

## Why Teaching Literature Matters

By Dennis Recio, S.J.

**A**t a Christmas party in the not-too-distant past, a woman I had just met asked me what I did for a living. I told her I was a Jesuit priest. Suddenly, she launched into a discussion of social justice. I explained to her that I taught English and writing at USF. Her face clouded immediately, and she asked, “What purpose does that serve?”

Surprised by the frankness of her inquiry, I sought clarification. “Is that a serious question?” She nodded, regarding me somewhat warily. “I teach students to see beyond their own experience.” I was struck by how frequently some people presume that social justice and academic work do not offer one another insight, that their relationship is, at worst, inimical to one another; at best, lukewarm when necessary.

For my students, reading Asian-American literature allows them to mine what has been an unarticulated experience. Currently, Asian-American authors are raising questions about self-hate, identity, assimilation vs. nationalism, nativity, displacement, and gender/sexuality issues, to name a few. When we read Peter Bacho’s short story, “August 1968,” we encounter the long-standing friendship between a Filipino-American, Buddy, and his African-American friend, Aaron. Buddy has adopted and appropriated African-American identity in order to fit into the larger community. Both friends speak in the same urban-shaped patois and they tease and affirm one another accordingly. When the race riots create tensions in their relationship, Buddy’s insecurities lead him to make an incendiary decision which causes the collapse of their friendship.

In discussing “August 1968,” we acknowledge the complex history that led up to the riots. Stokely Carmichael, Black Power, and riots in Newark and Detroit all shape our reading of the work. But there is also a point at which our discussion explores the limits of performance, of appropriating a cultural identity that is not one’s own. How do we avoid forcing people into a narrow self-understanding of their person while navigating the realities of history? When Buddy and Aaron’s friendship collapses, it is because Buddy realizes that appropriating African-American identity will not protect him from the kind of political

upheaval that renders his friendship at a loss. As a result of this inquiry, my students who have invested heavily in hip-hop culture will sometimes express their discomfort at the possibility that they have adopted another ethnicity’s culture without considering the rich value of their own ethnic heritage.

Perhaps one of the more urgent questions that arises in any ethnic literature is the process of coming to authenticity. Our students cannot be “men and women for others” until they have a clear sense of their own desires. For my Asian-American students, I hope they will believe in the beauty and power of being Chinese, Filipino, Hawaiian, Korean, Japanese, and Hmong, fused with the richness that comes with being in the United States. Too often, I encounter students who find reading Asian-American literature exciting but also emotionally painful as their personal experiences become exposed on the page. But when the pain subsides, they can begin to ask the difficult questions that can free them to accept the unavoidable challenges ahead.

For my students who are not Asian American and who are exploring a literary tradition new to them, their courage to take a risk in doing so can bring a deeper understanding of the people with whom they will work in society.

As one student admitted to me recently, “I have begun to ask myself about the lives of others, about the Chinese woman on the bus, about the Filipina woman who serves as a nurse. I am suddenly curious about their lives.” In this blessed curiosity, she gradually tears down assumptions she may have had, gently subverting the possible tension that could easily arise from a series of misunderstandings.

I once asked a student if she believed literature had saving power. She replied without hesitation: “Yes, I do.” Literature may not be the panacea to all our ills but it is a worthy response to the myriad questions we have about one another. The concerns that arise from literature can aid social justice. Where social justice seeks to address the needs of the poor, literature affords us the possibility of delving even more deeply into this incipient relationship. [USF](#)



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