

Rewriting the Foreign Literature Syllabus from the Perspective of Critical Literacy

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reconsider, from the perspective of Critical Literacy, the design of the foreign literature syllabus, produced in what Spivak (2003:8) calls 'European national languages': English, French, Spanish, German and Portuguese, and that Gates (1992:89) defines as inscribed by the metaphor of racial difference that seeks to pass the literary expressions articulated through them as 'natural, absolute and essential'. Our desire to rewrite the foreign literature syllabus comes at a moment when the discipline is being problematized because of the increasing relevance and centrality of postcolonial literatures that deconstruct the West versus the Rest divide (Gates 1992): the monolithic and univocal West that silences the multiple Others. I will consider the issue from the perspective of the English literature syllabus used in undergraduate Modern Language (English/Portuguese) courses in Brazilian universities.

As an example, there was a radical change in the literatures in English after WWII, when the newly liberated colonies in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean as well as the former settlement colonies: Canada, Australia and New Zealand, started producing their own national literatures in English, or better, in *englishes*, as Ashcroft *et al* (1989) announced more than a decade ago. These new marginal talents have acquired significant and representative voices, to the point that in the last years some Nobel Prizes and most Booker Prizes have not stayed in Europe or in the United States, but have emigrated to Asia, Africa, the Caribbean and Canada. Therefore, the big names against which new writers in English measure their talent have not come from England or the United States lately, but from the former colonies. It is these literatures that have brought about a renovation to canonical literatures.

However, if making room for these new literatures is thought by most as politically correct, one of the issues that needs to be addressed is *how* they find their way into the school syllabus so as not to re-affirm their marginal status, and the critical perspective from which they will be taught so that they do not become a mere celebration of newness, to borrow Bhabha's term (2004). Another issue to be taken into account is that it is not the case that the so-called canonical literatures should not be taught any longer. Rather, what should be reconsidered is firstly, their place in this broader school syllabus and secondly, the way in which these texts should be approached, from a critical perspective. In turn, that calls for a reconsideration of some taken-for-granted categories such as the concept of literariness and literary value, the concept of the aesthetic, the role of literature and the relationship between literature and culture.

This shows that, on the one hand, the foreign literature syllabus should first reflect all the different cultural groups that fight for a fair treatment at an ethical, aesthetic and political level. On the other hand, the foreign literature syllabus will always be inscribed in a moment of 'transition' (Bhabha 2004) because its elaboration implies the co-existence of different literary and cultural narratives in counterpoint whose relationship is never fixed or transcendental but is always in a process of change. In turn, borrowing Bhabha's

conceptualization about the relationship among cultures in the globalized present, the foreign literature syllabus recreates that moment of equilibrium among literary and cultural intersubjectivities that can be read as 'a moment of fairness grounded in the historical inequalities and dissonances of the present' and implies the critical revision of the already established and the inclusion of the new as an ethical project, always contingent and contextual, not a mere exaltation of the present. In the literary tradition in English, the inclusion of Black writers, feminist writers and post-colonial literary traditions exemplify such moments of cultural and literary transition.

The ways literatures and, in particular, foreign literatures are framed and interpreted are of the utmost importance in the educational process because the discourse of literature 'may give us entry to the performativity of cultures as instantiated in narrative' (Spivak 2003:13); it has a marked affective element, due to the 'metaphoric/symbolic use of language' (Tiffin 1996:145) and because, as Achebe (1978:95) noted, 'If art may dispense with the constraining exactitudes of literal truth, it does acquire in return incalculable powers of persuasion in the imagination'. This illustrates how persuasive literary discourse can be in the sense that it very much influences and determines the way of thinking and of approaching both one's own culture and other cultures. However, the agency promoted by literature can be either progressive or regressive: the foreign literature syllabus can be regarded as either a way to shorten distances among cultures or a way to reproduce unequal social relationships. As Achebe (1978:98) points out, '...not all fictions are equally useful or desirable' in all cultural contexts. His remark is particularly relevant in the case of literatures in European national languages since the contents of these disciplines, as taught in different parts of the world, both former colonies and Third World Countries, still bear marks of the colonial outlook on the divide between hegemonic/marginalized cultures that from a literary perspective translates as canonical/non-canonical literary traditions.

In this context, I will frame my considerations on these issues from the perspective of Critical Literacy because as Shor (1999) points out, this theoretical perspective allows us to critically question the way in which we have been shaped by the *status quo* of our own social, cultural and educational contexts at the same time that it helps us recreate our discourses in order to remake ourselves and our culture.

Guillory (1993:54) says that 'it is only in the pedagogic imagery that changing the syllabus means changing the world'. I do not quite agree. I do believe that changing the literary syllabus helps change our vision of the world because, as he himself says 'The selection of texts is a selection of values, the way of reaffirming one ideology' (1993: 22). Therefore, changing not only the contents of the syllabus but also the way the syllabus should be approached is a way of becoming aware of the way knowledge is constructed and how it bears directly upon our social and cultural context.

Envisioning the Indian nation, freed from the English yoke, Gandhi understood the mission of modern Indian literatures as fostering 'unity, morality, valor and such other qualities' and discouraging 'communalism, fanaticism, ill will and hatred between individuals, classes and races' (1975:347). What the schools of India should teach, according to Gandhi, were 'the literature of the people' (1975:26), 'literature and arts that spoke to millions' (1975:415-416). If literature is seen in this way, as I will discuss in the present paper, and such works included in the literature syllabus, I believe that discussing the literature syllabus goes beyond the pedagogic imagery and helps envision a better society within and without the national frontiers.

Questioning the Foreign Literature Syllabus from the Perspective of Critical Literacy

Considering the way in which school syllabuses are designed is of vital importance because it leads to questioning the educational system as a whole. School syllabuses in general and foreign literature syllabuses in particular can be described, borrowing Simon's term, as 'modes of semiotic production' (1992:37) because they imply a constant process of meaning making. In the case of the literature syllabus, this process is conditioned by the inclusion of some narratives and traditions to the detriment of others that goes beyond aesthetic considerations. Thus it may become an institutionalized tool of categorization and exclusion due to cultural, class, racial, ethnic or gender reasons.

In turn, many of these texts become part of the 'content fetish' (Gee 2004:117) in the sense that when people think of learning literature, they think only of *what* texts should be learnt. Many of these texts become staples of the literature syllabus to the point that they are taught year after year, but nobody questions *why* the same narratives are constantly being reread, instead of others. However, as is well known, these choices by syllabus designers are not arbitrary but are 'historically and economically constituted by the social forms within which we live our lives (Simon 1992), and depend on the type of ideology the teaching and learning process is intent on fostering. Both teachers and students, then, should first critically understand the motivations that have given rise to the syllabus then analyze in detail how these choices and motivations translate themselves into the teaching/learning process.

There is also a third question to be considered from the perspective of Critical Literacy, that goes beyond the scope of this paper: *how* texts should be taught, since each learning setting has characteristics of its own, both literary and cultural, and therefore the inclusion of literary texts in the syllabus as well as the way they will be later approached in the classroom situation should not be fixed but variable.

Talking about cultural technologies, Simon (1992:44) explains that such practices, when applied in certain contexts, articulate what are considered as *proper* ways of communicating that are then considered as 'customary, accepted, normalized and expected'. In so doing, they exclude other practices as 'marginal, false or perverse'. Considering the way in which any syllabus, and in particular the foreign literature syllabus is built, should imply looking behind the practice in order to see the epistemology that informs the content included in it as well as the pedagogy applied to develop it. This is foremost because the literature syllabus, as any other mode of semiotic production, tends to legitimize certain literary productions as canonical, and the ways of life articulated through them as the ones to be emulated, while the ones which are left out are reduced to the condition of marginalized and non-canonical. These assertions are then passed on to the students in the classroom situation as taken-for-granted truths. When considered in this way, one can see that the contents as well as the epistemology that inform the literature syllabus go beyond the merely pedagogical and become markedly ideological.

What lies behind the literature syllabus is a system of belief backed up by an institution and as such is connected not only to certain concepts of schooling, but also to certain ideologies. Because of this, as Simon (1992) remarks, it is necessary to identify the politics behind any such project. Both professors and students should be aware of these beliefs. Teaching literature is not simply a question of doing a critical interpretation of the narratives listed in the syllabus, through the application of the tools and concepts of literature, but also understanding why those texts and not others, and from that perspective and not others, have been turned into the content of the pedagogical activities developed in class.

To achieve this, Critical Literacy proposes a series of questions to critically question any literacy project to help identify the ideology that informs the literature syllabus: What are the

assumptions behind the syllabus? what could be the implications of the assumptions for the school and the students where it will be applied? what could be shaping the policy maker's understanding of reality and conception of literature? who decides what should be included? in whose name? for whose benefit? whose interest could be represented in this syllabus? what is the education model behind it? what is the logic that undergirds the literature syllabus? All these questions about the syllabus point to the 'recognition of the relations of difference and power that such cultural technologies mobilize' (Simon 1992:44). It is precisely this type of reflection that will allow us to assume a critical stand towards the foreign literature syllabus in the sense that it will permit us to challenge the universal quality assigned to its rhetoric when considered in counterpoint with the many literary traditions produced in different cultural contexts.

Critical Literacy also considers *any* discursive formation and literacy practice as 'social, situated and multiple' (Souza 2007:1). If applied to the construction of a foreign literature syllabus these three tenets show that this mode of semiotic production has an aesthetic, ideological and performative function, capable of producing social agency thus showing the interconnectedness between knowledge and power. They also show that the foreign literature syllabus is a constructed and provisional discourse that depends on the context where it is enunciated. Therefore, the concept of knowledge that undergirds it is not singular but multiple and conflictual: different types of knowledges co-exist in counterpoint both within and outside-the cultural context where it is being applied. These considerations deconstruct the idea of the syllabus as a transcendent and essentialist fetish, based on a preconceived universal concept of literature that disregards local interests and beliefs.

The Social Quality of the Foreign Literature Syllabus

In the introduction to *Loose Canons* (1992: xv), Gates argues that

Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationality, ethnicity, race, class and gender. And the only way to transcend those divisions –to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture. Beyond the hype and the high-flown rhetoric is a pretty homely truth: there is no tolerance without respect –and no respect without knowledge. Any human being sufficiently curious and motivated can fully possess another culture, no matter how 'alien' it may appear to be.

Gates sees education as a cultural practice that can shorten distances among communities, deconstruct stereotypes and prevent ethnic, racial, class and gender differences from turning into discrimination. One of the literacy practices that should contribute to fostering this policy is the teaching of foreign literature, if it is based on a broad, located and not universal syllabus that makes room for all literary traditions and understands the narratives included in it. That is, not as closed literary practices or monolithic cultural forms with stable meanings that cannot be removed once they find the way into the syllabus, but as open literary and *social* practices that acquire different meanings when they cross cultural borders; and a syllabus which can always make room for new narratives. In addition, critical reading, in terms of the contexts of departure and arrival, will lead to a modification of the way in which ones and the Other's cultures are regarded. In this sense, the teaching of literature helps in the construction of social identities and leads to political agency.

However, one of the critiques made is that, when included in the school syllabus and turned into objects of study, literary narratives suffer a process of deracination (Guillory 1993) because they are reduced to a formal interpretation, or considered as token texts of complex and heterogeneous cultural contexts, erasing internal differences and reifying both cultures

and literary traditions. Thus the illusion is created that *our* culture or the culture of the other is transmitted simply by contact with the works themselves.

Critical Literacy resists this tendency through the premise that any literacy practice, including literature, should understand the process of meaning-making as being ingrained within social practices and having the power of bringing about social change. The school, where the foreign literature syllabus is applied, belongs within a community and interacts with other sites where social meanings are constructed such as 'one's family, various forms of popular media, the courts, formal and informal youth groups, sports organizations, religious institutions' (Simon 1992:17). Hence, literature is not an isolated practice but belongs among a network of social relations whose meanings, dependent on the socio-historical values of the community, are in a constant process of interaction and change. Besides, as Souza (2007) shows, Critical Literacy goes beyond the 'here's a culture, here's a literacy' because it considers that *any* cultural community is heterogeneous and, therefore, rather than having fixed and transcendent meanings, the different cultural expressions produced in it are iterable in the sense that they will acquire different meanings in the different contexts of use (Souza 2007: 1), both within and outside national frontiers.

From the perspective of Critical Literacy, then, any critique of a literary text will not limit itself to aesthetics, but will consider rhetorical strategies as local, discursive and ideological tools through which a culture creates an image of itself, showing the deeply interconnected quality of the aesthetic and the social. It is only when this complex social context is ignored or any particular social context, within the community, considered as universal (Prinsloo 2005, cited in Souza 2007) that the study of literary texts is reduced to a mere technicality through a reification of the values articulated through it.

When seen from this perspective, the foreign literature syllabus actually articulates complex social relations, through the texts and traditions included in it that are in a constant process of tension and change; this could lead to a reconsideration of writing and reading literature as social practice.

The Situated Quality of the Foreign Literature Syllabus

As Gee (2004:117) explains, for Critical Literacy 'each learning situation is different and calls for customized implementations not general ones'. Hence, other relevant questions to be taken into account as regards the foreign literature syllabus are 'What knowledges and perspectives are needed by whom and why?' And 'How will the foreign literature syllabus vary from one cultural context to another?' These two questions call attention to the fact that often the same literary texts are taught the world over, disregarding, firstly, in what way the knowledge passed through- those texts influences the contexts where they are taught, and secondly, what meanings those texts acquire when taught in different contexts. But if all literacy practices are socially situated and literacy is not some neutral skill to be acquired (Souza 2007), then including a foreign literary tradition in the syllabus implies including a foreign cultural vision, as has just been discussed. This requires a reconsideration of the way in which the knowledges articulated by such a syllabus relate to the knowledges of the cultural situations involved: that of the foreign literature being taught and that of the learners exposed to this syllabus.

As is well known, the relationship among cultures is asymmetrical and implies different relationships of power. Thus, a text from a hegemonic culture taught in a so-called marginal culture may often be taken as a literary and cultural measure to be attained, indirectly putting local cultural productions in a relation of inferiority; or it may be very much resisted, precisely because of the dominant culture it represents. Such is the case, for example, of the teaching of American literature in a Latin American context, where it may be taken, by some, as a

model to be emulated and by others as a model to be resisted. On the other hand, a text from a so-called marginalized culture, written in the same European language being taught and considered as unique or relevant to the hegemonic culture may often be appropriated and accrued to the hegemonic literary canon and syllabus, thus domesticating and masking its difference, through a decontextualization of its origins and a reduction of the narrative to a merely formal analysis. A case in point is that of James Joyce, known the world over as an Irish writer, but taught as one of the staples of the syllabus of Contemporary English Literature.

Souza (2007:3) points out that '... in the trans movements or semiotic flows from one social context to another, the nature of the social relationship between the context of origin ('from where') and the context of the social arrival ('to where') will define the way in which meanings interact and are transformed'. When applied to the literature text, it means that literary narratives, when crossing the borders among cultures, first through the syllabus and then through the teaching practice, will acquire different ways of signification. As Souza (2007:3) asks:

Does the nature of the 'others' in the community of origin, when compared to the community of arrival, play a role in deciding to what extent the saturated meanings of the word are maintained, abandoned or modified when the words flow across the borders from one social context to another?

The foreign literature syllabus functions along the same lines: the introduction of meaning-making systems into new contexts often implies a complex and antagonistic recognition of a different Other. These literary practices will be absorbed and reinterpreted and will lead, on the one hand, to a reconsideration of the relationship with the culture where those practices originated and, on the other, to a reconsideration of one's own (the reader's and the learner's) cultural practices. This process will very much depend on the relationship between the culture of the foreign literature syllabus and the context where it is being taught.

A good example comes from the teaching of English literature in the Caribbean. As Donnell and Welsh (1996) point out, colonial institutions played a significant role in determining the nature and value of literature in the West Indies. The literature selected for dissemination served the interests of colonial policy and as such, while pretending to be non-ideological was informed by a strong ideological intention. Thus many of the texts which were promoted by the school syllabuses as unproblematically apolitical helped the English to impose their culture as superior in their desire to colonize the Other, who was thus relegated to a position of subservience.

Donnell and Welsh (1996) illustrate this with the teaching of the poem 'The Daffodils' by William Wordsworth in Caribbean schools. Written by a white poet about flowers in England, within an Anglo-centric cultural perspective, it is seemingly both objective and purely aesthetic. However, the poem cannot be identified as ideologically neutral within a Caribbean context where daffodils are unfamiliar. Though Wordsworth was inspired by the culture of the common man and he was initially encouraged by the ideals of the French Revolution, once his poem crossed the borders of England and was recreated in a Caribbean context, it became one of the staples of the English literary canon and a weapon of domination. The idea that is implied in this poem, when read from a Caribbean context, is the superiority both of the English literary tradition as well as of English culture and nature as there is an implied comparison with local forms both cultural and poetical: the beauty and purity of English nature is implicitly contrasted to the un-named exuberance of the Caribbean. Both, the poem, as well as the genre, were appropriated and rewritten by the Caribbean people, from their own perspective, imprinting upon the poem and its form a new set of meanings, originating in the cultural context of the Caribbean.

Any syllabus, then, is partial and context-dependant - it will be interpreted in different contexts with profound and sometimes prejudicial cultural effects. Therefore, the literary practice, at any of its levels, requires more than an exercise of interpretation of its metaphors at a formal level: it requires a critical attitude towards what is chosen to be taught. If not, the syllabus becomes a decontextualized abstraction that obscures and masks the relations of power and difference that go into its design and helps re-affirm predominant cultural stereotypes.

One of the tenets of Critical Literacy is that no knowledge is total and immutable and no single system of meaning-making holds good for all and any cultural context; knowledge as a product of meaning-making is situated, ideological, constructed and contingent. Therefore, any foreign literature syllabus could be substituted by any other one, within the cultural context where it is being applied, depending on the needs of the learning community at a particular time. The foreign literature syllabus thus depends on the 'program of truth' (Veyne 1984:31) of the community where it is being elaborated' in relation to the values that hold good for that community at a given historical moment. Following Veyne's reasoning that it is not the case that some truths are more truthful than others, but that each concept of truth depends on what *truth* means for a certain community, it can be said that there are no literature syllabi more or less *representative* than others. This is because the texts included in the literature syllabus do not represent some transcendent grounded canon that is beyond any type of questioning and could only be changed by the sacred guardians of such a temple (namely, the literary critic);-the selection of texts included in the syllabus is contingent and depends on the specific belief claims of the community where they will be taught. This shows that any literature syllabus is a construct and is analogous to the many other literature syllabi that exists within and outside the community.

Teachers and students should be urged to consider what literature syllabus is in the best interest of their community because educational knowledge is directly related to cultural formation. If these considerations are not taken into account, they will often be consciously or unconsciously perpetuating an unfair *status quo*.

The Multiple Quality of the Foreign Literature Syllabus

From the discussion so far, it is clear that for Critical Literacy, the foreign literary syllabus in European languages like English should be multiple, in the sense that it should accept the different types of metaphors produced by different cultural and literary traditions articulated in all forms of *englishes* and literary conventions. The metaphoric quality of these many narratives will depend on the way in which literature is understood in the different cultural contexts in which it is articulated. The foreign literature syllabus should deconstruct the canonical view of truth and beauty which claims there is some accepted universal standard of what the literary is, and that it is able to cross cultural borders in an unalterable form.

Eagleton (1983) problematizes the concept of 'literariness' arguing that it is not an essence inherent to the words or the language; rather it is the context that decides whether a certain text is 'literary' or not. In other words, it is the interpretative community in which the text has been produced that decides what is literary and what is not. Seen from this perspective, then, literature is not some 'inherent quality or set of qualities displayed by certain kinds of writing [...] but *the way* in which people relate themselves to writing' (1983:9; my emphasis). This makes it clear that there is not an essence of literature that is eternal and universal, but that what is termed as *literature* is the result of the conventions of an interpretative community at both social and literary levels. This will vary from one community to the next, both within and outside the national frontiers, at different points in time. In this sense, anything can be literature and anything can stop being regarded as literature: 'Literature, in the sense of a set

of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties, does not exist' (Eagleton 1983:11). This is so because *value* is a *transitive term*: it means 'whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria and in the light of given purposes (ibid).

Returning to our discussion of the foreign literature syllabus, it should be multiple because those texts that form part of a literary tradition will depend on the local values of that particular community, on what is considered as 'literary', agreed upon by that community, and will vary depending on the judgments of value instituted by them. In turn, those values are not individual, but established by the social group in order to foster some image of itself, showing the deep connection between the literary and the social.

Critical Literacy considers *any* community value, as already pointed out, as local and dependant on the 'programs of truth' of the social context where they are articulated. In the light of the present discussion one concept of the literary is no more or less 'valuable' than another, but totally meaningful to the community where it was formulated, generating, in terms of each community, its undenied 'universal', 'substantive' value. This emphasizes, from a critical literacy perspective, the constructed quality of 'substantiveness' and 'universality' in relation to truth and meaning and 'literariness' by masking the situatedness of such values and transforming them into universal values.

From this perspective, any literary tradition, and any literary work in the European language being taught should be included in the literature syllabus on equal terms, in an infinite play of *difference*, as Derrida (1966) would say, depending on the type of knowledge that the community is interested in constructing through those narratives. In this way, it would contribute to deconstructing those cultural stereotypes that prevent communication among different communities. However, as literary narratives are decisive in the formation of national identities, the foreign literature syllabus of multicultural traditions, as is the case of English, might reaffirm cultural stereotypes of superiority and inferiority—that in literary terms translate themselves as canonical and non-canonical—if the policy of inclusion is not considered in all its complexity. For example, Gates (1992:34) notes that universal education in the United States was justified upon the premise that 'schooling made good citizens, good American citizens'. Therefore, part of the aim of the literature class in 'America' was to show what it was to be an American and in the process concealed 'the connections between institutionalized interests and the literature being taught' (Gates 1992:34).

As the foreign literature syllabus is a "trans-cultural phenomenon" (Souza 2007:3), it acquires new value when it crosses cultural borders, depending on the relationship among the different cultural *loci* of origin and destination. In turn, this is not a pacific process; the texts included in the syllabus do not necessarily exist in multicultural harmony as there will always be a collusion between knowledge and power, when the *trans* experience is enacted, that has to do with the fact that *mainstream* literary texts are generally associated with a concept of culture taken as universal, while so-called *marginal* traditions are associated with an *ethnic* (local, less valued) concept of culture.

In both these cases, as Guillory (1992) points out, this happens because there is a conflation of the two senses of culture considered: Western culture, defined as *refined culture*; marginal cultures, reduced to *ethnic cultures*. This implies a categorization of the cultural values of the different communities that regards the first as essential, universal and the second as local, thus reaffirming at a literary level the social divide among cultures. By extension, this categorization of the concept of culture implies that while Western narratives have *literary* value and could be studied as artistic works, the narratives produced by the so-called ethnic cultures were studied through '...an interdisciplinary methodology, in which sociology and history (and, for African literature, anthropology) had blocked out the literariness of the black

text...' (Gates 1992:94). This was because Black people were considered to be incapable of producing literature due to their racial inferiority.

So that difference will not be turned into discrimination and the syllabus a site of reproduction of unequal social relationships, Critical Literacy deconstructs these two hierarchical definitions of culture and prefers to talk of *cultures* in the plural, in the same way that it regards *knowledges* and concepts of the *literary* also in the plural as categories which are always context grounded. It considers that culture is not an essence and monolithic but in a constant process of transformation.

When regarded from this perspective, one of the issues that becomes clear in the design of the foreign literature syllabus, particularly in a multiple tradition like English, is that the central or marginal position of the different narratives does not depend upon the essential and transcendent value of their metaphor but on the historical and political relations among the cultures to which they belong to. This is the main dominant that decides the visibility of some traditions to the detriment of others within the syllabus.

As literary narratives are not only aesthetic but also social and political practices, what both teacher and students should consider is not only *what* narratives are included in the foreign literature syllabus but also the conditions in which they are included; in other words, the valorization and categorization that is implicit in the policy of inclusion of the different traditions because it may reaffirm antagonical relationships of culture, class, race and gender.

At the same time, as the relationships among different cultures are always in the making, always in an endless process of transformation, mediated by power, modes of semiotic production, like the foreign literature syllabus, should also be constantly renewed, taking into account how the different cultures articulated in it are regarded in the global scenario so that it does not contribute to the affirmation of cultural stereotypes.

Final Words

When approached from a social, situated and multiple critical cultural perspective, the foreign literature syllabus, and the teaching of literature, acquire moral value in the sense that instead of securing consent as regards certain ways of viewing the world and constructing values, they become literacy practices that allow both professors and students to become acquainted with other cultural identities, other modes of life. This can help us to understand what often from a distance appears to be incomprehensible social practices, and to see one's own social practices not as normalized and accepted behavior but also as situated customs that frequently appear equally strange to others. Considered in this light, the foreign literature syllabus should foster 'reconciliation, mutuality, recognition and creative interaction' (Gates 1992:xv).

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