

Jamaica: a New Literary Setting for Postcolonial Literature

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What is world literature? Who determines what constitutes world literature? How do educators begin to train prospective and current teachers who are, or who will be responsible for presenting world literature in the classroom? How do educators begin to prepare these teachers to look critically and analyze the new movement in world literature, which includes literature from postcolonial countries? What does it take to create a critical pedagogy in world literature? These are some of the questions I reflected upon as I left for Jamaica, West Indies.

Background

While I was acting chair and lecturer in the African American Studies Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, I was awarded a Fulbright Educational Grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant was bestowed upon me so that I could guide a group of 12 black and white female English language and Literature teachers from the North Carolina Public School System to Jamaica, West Indies for a 5-week study program. Using several literary works of West Indian writers as the basis for this learning experience, the objective of the trip was to develop a West Indian Fiction curriculum that could be infused into the existing world literature curriculum of the North Carolina public high schools.

Jamaica: a new literary setting for the post colonial literature

Jamaica, a newly independent country with a wave of emerging post-colonial literature was chosen as the setting for exploring the

answers to the questions posed. Through my dissertation and teaching I had already completed extensive research on the island. I was educated in the United States and continue to live here. As a Black Jamaican citizen, I thought that I had "lived" the experience of the two cultures and could bring a rich blending of both into the development of a new curriculum.

Having a historical and experiential knowledge of these two cultures, I was concerned about the way many world literature teachers included works from postcolonial countries in their curricula. Many lacked (a) the experiential, the lived experiences, or a conscious mental shift in location about the world they were teaching; (b) a critical, historical, social, and educational perspective in which the literary works took place; (c) an understanding of the political nature of world fiction in the context of world history, politics, power and culture; and (d) a theoretical framework in cultural studies from which to draw on.

To me, Jamaica seemed the ideal setting in which to study the evolving literary movement that was emerging in the United States. Jamaica's connection to colonialism for over 300 years, its newly formed independence from England, its connection to Africa in its historical framework, and dependence in many ways on western culture created a perfect locale for the study. Situated in this context, Jamaica's literary works could provide a microscopic view of another world in both Old and New World politics.

It was for these reasons that I believed Jamaican works of literature were ideal representations of the kinds of literature that were being introduced into United States public schools. In many instances, these new literary works by postcolonial authors that were being read by teachers and students in America dealt with issues of colonialism, post-colonialism, independence, oppression, domination, history, politics, power, and culture. More important, the major context of these stories have been situated in world events, (e.g. World War I, World War II, the Depression, the Vietnam War, the Cold War), that shaped and left imprints on the cultures of these countries. The implication here is that literary works of this nature provided a glimpse into a new culture and a wider and even more international perspective into how these world events impacted a country's politics and culture.

The Jamaican authors of the new books that I wanted infused into United States public schools were bringing with them a multicultural perspective on world events. These authors were born in Jamaica or in one of the West Indian countries that had been dominated by world powers for decades. They had been shaped by their Third World cultural heritage, slavery, colonialism, and post-colonialism. In many instances, they straddled both their native countries and their homes in a new homeland. Many lived now in nations that at one time were the rulers of their native countries. As a result, these writers were bringing a more diverse polycultural approach to cross-cultural experiences into their literary works.

Preparing for the trip

Before the group left for Jamaica, they attended a 6-hour workshop to gain a brief

history of the country. Several individuals from the Jamaican community in Greensboro, North Carolina also attended the workshop and shared their views about the island with the participants. Additionally, each participant was given a detailed itinerary of the impending 5-week study and a list of the objectives to be met before returning to the United States. The objectives were threefold: (a) to look at the social, political, and economic factors that have shaped Jamaica over the years; (b) to look at the purpose(s) and the role of the United States and other western nations in the making of Jamaica; and (c) to examine the extent to which the culture, the politics, slavery, pre-independence, and post-independence are reflected in its literary works. At the end of the 5 weeks, the participants were expected to have a curriculum using West Indian literary works as their main focus of study. This curriculum would be infused into the existing framework of the world literature curriculum in North Carolina public high schools.

Changing Their Mindset

The complex nature of this trip to Jamaica can only be likened to the complex struggles that go with teaching world literature that is inclusive of post colonial works in today's classrooms. First, I asked each of the participants to suspend their Americanness in Jamaica and their basic assumptions about Third World cultures. Second, I asked them to situate themselves in a world and culture they knew nothing about. Third, I also asked them to develop new techniques, a new language, and a new understanding for future use in the teaching of world literature.

Shifting the Historical Location

As part of the cultural experience the participants were given an opportunity to live in an environment that was not considered a tourist trap. This enabled them to better observe how Jamaican people lived and worked.

Kingston, Jamaica's capital, was the home base during the 5 week stay. The participants spent their first week getting accustomed to the heat and to their surroundings. Before leaving the United States, they were each given \$722 in American money, the equivalent of 22,000 Jamaican dollars. Having this money allowed them the opportunity to visit many craft markets and to make purchases on their own, without my guidance. From this experience, the participants gained both a working knowledge of the language, money, and of bartering for goods which they wanted to bring back to America. In addition, they experienced eating Jamaican food, both in the finest restaurants and from the street vendors who sold food from shacks that lined the sidewalks.

Learning in Jamaica

Weekday mornings were spent attending classes. As part of their transition in shifting their historical location from the United States to Jamaica and to ensure a critical understanding of this island's history and politics, I assigned the group a text, *The Caribbean: Survival, Struggle and Sovereignty* (Sunshine, 1988) for reading and discussion. Chapters explored were (a) "Caribbean People's Unity: History and Culture," (b) "Two Turbulent Decades: 1959 - 1980," (c) "Forced Migration and Caribbean Peoples Abroad," (d) "Alternative Models of Development: Cuba and Grenada," (e) "U.S. in the

Caribbean: Strategies of control 1960-1985," (f) "The Caribbean in Crisis," and (g) "Winds of Change: Building Alternatives for the Future and Toward a Constructive Caribbean Policy."

The assigned historical readings were also tied in with historical sites. For example, at Port Royal, one of Jamaica's shipping harbors, participants viewed maps that detailed the journey of the Blacks from Africa to Jamaica. A tour of Port Royal provided them with a deep, historical analysis of Jamaica's beginnings: slavery, Jamaica's connection to England, the buccaneers, Jamaica's connection to Spain, the 1907 earthquake, its ships, Jamaica's, connection to America and the rest of the world. At Hero's Circle, they saw monuments of Jamaica's founders both pre and post-independence: Marcus Garvey, Paul Bogle, Norman Manley, Donald Sangster, and Nannie, a female Maroon who fought the British system during the slavery era.

Fieldwork took place in the afternoons and evenings. The group spent two evenings out of each week reflecting on their class work and fieldwork. For fieldwork, the group attended several meetings with teachers from educational structure, visited historical sites, sugar plantations, and craft markets. The U.S. Embassy hosted a party, and the participants were introduced to several Jamaican writers, university professors, politicians, and embassy officials. In this environment, the members of the group were able to observe and speak to the new wave of Jamaican educators who were ensuring future Jamaicans a quality education by changing the curriculum from one that was English centered to one that was more Jamaican, and, at the same time, international in its perspective.

Providing Perspectives For The Shift in Location

By the end of 5 weeks, although many of the participants had come to the realization that Jamaica's culture was not representative of all Third World cultures, the lived experience had provided them with a practical insight of how they could use Jamaica's literary works to teach their students about issues that were endemic of Third World countries. For example, this physical relocation from the United States to Jamaica made the participants cognizant of the fact that teaching literary works from countries and cultures that were unknown to them required a shift, either a physical move from one country to another, or a mental shift from one consciousness to another. The implication was that in teaching world literature, which includes postcolonial literature, it was important for teachers to provide opportunities for their students to experience this shift in one way or another. Only by recreating this environment would they be able to provide their students with a whole new way of looking at the world.

Additionally, this physical shift in location provided the participants with the opportunity to experience a change in a new kind of power arrangement in a society other than that of the United States. It was the first time that any of the members of the group had stepped into a country that was 95% Black, a direct opposite of their American experience. It was also the first time any of them had been in an environment where Blacks were in control as leaders of a country. The implication for these teachers was that in the future readings of these postcolonial texts an acknowledgement of Blacks in power and control would have to be recognized. In these new literary works,

the native Black is at the center, equal and powerful, despite social and economic struggles.

A shift in location also provided the participants with the opportunity to give a human face to the characters they were reading about. A comment made by one of the participants was that "in truth, post colonial literature is the voice of the slave". Here, in these literary works, the voice of the slaves was being recorded with hope and light, not with hopelessness and despair. The authors of these books, after achieving only 30 years of independence from colonial rule, were presenting characters who were throwing off their yoke of colonialism and building their own countries in light of past sufferings. This is the essence of these new books for both Black and White readers in America; these authors have written about individuals who are becoming rulers of their own destinies, their own countries.

For all participants, this was the primary fact that they had to face during their lived cultural experiences in Jamaica. In recognizing this historic issue, they realized that there had to be a shift, not specifically physical, but mental, in the way they would be teaching world fiction when they returned to their classrooms in the United States. In these texts, the White person is no longer at the center of the novel, the savior who will deliver the Black native. The Black person is no longer vilified. Instead, the Black person is at the center, both as the ruler of the household and as the ruler of the country. The blame or the responsibility for the poverty of these countries or nations being written about, the inhumane conditions, is being laid on the leaders of the countries and on the international events that have shaped the world. Finally, in these novels, the

protagonists, in attempting to restructure society, draw on the models infused together through ancient rites, folklore, ancient poems, and proverbs that were once abandoned by their colonial masters.

Consequences of the Shift in Location

One consequence of placing the complex history of Jamaica at the center their learning was that participants became aware of the importance of location and the importance of power with regard to who gets what in the distribution of goods and services in any society. Embedded in this new knowledge was a new understanding of oppression, violence, and inequality. A far-reaching effect of this shift in historical location was that the participants could understand on a much more political, social and economic level the effects of slavery, colonialism, post-colonialism, and independence on the culture and inevitably the literary works that were coming out of Jamaica. The group could better understand the protagonists in Jamaican novels, their struggles and why they needed to create a new experience out of these struggles.

Another result of this shift in historical location was that the participants could critically analyze and trace the history of education in Jamaica from colonialism to post-independence, in the context of slavery, 300 years of colonialism, and 30 years of independence. This allowed the group to reflect upon the inherent injustice within the system and the inevitable consequences over the years to Jamaican society. It also afforded them the opportunity to embrace the attempt by Jamaican educators, over the past 30 years, to create a just educational system for their people.

Literary Texts

In the Context of History

In order for the participants to grasp an even deeper understanding of the consequences of location and power, I assigned the reading of two literary works by another Jamaican author: Brother Man and The Hills Were Joyful Together (Mais, 1995a, 1995b). Once their knowledge of the history and culture was more concrete and they had a basic understanding of the local language, it was easier for them to critically analyze and understand the literary texts that were being used. They viewed the literature as works that were deeply embedded in the historical and political context of Jamaica. They bridged the connection between literature and history. Finally, they realized that in order to gain a new perspective for teaching world literature which includes the literature from postcolonial countries, it would behoove them to encompass how the consequences of the presence and absence of power in nations come together in literary texts.

In the Context of World Events

Having gained a historical perspective from which to view Jamaica, the participants were challenged in several classes to list and to critically examine the historical events that shaped the world. Their list included events from the birth of Christ to the Civil Rights movement in America. The group then analyzed how these series of events contributed to the country's development in the political, social, and economic arenas. It was out of this new awareness that the participants came to realize that not only must they have a historical knowledge of the society they were teaching about but also they had to understand society's history in connection

to other world history. In reality, the literature they would be teaching would be a reflection of the country being studied, as well as a reflection of other world history and politics and the impact on society. By placing Jamaica at the center of their learning, the participants could better understand and to a greater extent see and feel the economic, political, and social consequences, or exploitation of world events that left a great impact on the country. Understanding this demanded a new pedagogy in world fiction in the sense that they would have to view these characters and the circumstances of their existence in a new light.

In the Context of a Philosophy of Cultural Studies

In the context of a theoretical framework from which to begin to write the curriculum, the participants were assigned several articles on multicultural education and cultural studies. The idea of knowing the history of Jamaica's society, understanding its connection to other societies, a physical and mental shift in location, and a solid perspective in articles on cultural studies and multicultural education were very much part of the experience on the island.

In the Context of the Dialectical Nature of World Literature

By week 5, the participants were ready to write the curriculum. It was difficult at first in that this was a very bright group of individuals who were committed to teaching, and each wanted to create a different curriculum.

In order to offset the tension, two separate groups were created. Writing the curriculum took place in three phases. In phase 1, the participants worked on the

differences between the words curriculum, goal, and objective. In phase 2, they dealt with the rationale or purpose for this curriculum. Finally, in phase 3, the two groups focused on five major goals. Out of these five major goals, the groups generated the objectives and activities for the curriculum.

The participants spent hours individually and in their groups reading and sharing books, short stories, and novels written by West Indian authors. These activities enabled them to emerge as a group that was able to connect history with literature, as well as their personal lived experiences.

Ultimately, the participants were able to write, create, and draw inferences about designing a world fiction pedagogy by using West Indian literary works as representative of the new literary movement in public schools, their lived experiences in Jamaica, the theoretical framework in cultural studies, and their own lived experiences as American citizens. At the end of our 5 weeks, the participants arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Teaching world fiction calls for a mental shift in consciousness.
2. World fiction must be taught with a connection to world history, world politics, human suffering, world exploitation, and world liberation.
3. World fiction is a connecting literature. It was through the understanding of the theories of justice and liberation for all humanity that the impact of world literature must be taught and felt in a connecting curriculum.
4. World literature was global literature. It is literature that touches on every scope of human events that had

- occurred throughout the world.
5. World literature was literature that presented individuals with another view of looking at the world. It was literature that asked educators to put both the Old World And The New World together and to embrace a new model for existence as the 21st century approached. It was liberation.
 6. World literature asked for teachers to suspend their culture and to situate themselves in a new culture.
 7. World literature asked teachers to be multicultural.
 8. World literature asked teachers to learn a culture that was not yet present in America.
 9. World literature asked teachers to develop new techniques, a new language, new images, new models.

Realizing this, it is important that teachers of world fiction (a) have a critical, historical, and political perspective of the culture and society being studied; (b) have an in-depth understanding of the internal and external factors that shape the society being studied; (c) have a political consciousness about justice and liberty as they apply to a global society.

Having done all these things, world fiction teachers must be prepared to address several important questions.

A Parameter of Purpose

1. Teachers of world literature must first be prepared to address the following questions, either in their staff meetings or at subject area meetings:
 - a. Why is there now a need for world literature which includes postcolonial writers?
 - b. For what purpose(s) is this being

- c. Who is asking for this new reform?
- d. In whose interest is this being done?
2. Closely related should be questions that pertain to the training of teachers who teach literature which includes postcolonial works?
 - a. How will teachers be prepared to teach it?
 - b. Will there be workshops to facilitate learning?
 - c. How available is this literature they will be using?
 - d. From where will the resources come that are so needed in the implementation of a successful world literature curriculum?
 - e. Where are their concerns regarding teaching of a world literature they know nothing about?
3. Additionally, the purposes of teaching world literature to a group of students must also be addressed:
 - a. Who are the students who will be served by this new literature?
 - b. How will educators measure whether or not the students have learned?
 - c. Is this going to be taught to a select group of students or to the entire student population?
4. Closely related to these questions are the following:
 - a. How will the community address this need for more money to be spent on an area that will not bring any return back to the community?
 - b. If world literature is to be taught from a political, social and international perspective, which it must, how will parents view this new learning?
 - c. How will parents view this new multicultural learning that is being forced on their children?

More important is the realization that 6

hours a week of class work is not enough to cover this material. Therefore, time must be set aside in staff meetings and in area meetings to discuss how many hours should be allotted to study this literature. Attached to the importance of time allotted to study is the question of whether or not world literature is going to be interdisciplinary or whether or not it is going to be the sole concern of only teachers of English language and literature.

My concern that the points in this parameter be addressed is embedded in the fact that change is difficult, and the real reasons for this new change in curriculum must be addressed.

The rationale for teaching world literature is the realization that society is global; nowhere can a world literature curriculum begin to be developed or initiated until some of the issues discussed are addressed.

Conclusion

Recognizing these issues, it is important that a world fiction curriculum, which includes postcolonial literature, be grounded in a political and historical framework not only of the country being studied but also of the world in general.

Having looked critically at all these suggestions, it is my firm belief that teachers of world fiction should and must initiate a plan of action to facilitate their students' understanding of the texts being infused into the curriculum. Such a plan should encompass (a) working with department chairs to implement a world literature curriculum, (b) obtaining strategies from other educators who have been teaching world literature for several semesters, (c) choosing a country in which educators are interested, (d) setting a goal

of the number of books that can be read in a year's time about the country that is chosen, (e) compiling as much information that can be obtained about the country chosen, (f) working with the embassy of the selected country, and (g) choosing a text that is suitable for both the teachers and the students.

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