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"The Mask Is the Face": *Personae* in Teaching Multi-Ethnic American Literature

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At the outset, one must assume that the importance of the interrelationship of ethnicity and pedagogy lies in an oft expressed tenet of the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States. It is the belief that all people living in our multi-cultural society should learn the American Literature which comprises all cultural strands. An implied outcome of such learning is the increased sensitivity each child, teen, and adult will have for the cultural background of each of us. There is also the assumption (unfortunately, not a reality) that multi-ethnic literature in the United States should be taught at all levels. It is a misconception of many misguided mandarins that multi-ethnic curricula should be made up of exotic, esoteric, or highly specialized courses given at only the higher levels of academe.

I am here concerned with pedagogy at the lower division levels (freshman and sophomore) of college. The ideas and the methods discussed, I feel, can be adapted and modified at the high school level, as well as at the elementary school level. Related to this goal and of crucial concern is the training of teachers in multi-ethnic American literature. Hopefully, a study, national in scope, should be made to determine what courses, if any, are taught in the area in the fifty states.

One method which I have used in the classroom and that I feel has been successful is the use of *personae* in American Literature courses in poetry and fiction. In a 1984 NCTE workshop in Denver, Colorado, the technique was used in a session in which the aim was to sensitize teachers to the varied strands of American literary culture. It had only moderate success, this limited degree mainly caused by a time restriction. More than two hours are needed to effect attitudinal change.

In the classroom where a teacher has more time, I have found that the method stimulates and motivates students. They put on the "masks" of others. It has been successful in developing new perceptions in many students. The use of a *persona* combines creative imagination and authentic factual material. The use of a *persona* by a student is in reality an act of "translation." As one person has suggested, such translation is exact "in spirit." Historicity, however, is a *sine qua non*.

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The use of the method certainly does not give any teacher the license to “create” material—cultural material—into something that never was, or will be. What is done is done within the cultural context of the group whose work is being read and studied. Thus, false interpretations having their bases in the biases or slants of the Anglo- or Euro-American traditions are avoided.

Thus, teachers have to do their homework well and thoroughly. As instructors of multi-ethnic literature, their training and their learning have to go beyond simply the discipline of the language arts alone. As starters they must have broader knowledges of folklife, folklore, history, and anthropology. Present scholars and teachers, practitioners in the field, as well as curriculum planners, must examine these needs, lest we fail in our hopes for teaching multi-cultural American literature before we begin.

It has been stated that the *persona* method has aided students in gaining new perspectives; in a sense, it may be termed “three-dimensional,” for students discover an author “directly.” The planning that goes into such sessions where the technique is used is rewarding. Whether the teacher or the students are role-playing, all gain insightful glimpses into the hearts and minds of authors—and, one may add, of themselves.

Rewording Melville’s famous opener, the teacher as rôle player may state: “Call me Tiresias!” or “Call me Proteus!” The instructor may bring students into “contact” with all manner of writers: essayists, fictionalists, dramatists, poets, and historians. An “atmosphere” is carefully established, providing the basis for a dialogue between student/learner/reader/listener and the “creative artist.” It goes without question that the teacher must have acquired an in-depth understanding of the character whom he or she must realistically portray—a full comprehension of the quality of the personality presented. It is not in composing the script (which is to be read-talked) to quote by rote, or to mouth the words of the author. The mind of the rôle player should have absorbed, “played over” the life and the significant work(s) before the *persona* “recreates.”

Let us briefly review the approach, and then look at some of the projects for students.

The teacher may well prepare the students by presenting historic backgrounds of the times in which a particular author (or authors) wrote. This may be supplemented by “handout” material on the times, or cogent quotations about the times written by contemporaries of the author(s). The historicity of the writer’s background and times is also explored by having students read closely the work of an author. Having done this, individual conferences with students are a *must*. This session will clarify the details of the approach or method and will

serve to answer individual students' questions. In this situation when the student is assuming the identity of a single author or the identity of a person from the American culture being studied, a realistic situation is posited. For example the student may use these points to develop the identity of a Chicano(a) or an Asian American. (See models below.) With the background material, and with the situation on hand, the student may now work into the rôle, and write in "another identity." A teacher may well use this technique in ethnic American literature classes, as well as in courses in American fiction, drama, poetry, and essay.

The student may also be assigned a project on an author, having the option of choosing one of many authors whose work has been read, studied, and discussed. Students may take the role of any of the following: Frederick Douglass, Merle Woo, Lawson Inada, Helen Barolini, Leslie Silko, Lorna Cervantes, Wendy Rose, Rudolfo Anaya, Mari Evans, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, *et al.*

Walker Gibson has observed much that is pertinent to the use of a *persona*. He has said that a student's taking on a role "not necessarily...[one's] own" is a useful kind of experience (79).

The project assignments presented below were developed for students in elective courses in a community college. Most students had at least finished a cornerstone English course as freshmen. Many also had writing experience in an "upper freshman" writing or literature course such as "Fiction and Writing" or "Modern American Literature." These projects, generally four in number, supplemented at least eight pieces of shorter critical writing (average 300 or more words.) The assignments were handed out almost a month before the due date, allowing plenty of time for preparation as described above.

1. A project centered upon the Chicano experience. Students were asked to read representative poems which included Jose Angel Gutierrez' "22 Miles"; Abelardo Delgado's "Stupid America"; Rudolfo Gonzalez' "I am Joaquin"; Ricardo Sanchez's "Denver," "Espontaneo/ Spontaneous," and selections in English from "*Canto y Grito de Mi Liberación*."

The students were referred to texts on reserve which included: Edward Simmen's *The Chicano* and Luis Salinas' and Lillian Federman's *From the Barrio: A Chicano Anthology*.

Students were asked to read and reflect on the situation:

Each of us has come from a small, poverty-stricken town in New Mexico. From the time each of us was a child, we have been made to feel different and inferior because of our name, our manner of speech and our darker skin. Insensitive Anglo teachers have been guilty of these actions. Further, our people have been stereotyped as "drunk" and "lazy."

Drawing upon one's reading of the poems and background material, each student is asked to discuss how she or he now feels as an adult looking back upon an earlier childhood or teenage experience.

2 and 3. In parallel fashion (not necessarily in this same term), students might be given one of the two projects below. The first focuses on the Native American Indian experience. Students were asked to read representative poems such as: David Martin Nez's "New Way, Old Way"; James Welch's "The Man from Washington" and "Surviving"; Peter La Farge's "Visions of a Past Warrior"; Simon Ortiz's "Relocaton"; Carol Lee Sanchez's "Tribal Chant"; and Calvin O'John's "It is Not."

The situation was presented as a project theme.

Since early childhood each of us has lived on a reservation, restricted economically and socially by the majority society. Early in our lives, we were sent either to a white religious school or the Washington, DC sponsored Bureau of Indian Affairs school where we learned the essentials of an Anglo education but were bereft of our tribal traditions and lore. Since one of our grandparents was white, we have at times questioned who we are. Further, we have felt the weight of being regarded differently when some of us went on to high school and college.

In this exercise students were asked to read background material to be found in *The Way* edited by Shirley Witt and in *The Literature of the American Indian*, edited by Thomas Sanders and Walter Peek.

Students were asked as Native Americans based on their past experiences to discuss how the tribe and society might come to grips with this situation.

3. The third project to be discussed asks individual students to assume the *persona* of an African American. Before this assignment, the class had read and discussed the earlier poems of African Americans such as Dunbar and Hughes. Now they were asked to read: Conrad Kent River's "The Invisible Man"; Dudley Randall's "The Melting Pot"; Claude McKay's "The Tropics in New York"; Arna Bontemps' "Southern Mansion"; Nikki Giovanni's "Nikki-Rosa"; Jean Toomer's "Karintha" and "Georgia Dusk"; Frank Marshall Davis' "Three Poems"; and Ishmael Reed's "Jacket Notes."

The students were assigned to read introductory period notes and biographical notes of authors in the following anthologies on reserve: Houston A. Baker's *Black Literature in America*; Abraham Chapman's *Black Voices* and *New Black Voices*; James Emanuel's and Theodore Gross' *Dark Symphony*.

Their *persona* assignment was: "Let each of us be a Black American, one who grew up in a Northeastern small or middle-sized city. Although our parents were middle class citizens, and we attended integrated elementary, high school, and public college, we sensed individually deeply and daily that there still remained among most of the white ethnic students with whom we came in contact an unspoken sense of antipathy—of keeping a distance. We felt that this was irrational and guessed it might have been from home conditioning. Often, we felt hurt or frustrated."

Here the students were asked to write how we might come to grips with this in our towns and neighborhoods.

4. A project entitled "The Ways of the Mothers and Fathers" was assigned in a course labelled "Fiction and Writing." It came after the class had read and discussed Leslie Silko's *Ceremony*. Daily we discussed material from Kenneth Lincoln's *Native American Renaissance* which clarified the beliefs and customs of the Laguna Pueblo people from whom Silko derives and about whose ways she tells in the novel.

"You are a member of a Native American tribe. You turn back to read a legend or myth of your people to learn something of your heritage. (See Richard Erdoes' and Alfonso Ortiz' *American Myths and Legends*.) You retell a legend or myth to your children and interpret its truth for your people today. The storytelling you regard as a ceremony and part of your living heritage.

"Secondly, you sense as you have been reading Silko's fiction that she has incorporated the ceremonial format of the Laguna people. She has kept within the tradition of the elders in the way that she has written it. She has adapted the ceremonies to the changing times. You 'honor' her work by indicating how well you feel that she has been able to do this. As a sign of respect for her and her work you write her a letter, a poetic presentation after her manner, or an essay—any of which you plan to forward to her."

5. In this project all students are to be Nisei who have been incarcerated with their parents in Relocation Centers shortly after the outbreak of World War II. Some go back after being released to visit the sites years later. Background is provided by the teacher based upon readings such as *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* by Bill Hosokawa and Peter Irons' *Justice at War: The Story of the Japanese American Internment Camps*. They are asked to read closely: Mitsuye Yamada's "A Bedtime Story"; Doug Yamamoto's "At Manzanar in the Mountains"; Lawson Fusao Inada's "Before the War"; Yoshio Yao's "A Pilgrimage to Tule Lake"; Ferris Takahashi's "Nisei! Nisei!"; and Nobuko Joanne Miyamoto's "What Are You?"

Students are asked to recall in prose or poetry recollections of the days of incarceration, and/or memories of a visit to the site years later.

6. This project was assigned to a class "Fiction and Writing." I labelled it "Aspiring to be an Afro-American *Griot*." The class read Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. The project was due after the reading was completed.

Situation: "You are an Afro-American descended from people who had been in the United States and the colonies before 1776. You have discovered through Haley-like research that your early forebears were forcibly seized and removed from tribal areas on the West Coast of Africa as far back as 1650. Intellectual curiosity has led you to find facts about your people (tribe). You find the name and the present national location. In checking out this information you discover a folktale like those told within your tribe—in fact you have heard variations of this story in America."

(You have arranged earlier to place on reserve in the library all books containing various African folktales including Paul Radin's *African Folktales*.)

In one brief essay the student is asked to identify herself or himself by name and tribe and retell in her or his own words a folktale, identifying the tribal source.

Secondly, the student sensing that Morrison's methods resemble those of folk storytelling, is asked to discuss any similarities.

7. The last project to be discussed was labelled "Antidote to Racism." It was assigned in the course "Fiction and Writing." Here again the situation is given followed by the requirements.

Situation: "You are a contemporary Caucasian American whose forebears migrated either from England or a European country within the last century. Through your own interest in genealogy, you have found out where they were from: the town or city, province, and country. You have also found out that acceptance into the new American society was painful. Your ancestors were discriminated against by reason of national origin, sometimes combined with antipathy toward their religion. Through your own education and experience, you have finally come to perceive the basic unity of all peoples of all races. You have learned from the 'true' American history of the long periods of rejection, prejudice, and discrimination."

The assignment is to have each student indicate his or her "name" (adopted for the project) and the country of origin. Each is also asked to indicate briefly the nature of the discrimination against the ances-

tors when they arrived in America. At the time of initial assignment the teacher will have determined from the students the countries chosen. As a consequence, with the help of the librarian, books are placed on reserve dealing with the various ethnic groups; anthologies containing short stories by Anglo-American or Euro-American authors are also at this time placed on reserve.

Situation and Assignment continued: You, as indicated above, have finally come to certain perceptions beyond race; you sense, however, that a danger lies in the possibility that your child or children may acquire prejudices from peer groups within a racist society. You choose an author, a short story writer of Anglo-American or Euro-American background, and read this with your child or children. You discuss the story with them. The story is chosen with the purpose of learning about "other" people in our society. You talk about the respect for all people and concentrate on the likenesses among peoples. You use the session to sensitize the child. In an essay you discuss this plan and how through the story chosen you have administered an "antidote to racism."

This technique of employing *personae* as a pedagogical method has been honestly questioned as being superficial. I do not believe so, when one considers the educational context as well as the educational gains. The course as designed is for upper freshmen or sophomore students, not for more sophisticated and more knowledgeable upper classpersons, majors or university graduate students, although such an approach could easily be adapted to these levels. With only slight modification, the technique as described could be used in a first term or first year writing class.

I hope that teachers would agree that the technique is a viable and usable method and has a potential for stimulating students. We are concerned with motivating our students to read, to listen, to think through questions that require reflection, organization, and interpretation. Moreover, dealing with many authors in the past, students, through this method which allows an "interchange" with the "author," become aware of the contemporaneity of such writers and their pertinence to the students' world.

In teachers and students doing the reading and research necessary for the exercise, their vistas will indeed expand. The method introduces teachers and students (in multi-cultural literature classes) to authors of the highest caliber whose work has not been taught in most secondary schools. Studying them spurs our (teachers' and students') imagination, expands our knowledge, nurtures our empathies, and helps us to discover universalities through the particularities of the experiences set down in prose and poetry. For example, if a teacher were to assume the *persona* of Zora Neale Hurston and did so after reading her fiction,

essays, and the biography by Robert Hemenway, he or she would find in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—a love of community expressed, of culture, of tradition, and a desire to restore a world. Here teachers and students in reading this novel would discover the evils of racism and sexism which we face in our world. One would hope through reading and the method described, we might learn to exorcise the stereotypical.

A variety of writing sessions may well be developed based upon students listening to the *persona* of an author as we have suggested above. There may be interviews with the author; discussions of particular works; investigations and research of a phase of the author's life when works were written; TV scenarios for "spots" on PBS to acquaint wider audiences with the author and his/her works. Thus before the situation for writing, the student in a sense will assume different roles (not of another *persona*); the listening role; the recipient *persona*, and that of the confidant; then the critic, and respondent.

In relation to the writing, the role-playing continues for a student: the participant *persona* as the student interacts with the author; the reporter's role of writing about what has been learned as a result of the listening and the questioning; the teacher's role of instructing others what has been learned and researched; and the persuader's role if critical opinions vary about the ideas or interpretations of the author's work. Thus, too, a number of types of autobiographical essays may follow, the students having been provided models from aspects of the author's life.

Citing a report of a Dartmouth College conference, Walker Gibson quotes:

To help pupils encounter life as it is, the complexity of relationships in a group or dynamic situation, there is nothing more direct and simple we can offer them than drama. (79)

I feel that as you consider the suggestions contained above, you may ponder two statements that Gibson uses as epigraphs of his book:

"Acting a role, realizing in a specially intense way one's identity (in a sense) with someone who (in another sense) one is not, remains one of the most human things a man [woman] can do."

Walter J. Ong

"The mask is the face."

Susan Sontag

Work Cited

Gibson, Walker. *Persona: A Style Study for Readers and Writers*. New York: Random House, 1969.