

Ethnic American Literature

WHY TEACH IT?

My rationale:

- ▶ Well, my degree is in Comparative Literature with a focus in Spatiality, Specters, Gentrification, and Ethnic American Literature.
- ▶ But that is not the reason that I do this.
- ▶ I think that the reason I do this was from my experiences as an undergrad at Cal.

My Rationale ctd.:

- ▶ I was a high achieving student that had to take a form of remedial English. But the classes that made me feel most that I was capable of succeeding there were classes that discussed literature focused on the multiple experiences in the United States and in the larger Americas. These included writers from Latin America and various Ethnic American literatures.

More reasons for offering Ethnic Lit.

- ▶ And prevailing studies affirm what I see as a reality that if students see themselves as part of the American fabric, that their culture is part of a larger community of American experiences, they feel a sense of belonging. They feel that they can relate in these experiences.
- ▶ In turn, they see themselves and their cultures as valued by the institution that they often see in an adversarial context.

Things to consider when teaching Ethnic-American literature.

- ▶ Context. Context. Context.
- ▶ Context is everything. Use media to bring home a historical context that students can access. That students can tangibly refer to during reading.
- ▶ They can be timelines.
- ▶ They can be short videos.
- ▶ They can be songs.
- ▶ Bringing up a variety of different cultural experiences.

Suggestions

- ▶ Always bring it back to history.
- ▶ Some examples:
 - ▶ Asian American Literature (Hong Kingston/Tan/Houston)
 - ▶ African American Literature (King/X/Angelou/Morrison)
 - ▶ Chicana/Latina Literature (Cisneros/Rivera/Soto)
 - ▶ Working class Euro-American Literature (Terkel/Karr)
 - ▶ Queer and LGBTQ Literature (Rich/Baldwin)

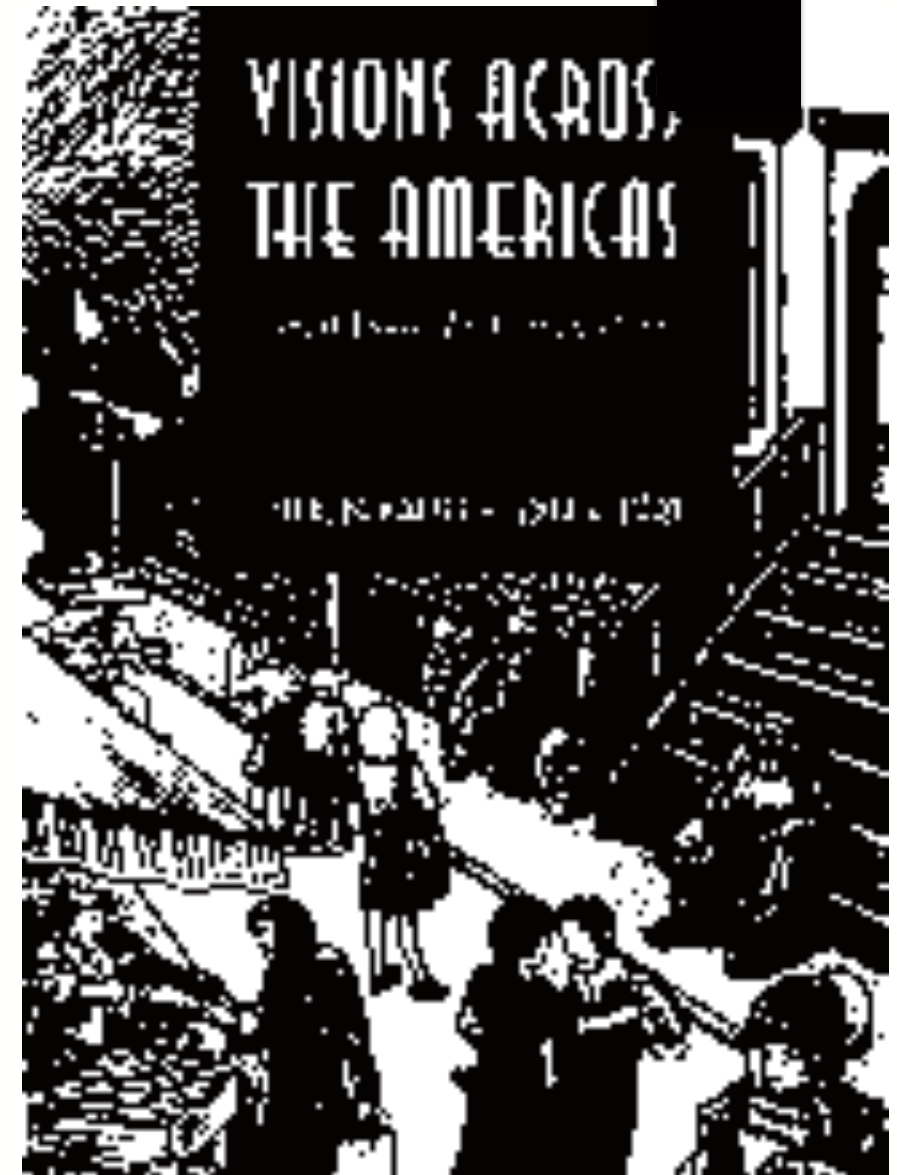
Resources

tolerance.org

diversebooks.org

also

Contemporary readers such as *Rereading America* or *Visions Across the Americas*. They usually have a wealth of resources, but it is our job as instructors to work to give context, historical frameworks and an understanding of themes before we move into the texts.



Final thoughts:

- ▶ But I think it important to discuss some of the Ethnic American Literature that we have learned in graduate school. But this means teaching it from the lens of a community college student, NOT a graduate student.
- ▶ The difficulty is how to keep the rigor while engaging students that often lack a critical lens with which to approach literature.

Sample Native American Literature Lesson

INTRODUCING "THE OFFERING OF THE PIPE" BY BLACK ELK

Intro

- ▶ What is everyone's daily interaction with Native Americans?
- ▶ Invariably some have gone to the casinos, but it is important to note that only 3% of Native nations have casinos and that this money rarely is produced and maintained on the nations, but rather goes to larger casinos in New Jersey or Nevada.
- ▶ But the reality is that we have few interactions with Native Americans.

Context:

I then give them a text titled 1491 from the New Yorker. This is a complex text where we (in groups and over a couple of class sections) created a TIL column, a Questions column, and a How did this challenge my understanding of Native Americans.



Through

I discuss literary themes and aspects of literature as part of the class. This is where I introduce orality, collectivism, and cyclical time. From there we take time to read a text

I'm going to give you a 1 1/2 page text that we'll read from Black Elk Speaks by Niehardt and Black Elk, titled "The Offering of the Pipe" from the course reader I use titled Visions Across the Americas but can also be found at:

<https://www.firstpeople.us/articles/Black-Elk-Speaks/Black-Elk-Speaks-Index.html>

This leads to reading the text individually and then pointing out aspects where the three themes appear.



Beyond

- ▶ Utilizing poems by Joy Harjo such as the "Eagle Poem" and "Remember" both are readily accessible online.
- ▶ Utilizing the short story, "This is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona" by Sherman Alexie.
- ▶ I would also highly suggest as well utilizing themes as Patriarchy, Assimilation and Resistance to U.S. dominant culture to be able to work through Ethnic American literature.