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TEACHING ILLINOIS:

DEVELOPING A COURSE ON STATE LITERATURE

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What makes someone an "Illinois Author"? What role do these writers play in American literature? How has Illinois been presented as a setting in literature? These were a few of the questions prominent on a promotional brochure last Spring semester for a new course I would be offering in the Fall. Now that the course has been successfully completed, I'd like to share *why* developing a course on state literature is valuable, and *how* to go about doing so. Thus this article is structured around answering questions that I had, and that may be plaguing you. While my essay is specific to a course on Illinois, I believe that useful information can be extrapolated to other situations and may help you develop a course on the literature of your own state.

Why develop a literature survey course particular to a state?

I'll begin with a personal reason: adding variety to the curriculum. I'm an assistant professor at a small, private liberal arts college in Illinois, aptly titled Illinois College as a marker that it was the first college in the state to conduct classes and award the baccalaureate degree in 1829 (◆College of ◆Firsts'◆). As the resident Americanist in a department of eight full-time faculty, I teach an early American survey every Fall. The course is designed as a broad survey for non-majors at all levels, although it does occasionally ◆hook◆ students into declaring an English major. I proposed teaching a course on Illinois authors in part selfishly, to replace the early American survey in the 2005-2006 course offerings. The process of updating our existing courses and the work of researching and developing new courses is, I believe, very valuable to keeping faculty fresh engaged with the discipline. While it entails more work in preparation, a new course can serve as a ◆vacation◆ from an old standard that may be going stale.

A second reason to develop a course on state literature was to expand my knowledge of what was, to me, a new home. However, researching the literature of place can bring new information even to those who have lived their whole lives in the same state, and structuring the discovered literature into a coherent curriculum can reveal connections between canonical works and newfound gems of regional writers. In *Rediscoveries: Literature and Place in Illinois*, Robert C. Bray asks an intriguing question: ♦Can the ethos of a state or region or nation be adequately understood if a considerable segment of its literature, though no more than a century removed in time, goes almost entirely unread?♦ When researching state literature you will no doubt find, as I did, many works that shed a new light on local history, people, and places, yet are part of no official curriculum. As David C. Pierce and Richard C. Wiles note, ♦the local is the point of departure for all life♦ (3). How could reading the literature specific to my town, region, and state help me better understand the place and its people? And, more importantly, how would it aid students in understanding literary history?

The proposal for an Illinois Authors course was eagerly accepted. The college prides itself on its unique history, as I'm sure every college does, and the course was of interest because it could promote and put into context the college's role in the region. The course might be of interest to local community members and groups and distinguish our curriculum from that of several local colleges. It was also hoped that the course would interest our student body (89% are from Illinois). The course was fully enrolled, indicating that students found it an appealing choice to meet a humanities requirement, and 20 of the 22 students in the course were from the state. Indeed, in the post-course survey I conducted, all but one of the students said they selected the course from among a variety of options because the regional focus caught their attention.

What are the benefits of using region, rather than genre or period, as the lens?

A regional focus allows for a broad historical swath to be covered and also allows multiple genres to be included. For instance, we began with Eliza W. Farnham's 1846 nonfiction work *Life in Prairie Land* and ended with Richard Powers' 1998 novel *Gain*. Along the way, we read short stories, poetry, two other novels, and a play. This allowed us to discuss how Illinois as a state developed, how the state literature reflected cultural changes, and how literary techniques developed in sync with broader literary movements such as Realism and Modernism. Reading multiple genres allowed me to introduce students, 82% of who were not English majors, to genre conventions and different reading strategies, a goal of survey courses. The variety also helped to hold student's attention. Indeed, I was surprised by how many students declared a new-found appreciation for and, in some cases, love of poetry. (The students themselves were equally amazed.)

Using region as a lens can provide links between student experience with landscape and the literature. Roughly half the students were from a specific area that an author was from or a work was set in. For instance, one student was from Lewistown, Illinois, home of Edgar Lee Masters and setting for his *Spoon River Anthology*. She brought pictures of the Oak Hill Cemetery, the actual setting for Masters' work, and announced the annual Spoon River Driver, which culminates in a reading. Even those who did not have such a clear correlation between hometown and literary work had been to areas that were prominent in the literature, such as Springfield (just down the road from the college). We also read short stories by JF Powers, a native of Jacksonville, where the college is located. This proximity allowed students to understand that literature is not some alien, elitist form written in Parisian garrets or New York lofts, but that poetry and prose were natural responses to the same Midwestern landscape and customs that produced them. Students were often vocal in discussion and brought in their own experiences, such as when one tennis-player spoke passionately about David Foster Wallace's ♦Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley.♦ Another student, reporting on James Ballowe's poem ♦Starved Rock,♦ brought in pictures of her own visit to Starved Rock State Park and provided additional research on the history to clarify the history retold in the poem. This kind of interaction with the material helps serve a pedagogical goal: to enable students to view literature as alive.

How can such a course make use of interdisciplinary resources?

A course on regional literature must make use of interdisciplinary resources, helping students see literature as a form of artistic production that engages its environment. Local experts in history, geography, and the

environment can be invited in to share their knowledge of the region. This can be paired with early writings about settling the region, which then leads into a discussion of early literary conventions (such as the popularity of regional sketches in early newspapers, and the use of travel journals as both exotic escape fiction and practical how-to manuals for other travelers). As Robert Bray notes, Illinois regional literature

is crammed with social history. It represents the works and days of common folk and insists upon drawing its scenes and portraits realistically, with carefully reproduced dialect, with foibles, superstitions, and peculiar mannerisms, with evangelistic religion, frontier politics, and democracy and lawlessness. (6)

Reading early sketches led to a lesson on dialect and folk culture, which can be supplemented by artwork depicting the prairie and early folk music. For instance, we looked at folksong lyrics that read ♦then move your family westward; good health you will enjoy,/ And rise to wealth and honor in the State of Elanoy,♦ a song comparing Illinois to Eden (Hallwas 118). We compared this favorable vision to M.H. Jenks' 1847 poem ♦Farewell to Illinois,♦ which reads in part, ♦Illinois, adieu to thy flies and mosquitoes,/ Thy black muddy roads, with their soil three feet deep;/ I was anxious to gaze on thy beautiful features,/ But in parting I feel no desire to weep♦ (Hallwas 119). By examining the geography and early settlement history, and seeing visual depictions, students better understood these competing visions of Illinois as heaven and hell.

How do you find and integrate these resources?

One of the most basic research steps is an internet search on your state's name and keywords such as ♦literature♦ or ♦authors♦ or ♦syllabi.♦ I uncovered an anthology entitled *Illinois Literature: The 19th Century* by John Hallwas, now a retired professor from Western Illinois University. I contacted Dr. Hallwas, and he graciously led me to other sources, gave tips on course design, and recommended I look into the Illinois Humanities Council. Following his advice, I won a grant to fund Becky Bradway, herself an Illinois writer, and she gave a public slide lecture on the Chicago Renaissance. Your state may also have many valuable resources to be tapped, including grants.

Such a search will also turn up state university presses, which often publish books with a regional focus, and your state library. The Illinois State Library sponsors an online Illinois Writers Directory, writing contests, the Illinois Center for the Book, and publishes an annotated bibliography of Illinois fiction. Another resource is state poet laureate programs, currently available in 37 states (Library of Congress). I arranged, for a very modest fee, a two-day visit to campus by Kevin Stein, the current Illinois poet laureate, during which he gave a public poetry reading and spent a day with faculty and students. Dr. Stein's visit was a huge success♦he was so open and approachable that many students commented in their evaluations that they were now less frightened of poetry, that they had a new appreciation for it and saw poetry as linked to their own lives. It was the first poetry reading most had ever attended, and some students said his visit was the best part of the course. As one student wrote on their course evaluation, ♦I hated poetry before because I could not understand the meaning of it, but Stein helped to change my mind.♦ In addition, he donated \$100 of his speaking fee back to the college library for the purpose of buying books by contemporary Illinois poets.

Another potential resource is local cultural and historical sites. I did *not* arrange a field trip, but perhaps will in the future, as nearby Springfield has the poet Vachel Lindsay's house, and the Spoon River Cemetery and various Lincoln sites are within reasonable driving distance. Such a trip might add richness and variety to the experience of studying literature for many students, especially if the trip were tied to a specific work that makes that site central.

How do you make decisions regarding coverage and design?

I was honestly amazed by how many ♦Illinois authors♦ I found, and needed to make some tough decisions in order to design a feasible course. What did I mean by ♦Illinois Author,♦ for instance? Born there? Lived there for some period? Wrote about the area? As Pierce and Wiles ask, ♦Is a liberal sprinkling of local scenes and place names in a novel enough to qualify a work as a regional one?♦ (6). I decided that the author should either

be born or have lived in the state for an extended period, and I looked for texts that also used Illinois as a setting. For this reason I did not include perhaps the state's most famous writer, Ernest Hemingway—he doesn't set works in Illinois, and besides, I justified, most students read Hemingway in high school. I did include Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* even though Sinclair isn't from and didn't spend much time in Illinois: the work was such a great representation of Chicago in a certain era, as well as being a great example of muckraking journalism mixed with narrative, that I included it.

I also wanted to ensure a diversity of experiences and considered gender, race, and other factors in text selection, such as representing rural areas. I agree with Pierce and Wiles, who argue that

diversity—one could say fragmented responses—is of the substance of regionalism. If diversity is absent, then richness, complexity and variety are lost in nostalgia and parochialism. The region will not be a unified concept but a many-faceted way of interaction with place and circumstance. (6)

Too often people hear Illinois and think Chicago, and indeed when many hear Chicago they think of Sandburg's *City of the Big Shoulders*. We applied James Hurt's idea of three distinct symbols in Illinois literature: the prairie, Lincoln, and Chicago, to examine the repeated motifs in literature set all over the state and throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As one student wrote in a course evaluation, I always felt that the only famous Illinois Authors came from Chicago, but in reality there are so many more. This is precisely the sentiment I want students to leave the course with—a strong sense of the variety of literature of Illinois.

Another component in the design of the course was the availability of texts. As James Krohe Jr. notes in his article *Forgotten Canon*, many important Illinois texts are *moldering away* in libraries. In my own search, the Hallwas anthology of 19th century work was out of print, but Kevin Stein and G.E. Murray had recently edited a wonderful anthology of 20th century Illinois poetry. State University presses with special series rather than large commercial publishers can be a good source for texts, but cost and availability are often prohibitive, and these books can quickly go out of print. I solved this problem by using electronic reserve for the early works that had been available in the Hallwas anthology, making some use of state press publications such as the poetry anthology, and finding works such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which are available in mass-market paperback editions.

So, how'd the course go? Would you teach it again?

In conclusion, the course I taught was a success, both in my eyes and those of my students. One student wrote in their course evaluation, I think that the class was a very interesting one and I think it is important to have it repeated. Another wrote, I have learned so much from this class. I had no idea that there were so many famous/successful authors from Illinois! I am much more interested in their work now that I know I have the connection of living in the same state as them. I enjoyed teaching the course and learned quite a bit (always a goal of mine). I will teach the course again in the future, although I will also continue to tweak it. For instance, next time we'll focus on the 20th century.

By spending a semester on the literature of Illinois we managed to better understand the ethos of the region in which we live. Through reading and discussion we discovered what makes the state, and its literature, simultaneously unique and part of a larger social and literary history. To close, I'd like to once again quote Robert Bray: *The Midwest as a unique cultural region is dying. Thus the retreat into place into, as the familiar metaphor goes, an island in the corn and the preservation of a usable past are more urgent matters than in former days* (160). While Bray's comment may cause some to label him part of *A rising chorus of modern-day Jeremiahs* that *proclaims the death of place in American life*, he makes a valuable point that teachers of literature should consider (Halttunen 1). Many students learn about literature in broad swaths, as global or national artistic trends while reading a few specific examples. Thus Hemingway comes to stand in for *Modernism*, etc. A course on state literature can help students, including those from outside that state or country, view reading and writing in a new way. Preserving a sense of distinct regions, even as their accents

and customs are homogenized by modern technology and consumerism, is a worthwhile goal. I'd encourage you to explore developing a course on state literature.

Note: This article began as a paper presented at ♦Region(s),♦ the 37th annual College English Association conference in San Antonio, Texas, April 6-8, 2006. My thanks to fellow panelists Fernando Benavidez and Jennifer Holly Wells.

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