

Eric Jenks 8.7 Multicultural Lit Reflection

For this unit we focused on the issues of diversity--accuracy and authenticity when it comes to pieces of literature written by or about a group that has not been part of the dominant culture in the US. Our group had a number of deeply debated issues related to the ideas of multicultural literature. We discussed the issues of truth, as in where does "truth" lie, which groups can claim they know the truth, how is it verified or documented, and how these materials evaluated. Over the course of the unit we focused on one particular group that has been historically marginalized and read books by and about the Native American people, specifically the Abenaki people who live and lived in New York and Vermont. This particular group of Native Americans faced an absolutely heinous attack on their people by the State of Vermont in the 1930's until the early the 1950's. As a result of that attack one of the ways that the Abenaki people found to protect themselves and especially their children was to hide in plain sight. To do this they had to disown their heritage and assimilate to life in "White America" by calling themselves "French Canadians." The second way was to run to leave Vermont to get away from the State sponsored Eugenics Program that sought to end the Abenaki people through forced sterilization.

The unit began with the reading of *Dark Pond*; I am not exactly sure why we had to read this book since we never really had to discuss it at all. The only connection to the unit is that is about a young man who was half Native American and he discussed his connections to Nature. Looking back this was my second favorite reading for the unit and I wish we would have had a chance to discuss this particular book more. Either way,

Dark Pond was brought up a little bit in our discussions about *The Darkness Under the Water*. It seemed that in our group the Men liked *Dark Pond* better and the women were more drawn to *The Darkness Under the Water*. We decided as a group that the women responded more positively and has more connections with Molly and the obstacles she faced growing of age. The women could relate to talking with other girls about what to wear on dates, the nervous energy and feelings that accompany the first date, brushing their hair out, much more then the men could relate to. While at the same time the men in the group seemed to relate to the issues that Armie faced as he bounced from school to school without ever having a real set of friends.

If *Dark Pond* was a blip on radar, *The Darkness Under the Water* was a huge thunderstorm. *The Darkness Under the Water* was our group's most debated novel. After finishing the book the group consensus that the book was enjoyed by all. Only one person, Marc, had anything negative to say about it and I think that came from his reading the critiques of Doris Seale and Judy Dow before the rest of us. Most of the group thought it was a good coming of age book for adolescents, especially girls. The book was helped by the fact that it had a good plot, emotional points where Molly's mother loses her baby and eventually her life and some extremely disturbing aspects with the idea of sterilization and that fact that it was not only state sponsored but a law in Vermont in the mid-1900's.

I'll be completely honest I have both a minor and a major in History from Michigan State University. I have taken 15-20 history classes at the college level, I read all the time and consider myself pretty well versed in U.S. History. I have even taught U.S. History at the High School level. Before this unit I had never even heard of the

Vermont Eugenic Program. As an American am completely appalled by what was done to the Native Americans in Vermont. I think I can speak for the whole group when we were all disgusted by that idea that this could take place not only in the World but here in the United States. The question that I still have is that was going on with humanity at that time that could cause people in different areas of the world to think that human experimentation, sterilization, and even genocide? The Nazis in Europe, the Japanese in China and the Koreans, the United States with Native Americans, the interment camps and sterilization of the criminally insane. Was it the fact that science was making such advancements that the “scientists” forgot their subjects were fellow humans? Did humanity just stop caring about each other? Was nationalistic pride so high that people of other cultures no longer counted? Was there some type of scientific thinking that people were following? The fact that not only did all of these events happen but that they were all happening simultaneously, its mind boggling, disgusting and shameful for mankind.

In *The Darkness Under the Water* there was one part that not one of could answer. The issue that no one seemed to have an answer for was what was going on with Gratia’s voice? Why Gratia’s voice even was included, it didn’t seem to fit into the story, it felt out of place and very disjointed. We never came up with a good reason for why Kanell added that into the book at all. Marc suggested it might be part of a Native American stereotype of hearing voices and a connection to dead ancestors. I thought maybe it was related to Molly’s maturation as a young woman. In the beginning of the story Molly was still acting like young girl and Gratia’s voice was very common, but because of the circumstances that arose with her mother sickness, she was forced to grow up and we hear less of Gratia’s voice. Then the family has to move into a new house because of the

flooding and fire destroys her old house it severed any remaining tie she had to her childhood and Gratia's voice also disappeared with those events. When you combine all that, I had the hypothesis that maybe it had to do with her growing up and losing that innocence of childhood. Similar to when a child finds out Santa is not real, things are just a little bit different after that. Molly was forced to grow up fast and she lost that connection to her "older, younger sister."

It was very interesting the way that most of our group made a 180 degree change in their feelings for *The Darkness Under the Water* after reading the critiques' by Seale and Dow. It was decided that most of us, that as we read the book we didn't realize that Kanell wasn't accurately describing Native American life. That she was really stereotyping many of the characters in the book, as the noble and Stoic Indian for example. That she didn't have accurate facts about basket weaving, willow vs. black ash or Native American Cultural Traditions like that women farm, the men would be out hunting providing for the families. *The Darkness Under the Water* became a book that our group saw as inaccurate and disrespectful to Native Americans as a historical fiction book, but might be better off if it were reclassified as a regular fiction book. It was entertaining; it did have an interesting plot, engaging characters and was an emotional coming of age story about a young girl and her family.

Our group agreed with Seale and Dow in their criticism that Kanell should have done some more research on basket weaving in particular, but we all had feelings like maybe they took their critique too far. We thought their critiques could have served their purpose better if they didn't seem so overtly negative and almost racist. A few people in the group, myself included, thought that it was like Seale and Dow went out of

their way to attack Kanell and that they sounded like one of the main reasons they did criticize her work was the fact that she was a white woman, who moved to Vermont and who wrote a book about Native Americans. I personally thought that they centered their critiques on smaller details in the book and not on the major issues, Molly growing from girl to young woman, taking over the family business, her growth in at time of family need, and the concepts brought up with the nurses and the sterilization of Molly's mother.

After reading *Hidden Roots*, I realized there were many similarities between Kanell's *The Darkness Under the Water and Hidden Roots*. I posed the hypothesis in our discussion on *Hidden Roots*, that possibly the similarities are not by chance. I think Kanell might have taken some aspects of *Hidden Roots* and used them in her book. The first similarity I noticed was that in each book the main characters, Molly and Howard, were only children. Not only were the only child they both had older siblings who died and younger siblings who were miscarried. In both books the fathers are almost too busy working and trying to provide for their families that they are not in their children's lives enough. Because their fathers refused to recognize their heritage and were away so much, the responsibility to pass along traditional knowledge is taken on by their Grandparents. There is evidence that both mothers were sterile. We know that Molly's mom is for sure with what happened with the Nurses during her delivery, and Howard alludes to his mother "and now she couldn't have any more kids" (*Hidden Roots*, 17). Finally both families face a major catastrophic event, Molly's mother dies and Howard's father loses part of his hand in an accident. I don't think that Kanell purposefully took Bruchac's ideas, I think she might have read *Hidden Roots* before she wrote *Darkness* and some of those ideas stuck in her head as she planned and wrote *The Darkness Under the Water*.

I would say that of the three stereotypes Debbie Reese references in her article (aggressive savage, romantic/noble, and characters wearing Indian attire) Joseph Bruchac tends to show certain stereotypes of the romantic/noble Indian in the *Faithful Hunter*. As I read Reese's review I found myself both agreeing with her and disagreeing with her views about stereotyping. I agree with the negativity of an "aggressive savage" and how our government basically used that stereotype to decimate the Native Americans over the centuries. I understand that stereotyping is bad but at that same time don't all movies and TV shows basically follow the basic villain, hero, damsel in distress character typing? I don't see why having a "romantic/noble Native American" would be a bad stereotype. Our society becomes more and more politically correct each day, where will it end? It's almost like is counter productive and it is creating more individuals and causing factions in society. What was most interesting about the three stereotypes that Reese references is that we never saw the "characters always wearing Indian attire" stereotype. If anything we see the opposite in this entire unit. Instead of proclaiming their heritage and announcing their past, in the literature we read for this unit the characters are actually hiding their heritage. Time and again we see this with our main characters, Howard's mother and father don't even tell him who his grandfather, Molly's parents and Grandmother skirt around the issue preferring to be called French Canadian, Jesse Bowman will go out of his way to help anyone he knows, even total strangers but he won't acknowledge publicly that he is a Native American. This unit really was a really eye opening experience. Like I said earlier, I never even knew this was apart of our countries history, next summer when I head to Lack Placid, New York, I will definitely do so with a new out look, that's for sure.

The most important theme that was found throughout the readings in this unit, is the idea of hiding in plain sight. Molly's parents and grandmother, Howard's mother, father and "Uncle Louis" in *Hidden Depths*, Grandpa and Grandma Bowman in *Bowman's Store* were all Native Americans who hid their ancestry. One common way for Native Americans to hide in plain sight was to say they were French Canadian. Due to the close proximity of Canada it was an easy way for Native Americans to hide in to Americans society, even though most people understood was "French Canadian" meant. It baffled me at the time when I read that today Native Americans in Up-state New York and Vermont will still not claim they are Native Americans. I couldn't figure out why or how they could still be worried or afraid of. But then as I read *Hidden Depths* and *Bowman's Store* it all begin to make sense. The fear and loss that Grandpa Louis felt and endured is beyond anything comprehensible to me. To be sterilized and have your wife sterilized without their consent just because they were Native Americans is disgusting and inexcusable. I understood why Howard's father wanted to shield him from the bigotry and negative stereotypes that he faced in his life. I understood why he said he was French Canadian and not Native American. I understood why in the Vermont Censuses had no Abenaki even registered during the 1960's and 70's. They were deathly afraid of something like the Eugenics Project taking place again. It was a community's way of coping with a terrible even a catastrophic event. Most of all it truly embarrassed me as an American to read that this happened and within the past 70-80 years here, its sickening.

Looking back at this unit as a whole, I wonder why the last reading, "*Different Definitions of Multicultural Literature: Is the Debate Really Ivory Tower*" by Mingshui Cai, was not the first reading we were assigned. I feel like Cai brings up some very good

points in her article about what really is Multicultural reading and I felt like we had a good debate about her article. At the same time I feel like if we possibly started with her article then chances are better we and I know I would have read the stories with a different perspective. I read all the books as a white male, who has way too much going on in his life right now and I read them to get them done with. Sure, as the stories advanced, I was sucked into the twists and turns of the plots, but it didn't even cross my mind that these books had a multicultural aspect to them. As I read I understood the characters were Native American but I didn't think about that in terms of how different people with different cultural backgrounds might take different parts of the stories differently. I read the stories, enjoyed the tales and looked more to finishing and being able to fulfill my class obligations more than anything else. I think my perspective would have been altered if I had read Cai's article first. I might have paid attention to parts of the story differently. I might have possibly keyed in on certain events or details as important. But then maybe that was the intent, to have us read the books, discuss in our own perspectives and then read the Cai piece and force us to reflect back and reassess our thinking about the topics covered and how we possibly could or should look at them through others perspectives.

After reading Cai and hidden roots and then going back to the critiques of Seale and Dow, their harshness seems to be more understandable. Their critiques now seem to hold a little more purpose because the stories and the facts that Kanell missed really offended them as Native Americans and they looked at the story in a completely different way than my group mates or I did. This is their past, its stories that are supposed to reflect their people; maybe Kanell should have done a more thorough investigation of their

culture. As a white man I can understand why Kanell used the willow branches for her baskets, they bend easily, I am sure there are some near the river, it just seems natural. But looking at it from the Native American point of view, the Abenaki people believed they came from the Ash trees. They used the same Black Ash to make their baskets, this oversight by Kanell might feel like a massive blow or seen as extreme disrespect to their people and heritage and not something that should be wrong in the book.

On a personal note this unit was very insightful, learning about the Native Americans of Vermont and New York and what they went through was very eye opening. I thought our group had a number of very good discussions about each of the books we read. The evolution of our group's understandings and beliefs from the first time we discussed Darkness to Cai's article on multicultural literature was quite remarkable. I think everyone in the group changed their thinking two or three times. We were introduced to new ways of looking at the same issue and I think everyone in the group did great job of having an open mind throughout the unit.