borges's historical relationship with Argentina and with Europe. A recent literary biography of Borges by Edwin Williamson (2004) strives to connect his life experiences, his writings, and the politics and history of Argentina.
6. "Era alto a la manera americana, ni rubio ni moreno, de perfil de hacha, de muy pocas palabras. Nada singular había en él, ni siquiera esa fingida singularidad que es propia de los jóvenes. . . . Era suya esa edad en que el hombre no sabe aún quién es" (1974: 989).
7. Graff mentioned this in his response to a panel organized about the book at the MLA in 2004; his introduction to *Clueless* emphasizes this goal.

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