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# Studying Fictional Representations of History in the L2 Classroom

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The article addresses the didactic questions of *what*, *why* and *how* aspects of culture and history can be—and should be, it is argued—an integral part of all foreign and second language teaching and learning. In particular, it is argued that the study of literary fiction within tertiary foreign language education can function as a gateway for students to develop not only a stronger interest in and knowledge of cultural history, but also a better understanding of the complexity of historical representation, public memory and self-identity. Drawing on current theories of narrative discourse and historical representation, as well as the experience of having taught a foreign language course in Sweden dealing with fictional representations of culturally important periods in US history, the paper shows how a personal engagement with these “little narratives,” to use Lyotard’s term, can enhance foreign language students’ understanding of, not only important historical events and periods in the shaping of contemporary American culture, but also of the importance of textual representation and cultural “grand narratives” in the shaping of collective identities and personal subjectivities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Foreign language teachers, education researchers and policy makers are increasingly becoming aware that foreign language learning also involves learning about the cultural and historical contexts in which languages are used by native—as well as non-native—speakers.<sup>1</sup> Although there are still discrepancies between teachers, researchers and policy makers as to what is understood by “culture” in language learning and teaching, we have come a long way from the idea that learning a foreign language is limited to acquiring the four skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking.<sup>2</sup> National and local

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<sup>1</sup> There are also good arguments that the study of language use should not limit itself to native speakers, since many foreign language students—those of English in particular—will interact more with people using English as a second or third rather than first language. See e.g. Kramsch, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Risager, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> This development is perhaps most prevalent in a general language education where language learning is seen as part of a civic education that should encourage cross-cultural understanding. It is true that in recent years challenges to this humanist approach have arisen, for example the English as a Lingua Franca movement and the still growing CLIL movement (Content-and-Language Integrated Learning). These movements that have grown in popularity in recent years share an understanding of language as more or less culturally neutral, a transparent tool rather than a cultural practice. A similarly instrumental view of language can be found in electronic tools like the Google translator, which offers easy and tempting alternatives to learning a foreign language.

school curricula, from primary to secondary and tertiary level, now tend to include aims, goals and intended learning outcomes that stipulate the teaching and learning of culture in the foreign language classroom.<sup>3</sup> But as researchers have shown by analyzing official curricula as well as school and teacher practices (Byrnes 2010; Byram, 1997; Byram & Grundy, 2002; Corbett, 2003; Furstenberg, 2010; Kramsch, 1993, 1996, 1998; Risager, 2006, 2007), what constitutes “culture” as an object of study and learning in language education is far from clear and unproblematic.

In this paper, therefore, I will argue for an inclusive definition of culture in language teaching and learning, one which takes into account all social practices in which the target language is used, by native as well as non-native language users. “Culture” in the L2 classroom thus becomes both an object of study (social practice in the form of cultural texts such as literature, film, media, and so on in the target language) and a social practice in itself among the students learning the L2 language (social practice in the form of reading, discussing and writing about these texts). Moreover, understood in this way, L2 culture cannot be fully understood without applying an historical perspective on the cultural texts studied or without a simultaneous development of an historical self-awareness among the L2 students.

I will address the didactic questions of *what*, *why* and *how* aspects of culture and history can be—and, I argue, should be—an integral part of all foreign and second language teaching and learning. In particular, I will discuss how the study of literary fiction within tertiary foreign language education can function as a gateway for students to develop not only a stronger interest in and knowledge of cultural history, but also a better understanding of the complexity of historical representation, public memory and self-identity. I will draw on current theories of narrative discourse and historical representation as well as my experience of having taught a foreign language course in Sweden dealing with fictional representations of culturally important periods in US history. I will discuss how a personal engagement with these “little narratives,” to use Lyotard’s term, can enhance foreign language students’ understanding of, not only important historical events and periods in the shaping of contemporary American culture, but also of the importance of textual representation and cultural “grand narratives” in the shaping of collective identities and personal subjectivities.

## STUDYING THE ALTERNATIVE

The question of *what* aspects of culture ought to be studied in language classes has been the subject of much debate in recent years, in Sweden as well as internationally. Although much has happened since the days when students of foreign languages in European countries were taught courses on English, German, Spanish, etc. “*realia*,”<sup>4</sup> the relatively recent development in language study, inherited from the social sciences,

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<sup>3</sup> This is certainly more the case in the western world where the cultural baggage of foreign languages is seen as less of a threat than in some eastern and middle-eastern countries where L2 culture, especially in the case of English, may be seen as loaded with Anglo-Saxon neoliberal culture.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Risager 2007: “In certain countries, the term ‘*realia*’ was used until the 1980s as a term for cultural and social conditions in foreign-language teaching” (p. 25).

toward a more pluralistic, cosmopolitan and transnational approach to cultural studies is far from complete. As Adrian Holliday points out, although Western educators have acknowledged that the context for the study of English as a foreign language has changed to also include the outer circle of speakers that use English as a second language, that new context is still defined from the center:<sup>5</sup>

While this approach does acknowledge the imperialist politics of the imposition of practices from the English-speaking West on other parts of the world, it implies a simplistic packaging of national cultural ‘contexts’ within the popular professional discourse of English language education which does not capture complex educational, political and cultural scenarios. ‘Context’ has thus become a professionalised term which originates in the Centre. (Holliday, 2009, p. 145)

As other commentators have pointed out, studying language and culture from a non-native perspective often makes it easier for teachers and students alike not to be caught up in the center vs. periphery debate (see e.g. Kramsch, 2003 and Jenkins, 2006). But at the same time, in today’s world of globalized media and popular culture hardly any peripheral geographical region can escape the dominance of the all-pervasive center, emanating from “native” English-speaking cultures. Sweden, which can be seen as part of the expanding circle of English if we follow Kachru’s model, is a good example of a country which is increasingly dominated by Anglo-American popular culture.

Therefore, I argue, the role of institutionalized language education, from primary to secondary and tertiary level, is to present students with *alternative* aspects and understandings of culture from the parts of the world where the target language is used, by native as well as non-native speakers. Below I will clarify what I mean by these alternative aspects of culture. I will also give examples of possible ways of expanding the subject content and context of English to develop students’ L2 literacy skills and practices by engaging them in a critical study of certain periods of American history through historical fiction.

Firstly, we need to present our students with an alternative to the traditional canon of native English studies, that is, an alternative to how English as an academic discipline is traditionally taught as a first language in the English-speaking countries of the Western world. And here, I argue, teachers of English as a second or foreign language have both an advantage and a responsibility to engage students, who tend to have a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with alternative aspects of the cultural history of the target language and its speakers, native as well as non-native.

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<sup>5</sup> The concepts of inner and outer circles used by Holliday implicitly draw on the model developed by Braj Kachru (1985). According to Kachru speakers of English in the world could be divided into three concentric circles. The inner circle consists of native speakers of English in countries like the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Anglophone Canada and South Africa, and parts of the Caribbean. The outer circle includes countries where English is widely used as a second or official language, such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya. The expanding circle, finally, encompasses countries where English is widely studied and used as foreign language, particularly for specific purposes such as business and higher education. This rapidly expanding circle is difficult to define but includes parts of China, Russia and most of Europe.

Secondly, the teaching and learning of culture and history in the L2 classroom can also function as an alternative not only to L1 but also to the tradition of other school subjects and university disciplines, such as social studies, history, geography, etc. which tend to be caught up in their own disciplinary traditions, typically dealing with official or public historical narratives. Thirdly, the L2 classroom can present an alternative to popular culture and news media that largely deal with the latest news related to political or military conflicts. These news items rarely explore the historical background that is necessary to analyze how the colonial powers of the Western world have been involved politically, economically and ideologically in the build-up of the social and political tensions that we now see erupting in protest and violence.

### **STUDYING THE “LITTLE NARRATIVES”**

What, then, can these alternative ways of teaching and learning culture and history in the L2 classroom consist of, and how can they function as alternatives to what students learn in other classes and through popular culture and news media? In other words, what role can L2 study play in the larger context of a civic education that seeks to develop a critical pedagogy that can enhance students’ critical literacy skills and practices as well as their historical awareness?

Already in the late 1970s Jean-François Lyotard saw that “the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies” had since the beginning of modernity and the Enlightenment become dependent on a number of master, or grand, narratives in order to legitimate their claims of truth and knowledge. What he saw developing in the Western world was a growing “incredulity toward metanarratives,” something he termed “the postmodern condition” (Lyotard, 1984 p. xxiii). The term *modern*, Lyotard used:

to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of a possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative... (Lyotard, 1979, p. xxiv)

Today, 35 years later, although postmodern theories of language, literature and education have made their way into academic journals and departments of higher education, we can see that many of these grand narratives of modernity still have a strong hold on how culture and history is understood—and taught—in educational settings around the world. For example, when US cultural history is studied as part of an English language education in Western Europe, the grand narratives of religious freedom, democracy, equality, scientific progress, economic growth and so on are seldom questioned. Even though a number of “challenges” in contemporary American

society usually are acknowledged in commonly used textbooks, still, they do not challenge the basis of the grand narratives as such.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, I argue, by exposing language students to alternative narratives, what Lyotard calls *little narratives*, students can gradually learn to see that there are other, often conflicting, narratives of what it means, and has meant, to live in the US or to be an American. By juxtaposing these little narratives to what they have been taught in school and learned from popular culture and media, students can begin to see “that there is a strict interlinkage between the kind of language called science and the kind called ethics and politics: they both stem from the same perspective, the same ‘choice’ if you will—the choice called the Occident” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 8). Thus, by being exposed to personal narratives, often written by non-native English speakers, students are encouraged to engage in what Lyotard calls “language games”, that is, to take opposite perspectives on certain cultural and historical events in order to discover that their previous cultural knowledge was constructed based on one historical narrative out of many. And in order to play this game we need “not only a theory of communication, but a theory of games which accepts agonistics as a founding principle” (Lyotard, 1979, p. 16). In other words, as educators we must allow a multiplicity of stories, or little narratives and discourses, to be played out and tested against each other. Thus we must allow, and even encourage, the language game of agonistics in the L2 classroom; without it, students will not progress beyond their preconceived ideas of national or native cultures, and they will lack a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural embeddedness of the foreign language they are studying.

To take a concrete example, when studying the Vietnam War, and its impact on national US identity and public memory, it becomes clear that, according to Lyotard, “[w]e no longer have recourse to the grand narratives—we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse” (1979, p. 60). Instead, we have to turn to the little narratives that testify to personal experiences for validation and a different understanding of this historical event. As Lyotard explains, “the little narrative [petit récit] remains the quintessential form of imaginative invention [...]. In addition, the principle of consensus as a criterion of validation seems to be inadequate” (1979, p. 60). Therefore, by reading a number of imaginative responses to the Vietnam War, from a number of different social, ethnic and gender perspectives, students are able to negotiate their own personal response to what this decisive event in American cultural history has meant to national identity and to America’s role in the world.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See for example MacQueen (1997) and Mauk & Oakland (2009).

<sup>7</sup> In an English course that I teach at Dalarna University, *Contemporary American Fiction: Fictional Representations of History*, we study for example Jane Anne Phillips’ *Machine Dreams* (1984) and Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried* (1990). Other possible texts are Bobbie Anne Mason’s *In Country* (1985) or Robert Olen Butler’s *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain* (1992). For a more in-depth analysis of how literary fiction can communicate a personal experience of the Vietnam War quite different from the narratives of official historiography and popular culture, see Tegmark (1998), *In the Shoes of a Soldier: Communication in Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam Narratives*.

As mentioned above, the study of culture and history through fictional literature in the L2 classroom can also function as an alternative to how they are studied in other school subjects and academic disciplines. The main difference, as I see it, is that foreign language study lays no claims to fully cover an historical period or a cultural phenomenon. Whereas the focus of history or cultural studies usually is on understanding the historical events and the cultural phenomena themselves, the focus in L2 literary study can be more on the *human experience* of these events and phenomena.

As I have argued elsewhere (Tegmark, 1998), imaginative literature has a unique potential when it comes to communicating an otherwise “foreign” experience to its readers. Unlike “factual” textbooks, although they too use narrative discourse, literary fiction requires a higher level of interpretative activity from its readers, which typically results in greater personal involvement with the historical and cultural events studied. Moreover, whereas history books typically tell the stories of civilizations, nations and cultures, literary fiction tends to focus on the actual experiences of the people who lived through these events. I am not suggesting that fictional representations of history are better, or more true, than non-fictional history writing, or that the former ought to replace the latter; I am simply arguing that the L2 classroom has an important role to play by presenting students with alternative representations of history that most teenagers and young adults would not be exposed to otherwise.<sup>8</sup> Often a personal involvement with historical events and its people through a literary experience will prompt students to find out more about the historical (political, economic, social, etc.) “background” of the story. Lastly, the fact that L2 study requires students to read these alternative cultural narratives in a language that is not their native tongue can in and of itself contribute to an increased foreignization effect. If the same historical narrative were to be read in translation as part of a L1, literature, or history class, the reading experience would be domesticated, and the alternative perspective not as prominent.<sup>9</sup>

In the context of American history and culture, and the place that they have in the subject of English as a foreign language, my experience is that students in post-secondary education, from Europe as well as from the Middle and Far East, have a very limited knowledge and awareness of these other, alternative, or little, narratives that give a different perspective on the official, public, and popular history of the United States. Although they tend to have very different views on how to interpret the American grand narrative of progress characterized by freedom, democracy, individualism and capitalism, they seem relatively unaware of the internal and historical challenges to this master narrative. Seen from the outside, it is perhaps not so strange

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<sup>8</sup> We know that book reading as an activity has decreased as children, teenagers and adults alike spend more and more time online, where they normally read only shorter texts. To encourage literacy as a practice, not only a skill, should be the responsibility of the L2 as much as the L1 teacher.

<sup>9</sup> To illustrate the importance of reading literature in the original “foreign” language, I sometimes have my students translate parts of culturally specific texts from English to Swedish. For example, when they try to translate parts of Tim O’Brien’s Vietnam story “The Things They Carried” they realize that many of the key words and concepts in the story do not even exist in Swedish, since Sweden did not participate in the Vietnam War and has not been involved in warfare for centuries. Terms like “grunt” and “frag” are exclusive to a very specific cultural context, and thus charged with specific socio-cultural connotations, that can only be understood in the L2 language.

that foreign students have learned to see American culture as quite monolithic and without history. Their previous knowledge of American culture is mainly based on popular culture and various forms of audiovisual media (Hollywood movies, TV-shows, commercials, computer games, popular websites, as well as domestic and international news media). If they have studied American literature before, it is usually canonical writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Twain or Hemingway who have been read as examples of the American grand narrative. In many ways, I would argue, the development that has taken place in English departments at universities and colleges over the past twenty or thirty years seems to have had only a limited effect on how culture and history are taught as part of English as a foreign language in primary and secondary school.

Therefore, the argument I want to put forward here is that the subject of English as a foreign language has an enormously important role to play in primary, secondary and higher education, in all parts of the world, when it comes to presenting children, teenagers and young adults with alternative narratives of American culture and history. This lack of historical awareness of internal cultural difference, I believe, is what lies behind a lot of the anti-American sentiments and prejudice that still exists in many parts of the world.<sup>10</sup> Without conscious schooling, students are left with what they learn from popular culture and news media, or what they gather from the Americans that they meet in their home countries, typically tourists, soldiers or businessmen, who hardly can be said to make up a proportional representation of the US population.

## STUDYING HISTORICAL FICTION

What kind of alternative, or little, narratives, then, should be brought into the L2 English classroom in order to give a more nuanced and, I would argue, representative view of the diversity of American history and culture? Based on my arguments above, and drawing on my experience of teaching contemporary American fiction to Swedish as well as international students of English, there are a number of “emergent” American literatures, to use Raymond Williams’ term, which historically have been marginalized by the dominant mainstream culture, that I believe can be introduced into the curriculum of English as a foreign language already in lower secondary school, in order to be fully integrated into upper and post-secondary school. By studying examples of African American, Native American, Chicano/a, Asian American, as well as gay and lesbian literature, students will be able to see how these previously termed minority cultures share common predicaments in relation to the master narrative of the dominant mainstream culture. For example, although many of these emergent writers share with the mainstream culture a strong belief in individual freedom, democracy, and equal opportunities, they also share the common “predicament faced by all of America’s minority cultures, whether they are oriented around ethnicity or around

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, Americans are often looked down upon, or even ridiculed, in Europe for lacking a historical perspective and being ignorant of the world outside the US. But the average knowledge that Europeans have today about the culturally diverse history of the US is equally frightening.



sexuality, how to transform themselves from marginal cultures into emergent cultures capable of challenging and reforming the mainstream” (Patel, 1999, p. 541).

A common feature among these emergent literatures is their interest in the small alternative histories that have been pushed into the margins by the grand American narrative. Typically, these histories are more private and personal, rather than public or official in nature, as they tell the stories of individuals and groups rather than those of a whole nation. Thus it is no coincidence that autobiographies and autobiographical novels are two of the most popular genres among writers of these emergent cultures. Borrowing a term from Native American writer Michael Dorris, the critic Cyrus Patell defines this type of historical writing as “self-history”:

History written from within particular communities whose stories are either excluded or distorted by the ‘standard history’ of the nation. American history, as commonly construed, is the history of a nation; self-history is the history of a particular people, a history that typically stretches much further back in time than the founding of the United States and often originates in territories that lie outside of its boundaries. (Patell, 1999, p. 558)

Examples of emergent literary texts that successfully lend themselves to study in the L2 classroom are Chinese American author Maxine Hong-Kingston’s historical novel *China Men* (1980) and Native American author Louise Erdrich’s short story cycle *Tracks* (1988). Both of these contemporary narratives can be described as self-histories. The first tells the story of the early Chinese immigrants who came to California in the middle of the nineteenth century following the Gold Rush, but ended up working for the Central Pacific Railroad. The fact that the transcontinental railroad was completed thanks to many of these poorly paid Chinese laborers is generally not included in the official story of how the west was won. Moreover, few students of American history are aware of the fact that racism against the Chinese was institutionalized by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which made the Chinese the only foreign nationality that could not immigrate freely to the United States, an act which was not completely repealed by Congress until 1943.

Erdrich’s *Tracks* gives a similar inside picture of an historical moment in the history of Native Americans. In 1887, five years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, Congress passed the Dawes Act which formally dissolved tribes as legal bodies and redistributed tribal lands among families and unmarried individuals. Heads of families were given 160 acres, individuals 80 acres. The first 25 years were tax free, but then the Indians would become full owners of their allotments, free to sell or to lease them, or if they could not they had to pay their taxes or lose them. From the white American perspective, the Dawes Act was intended to speed the process of assimilation by bringing to an end the tribal system, with its economy based on hunting and gathering, and by introducing Native Americans to U.S. individualism and a capitalistic understanding of land use and agriculture. The effect of the Dawes Act on Native American tribal culture is what Erdrich dramatizes in her historical short story cycle.

The volume deals with historical events like the outbreak of tuberculosis that afflicted North Dakota from 1891 to 1901 and the battles over Indian land rights following the Dawes Act. The Turtle Mountain Chippewa try to keep their allotments from falling into the hands of timber companies and to maintain a sense of tribal identity.

Studying Kingston's and Erdrich's historical narratives, or self-histories, presents students with alternative histories of how the US rose to be the capitalist center of the western world. Other contemporary novels studied in the course "Fictional Representations of History" are E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Each of these fictional narratives deals with specific events and time periods in American history, but from very different perspectives than those that students are used to from their previous studies.<sup>11</sup>

## STUDYING THE NATURE OF NARRATIVE DISCOURSE

Studying historical literature places a lot of responsibility on the student as well as the teacher. *How* are we to interpret the historical events represented—as historical fact or pure invention? After all, the narratives are labeled “fiction”? To help L2 language students with these epistemological questions it is important that the teacher, in addition to the literary and cultural studies, also introduces students to the contemporary debate in the human and social sciences over the relation between narrative discourse and historical representation. In line with Lyotard's argument concerning postmodernity's incredulity toward metanarratives is Hayden White's (1987) argument that these grand narratives of modernity have traditionally failed to acknowledge their own nature as narratives, that is as historical and ideological constructions rather than objective representations of (supposedly already existing) historical facts. As we saw above, as long as the historians of the grand narrative achieve consensus “between rational minds,” the truth of their story is never questioned, since it is taken to be objectively and scientifically validated, unlike literary fiction which is seen as subjective and imaginary. It is exactly this distinction between the two types of historical representation that White saw being deconstructed already in the 70s and 80s:

Recent theories of discourse, however, dissolve the distinction between realistic and fictional discourses based on the presumption of an ontological difference between their respective referents, real and imaginary, in favor of stressing their

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to point out here that as writers like Kingston and Erdrich present alternative “little” narratives to the traditional master narrative of how the western frontiers were settled and civilized during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the grand narrative of the unstoppable advance of individual freedom, democracy, and equal opportunity has adapted itself to its challenges in the name of diversity, struggle and progress. Hollywood and popular media have certainly played a role in this development of the grand narrative that now includes cultural diversity and “multiculturalism” as integral parts of the American story of progress. As I will show in another forthcoming study of contemporary American prize fiction, although many award-winning novels and short stories are critical of different aspects of American society and culture, they never question the fundamentals of the grand narrative of American individualism, struggle and progress.

common aspect as semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) for the extradiscursive entities that serve as their referents. (White, 1987, p. x)

In other words, White claims that recent theories of narrative discourse have helped to point out the basic similarities between traditional historiography and historical fiction; in both cases the historical events themselves have to be reinvented (as signifieds) in language.

Although the study of narrative and historical theory may scare students away because of its difficult language, my experience is that it is the theoretical terminology rather than the basic ideas themselves that creates difficulties. When students are given time to unpack the theoretical ideas by applying them to the different historical narratives under study, they are very often surprised by how “simple” the basic ideas were.

Moreover, studying some of these theories of narrative discourse leads students into a general discussion about the nature of narrative and historical representation, as well as their relation to human and social memory. As White makes clear:

[t]o conceive of narrative discourse in this way permits us to account for its universality as a cultural fact and for the interest that dominant social groups have not only in controlling what will pass for the authoritative myths of a given cultural formation but also in assuring the belief that social reality itself can be both lived and realistically comprehended as a story. (1987, p. x)

White’s conclusion is that “far from being merely a form of discourse that can be filled with different contents, real or imaginary as the case may be, [narrative] already possesses a content prior to any given actualization of it in speech or writing” (1987, p. xi).

Narrative, in other words, is a particularly human way of making sense of our existence—past, present and future—from which no human, whether historian or novelist, can set him- or herself outside. As soon as we think about the past, we start to narrativize it, to place events in chronological order and according to what we see as cause and effect relations. What this way of narrative thinking about the past presupposes, says White, is nothing but human imagination:

How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an “imaginary” way? Is it not possible that the question of narrative in any discussion of historical theory is always finally about the function of imagination in the production of a specifically human truth? (1987, p. 57).

This questioning of the fundamental difference between the two types of historical representation—one based on real and one on imaginary events—usually has two important effects on how students pursue their study of history and culture in the language classroom.

First of all it makes them reconsider their own preconceived knowledge, not only about the “foreign” cultures studied, but also of their own national or ethnic culture. What students had previously taken as objective or given (non-human) truths about, for example, Swedish or American culture are now being reconsidered as part of a historical grand narrative, or cultural ideology, built on what Louis Althusser calls “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (1971, p. 109). That is, there is no other way to understand culture and history—no matter how *real* those historical conditions of living are or have been—except by using our human imagination.

Secondly, the epistemological questioning of non-fictional narratives usually makes students want to read as many narratives as possible about the cultural and historical event under study. And it is exactly this curiosity and openness to other and alternative narratives and voices which prevents students from falling into the trap of absolute relativism or more extreme forms of historical revisionism. Not only do they learn to check their sources and to study as many different representations as possible, they also discuss and critically evaluate the narratives under study as well as their different interpretations of them. In this way, the students learn to see that each new historical narrative that they study, no matter how alternative or subversive, always has to be understood in relation to the dominant grand narrative. In other words, no little narrative or self-history can be understood in isolation, as they always have to position themselves in one way or another against the old “master narrative,” with which they are engaged in a constant dialogue.

## **STUDYING CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY AND SUBJECTIVITY**

Lastly, the main reason why I believe that L2 study, especially at secondary and tertiary levels, should include, not only texts that present students with alternatives to the grand narratives, but also a critical study of the nature of narrative discourse itself, is that it enhances the students’ personal involvement in the cultural and historical events studied, and it makes them realize that they, too, as human and cultural subjects are inevitably caught up in some of the very same grand narratives that frame the historical events studied.

One example of historical fiction that has strongly moved my students, and made them critically reexamine their own privileged position in a traditionally homogenous and monolingual nation state, is Edwidge Danticat’s historical novel *The Farming of Bones* (1998). Before the disastrous earthquake in January 2010 few students knew anything about the country of Haiti or the island of Hispaniola. In less than a week of continuous news reports of the human catastrophe that plagued the capital Port au

Prince, Swedes had donated millions of dollars to various aid organizations. However, it did not take long before other catastrophes and international conflicts took over the evening news, and Haiti and its people once again fell into oblivion.

Despite the enormous media coverage that Haiti got during those weeks in January 2010, few of my students today would be able say anything about the very special history and culture of Haiti and its people (the first slave colony to achieve independence after a rebellion in 1804)—before they read Danticat’s novel. Set between 1937 and 1961, during the rule of Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, the novel tells the story of Amabelle, a Haitian orphaned after her parents drowned fleeing across the river from Haiti into the Dominican Republic, where she grows up as a servant to a wealthy family of Spanish ancestry. The reader is invited to identify with Amabelle and her hybrid identity, working for the Dominicans during the day, speaking Spanish, and meeting with her Haitian boyfriend at night, speaking Creole French. From Amabelle’s personal perspective the reader witnesses the events leading up to and following the 1937 massacre of Haitian workers living in the Dominican Republic. But not only does Danticat tell a story about historical events that seldom reach a wider Western readership,<sup>12</sup> she also tells a story which is clearly an alternative to the grand narratives of national liberation and communal identity, which typically take a male and imperialist perspective. As critic Lynn Chun Ink observes, Danticat together with Dominican American writer Julia Alvarez “offer *alternative* communal definitions at the same time as they strive to present an *alternative* to imperial history... Both focus on the conflicts that arise in women’s involvement within nationalist struggles,” thus “rejecting a male-defined nationalism and the collective identity it produces” (2004, p. 789, emphasis added).

Thus, what historical novels like *The Farming of Bones* can offer foreign language students is first of all an inside view of previously unknown and seemingly “foreign” historical events. But as the students learn to set the historical events into the larger context of European and American imperialist history they soon realize that the atrocious crimes were carried out by military governments reared in the same grand narrative of patriarchal nationalism, upheld by military power, that still characterizes a large part of our contemporary world.<sup>13</sup> Suddenly the historical events of Haiti are not so distant and foreign anymore, as they become part of the students’ own memories and collective identities in a way that the very recent earthquake failed to do. In this way, Danticat’s novel, like the fiction of Kingston and Erdrich, is a good example of what Linda Hutcheon labeled “postmodern historiographic metafiction,” fiction that aimed to elevate “private experience to public consciousness,” thus rendering “inextricable the public and historical and the private and the biographical” (1988, p. 94).

Jane Anne Phillips’ *Machine Dreams* (1984) is another novel that successfully manages to engage students in some of the most defining historical events of

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<sup>12</sup> The novel was originally written in English, which indicates that Danticat was aiming for an international readership.

<sup>13</sup> Actually, United States occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934 and the Dominican Republic from 1916 to 1924.

American history by focusing on how the private and the biographical are inextricably intertwined with the public and historical. Like Erdrich's *Tracks*, Phillips' novel follows a single family over three generations, from the Great Depression in the 1930s to the escalation of the Vietnam War in the early 70s. And like Erdrich, Phillips presents her family saga by letting different family members narrate different chapters, thus drawing the reader into the intricacies and conflicts of the Hampson family's small-town life in West Virginia. However "small" and ordinary their problems may seem, Phillips convincingly illustrates how all of them are caught up in the larger historical national events. As Kenneth Millard has correctly observed,

*Machine Dreams* is remarkable for the way in which it combines the domestic lives of the Hampsons with the major events of twentieth-century American history to show that the very fabric of their lives is in itself historically significant; it is a novel which undermines any simple distinction between the public and private lives of American citizens. (2000, p. 55-56).

The historical event that has the strongest impact on the Hampson family is of course the Vietnam War, in which they lose their son and brother Billy. A year after America had put the first man on the Moon (the epitome of the grand narrative of American progress), the Hampsons learn that Billy's helicopter has disappeared in the jungles of Vietnam. The mother's spontaneous reaction when she learns that her son is missing-in-action is, tragically and ironically, that "He might as well be on the moon" (Phillips, 1984, p. 312). Phillips thus illustrates how it is the same grand American narrative that takes Armstrong's Apollo 13 to success on the Moon and young Billy's Huey to death in Vietnam. As Millard points out, a "connection is made between man's conquest of the moon and his political involvement in south-east Asia, suggesting that both territorial struggles are a function of the same male aspiration towards technological superiority and American colonial expansion" (2000, p. 56).

Whereas Tim O'Brien's short story "The Things They Carried" communicates the physical and mental burden that the foot soldier experienced in Vietnam, *Machine Dreams* shows the deep impact that the war had on the soldier's closest family. After Billy's death, everything that his sister Danner has believed in disintegrates. Her parents, like her country, have already divorced, and now she loses the little belief that she had left in the idea of "America":

In the beginning, my thoughts were murderous. I fantasized about killing Nixon, someone killing Nixon... I felt betrayed by my government but I'd expected betrayal: I just hadn't expected betrayal to such a degree. That it would go on so long, that I would have to live with it. (Phillips, 1984, p. 324)

Still, she is unable to leave her "divided country": "By going to California, I'd made it to the far frontiers, but I'd never leave my country. I never will" (324). Instead she

chooses to live “like a refugee” (323) in her own country, bringing Billy back in her dreams.

By reading Phillips’ novel, and by identifying with Billy and Danner, students are able to understand the enormous impact that the Vietnam War has had, and still has, not only on national US culture, but more importantly, on private American lives. And as mentioned above, such in-depth cultural understanding will help students in their own negotiation of collective identities and construction of personal subjectivities. How are their own daily lives affected by, or even inextricably intertwined with, the public and historical events of today? Thanks to globalization and new information and communication technology, we are able to follow events as they happen in real-time. But as I have hinted at above with the Haiti example, the danger of living in a world where the most *important* event is always the *latest* event is that we may weaken, and underestimate the importance of, our historical consciousness and collective memory. As I have argued based on my years of teaching English as a foreign language, the study of historical fiction has an enormous potential to counteract the current tendency among teenagers and young adults in the “developed” parts of the world to live *exclusively* in the present, constantly connected and online in order to follow up on the latest news item. I am not suggesting *less* communication, but I do believe that it is the duty of institutionalized education to make sure that students also develop a critical and historical literacy, both as a set of cognitive skills and as a set of social practices.

To speak with Hayden White again, historical novels like *Machine Dreams* and *The Farming of Bones* in the L2 classroom can become “semiological apparatuses that produce meanings by the systematic substitution of signifieds (conceptual contents) [the Hampson family and Amabelle] for the extradiscursive entities that serve as their referents [America during the Vietnam War and the island of Hispaniola during the terror of Trujillo] (White, 1987, p. x).

## CONCLUSION

As I have argued and tried to illustrate in this article, the practice of teaching and learning a second or foreign language has an important role to play in introducing *alternative* aspects of history and culture into the language curriculum. As we have seen, the didactic questions of *what*, *how* and *why* these alternative aspects can and should be included in language education can all be answered in the same way: because they help our students to be aware of the dangers of an uncritical acceptance of the dominating grand narratives. Hilary Janks (2010) identifies *access* as one of the four key orientations to developing a critical literacy. But in spite of (or maybe because of) today’s information overload students need help and guidance in order to find and access these alternative historical narratives.<sup>14</sup> If we as teachers do not use the little freedom

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<sup>14</sup> I have had North American students in my class who have gone through a US high school education without ever coming across any on the alternative historical narratives that were included in the course.

we have left (in a politically controlled education system intent on skills and employability) to encourage and motivate our students to engage critically with different and alternative historical narratives, the less likely they are to use their literacy skills when they leave school. The concern of all literacy education, whether in L1 or L2, must, to speak with Janks, be with “developing in students a critical stance in relation to content. Such a stance is predicated on students’ gaining access to and facility with the language and literacy tools they need to be both critical and creative, problem posers and problem solvers, social analysts and social agents” (2010, p. 23). As I hope I have made clear in this article, teachers of second as well as foreign languages have both an advantage and a responsibility to help students develop such a critical stance.

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