Employed as a Generalist, Teaching as a Specialist: How to Stay Connected to Nineteenth-Century Studies in the Classroom

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For the last ten years I have been employed as a generalist on a Lecturer line in the English department at Baylor University, teaching a 4/4 load and tasked with extensive service expectations—in other words, a typical demanding schedule. Yet, as a full-time faculty member with job security (despite my non-tenured status) and the opportunity to teach a wide range of courses for both majors and non-majors, I truly love my job. I routinely teach surveys such as "American Literary Cultures" and "World Literature" as well as upper-level courses such as "Literature, Medicine, and Public Health," "Urban Space and the American Literary Imagination," and "Literature of the American West and Southwest." Any given semester I find myself getting to know a large swath of the undergraduate student body while researching across several Humanities and social science disciplines to write curricula that challenge my thinking, writing, and teaching. And I'm not the only one who enjoys these challenges: Laura L. Mielke has spoken highly of teaching the survey as a way to explore with students the value of the discipline of literary studies itself, and Robert Zaretsky has reflected on how pivoting from solely teaching modern French history to designing courses on a myriad of subjects—from political philosophy to postmodern fiction—revitalized

his teaching practice.

TThere's a difference, of course, between holding an academic position in one's specialization and *then* branching out as a generalist versus being hired as a generalist, hoping to connect to one's field of study at some point in the classroom. Yet as more and more Ph.D. graduates grapple with the shrinking academic job market and take non-C19 positions, this difference becomes a reality. For many of us, a central question arises: how can we find ways to stay connected to our specializations in nineteenth-century studies while building robust and fulfilling teaching practices as generalists? I'd like to share two ways that I've incorporated C19 teaching into my courses over the last decade that I have found rewarding: designing curriculum around nineteenth-century archives at Baylor and connecting units of study to the work of nineteenth-century scholars invited to speak on campus.

In my survey for non-majors, "American Literary Cultures," we work with archival materials from the Texas Collection to examine the origins of the Western genre in preparation to read Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992)[1]. In addition to housing the university's archives, the Texas Collection focuses on the local and regional history of the West. Highlights of the archive include a robust collection of Texas captivity narratives, western dime novels, Texas promotional materials, historical maps, and local and regional cookbooks.

First, we watch clips from *High Noon* (1952) and *Shane* (1953), and I ask students to identify the recognizable tropes that make these classic films "Westerns." (This unit of study is quite popular amongst Texas natives, many of whom grew up on working ranches yet haven't studied the West as a potent cultural symbol.) Once we make a list of these tropes, we're ready to dig into the archive to find their origins. We visit the Texas Collection to speak to an archivist about the development of dime novels in the nineteenth century and their role in American cultural history, and then we examine their expansive collection of western dime novels specifically. This visit familiarizes students with the stock characters, formulaic plots, and rhetorical patterns that writers frequently employed within the genre. Finally, I assign students digitized copies of two western dime novels to read: "The Brazos Tigers; or, The Minute-Men of Fort Belknap. A Tale of Sport and Peril in Texas" (1882) in *Beadle's New York Dime Library* and "The Girl Rancher; or Nobby Nat, the Tenderfoot of the Lone Star" (1906) in *Brave and Bold* from the collection. After visiting the archive and analyzing "The Brazos Tigers" and "The Girl Rancher," students are able to

trace how the historical figure of the cowboy morphed into the dashing hero of the western dime novel. This deep dive into nineteenth-century literary and cultural studies, in turn, positively impacts our discussion of McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*: students are thoughtful and nuanced in their analysis of the novel's adolescent protagonists, whose vision of themselves as cowboys owes more to dime novels and classic films than the realities of postwar American society.

In addition to teaching with archival materials, I design curriculum around the work of nineteenth-century scholars invited to speak on campus. These scholars are invited by 19CRS, an interdisciplinary research seminar whose members include faculty and graduate students from departments across the university. As a member of 19CRS' leadership team, I have had the opportunity over the last few years to invite two Americanist scholars to speak about their contributions to nineteenth-century literary studies, including the genre of literary biography. Since we plan these events a semester or a year in advance, I have enough time to revise curriculum to connect to speakers' specific research topics. For example, in preparation of Anne Boyd Rioux's talk, "Taking the Recovery of the Nineteenth-Century American Women Writers Beyond the Academy," we read "Rodman the Keeper" by Constance Fenimore Woolson (whom Boyd Rioux has written about extensively) and discussed what a literary recovery project entails and why it matters. Topics ranged from the complex critical reception of nineteenth-century women writers to debates over canonicity in American literature. Before John Gruesser's talk, "Sutton E, Griggs, Imperium in Imperio, and Waco, Texas," I highlighted the importance of Gruesser's contribution to our understanding of Griggs as a writer, preacher, and civil rights activist[2]. Students then read short selections of Griggs' writing, and we discussed his legacy on African American literature. Incorporating Gruesser's visit into my classroom proved fruitful later in the semester: students made powerful connections between Griggs' arguments for racial equality in the late nineteenth century and themes resonant in the poetry of Nikki Giovanni and photography of Kwame Brathwaite during the mid-twentieth century. These connections, in turn, led students to interrogate the recurring challenges in the pursuit of civil rights in the United States.

By introducing scholarship about the ongoing recovery of marginalized nineteenth-century writers, students discover the role of American literary historians in countering marginalization and erasure. Similarly, by teaching with nineteenth-century archival materials in the Texas Collection, students

explore the ethics of representation and erasure that led to the "myth making" of the American West. Most important, perhaps, are the critical thinking skills that students gain from this C19 teaching, as we face renewed efforts of erasure in our current political climate.

Finding job satisfaction as an academic has become more and more elusive as greater demands are made on our profession each year. (The fact that *Chronicle of Higher Education* dedicated an entire issue of its magazine recently to the state of the academic workplace and faculty burnout attests to the magnitude of the problem.) And while I certainly don't have a holistic solution to address the systemic issues facing our profession, I do find Jonathan Malesic's career advice compelling. In "How to Build a Sustainable Career," Malesic recommends, "To be happy in a faculty career requires aligning, as best as you can, the ideals of your vocation and the realities of your position." Malesic's approach resonates with me—I will continue to utilize resources on campus to bridge the gap between my generalist position and C19 teaching.

ENDNOTES

[1] The last few decades have produced a rigorous body of work in archival studies and pedagogy that examines theory, praxis, and student outcomes. When considering different pedagogical approaches to teaching with archival material, I recommend the resources available at TeachArchives.org, a collaborative project between the Brooklyn Historical Society and neighboring colleges.

[2] I don't require students to attend these talks—work commitments, team practices, and other classes often pose scheduling headaches. Instead, I simply encourage students to consider attending.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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