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TEACHING THE GILDED AGE AND PROGRESSIVE ERA

Teaching Charles Alexander Eastman's "The North American Indian" in Dialogue with Elaine Goodale Eastman's *Yellow Star*

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Abstract

Charles Eastman's "The North American Indian" address for the 1911 Universal Races Congress (URC) in London provides multiple pathways for teaching in a comparative context. One productive approach involves setting the lecture in dialogue with Elaine Goodale Eastman's *Yellow Star*, published in the same year. Another entails asking students to situate Charles Eastman's talk in the context of the URC as a vital milestone in global thought leaders' engagement with questions about race. This approach could include juxtaposing Eastman's lecture with one by W. E. B. Du Bois delivered at the same convention. Pedagogy for Eastman's speech can also locate this text in the context of his larger oeuvre, including more assertively anticolonial discourse in later writings for Indigenous readers.

Keywords: Charles Eastman; comparative race studies; Universal Races Congress; oral rhetoric; publication history; pedagogy

As suggested in the companion essay on Elaine Goodale Eastman's *Yellow Star* in this special issue, that novel for young people and family reading provides multiple avenues of exploration for scholarship and classroom teaching on Indigenous peoples' righteous concerns in the early twentieth-century United States, as well as on white cultural arbiters' efforts to control the stories being constructed about Indigenous life. One can value the lessons of Yellow Star (the narrative's protagonist) and *Yellow Star* (the novel) as a whole in tandem with continued research and pedagogy on the writing and life of Goodale Eastman's longtime partner, Charles Eastman. A particularly productive text for curricular dialogue with her novel is Charles's "The North American Indian" presentation for London's Universal Races Congress of 1911, the same year *Yellow Star* appeared. Charles's address—published along with others delivered at the convention—also stands on its own as a worthy text for multilayered classroom conversation.

I came to my initial study of Eastman's address while investigating texts by Indigenous writers for an anthology on transatlantic literatures of the long nineteenth century, which I was coediting for Edinburgh University Press. Encouraged by Cari Carpenter and Coll

Thrush, members of our advisory board, the editorial team made a commitment early on to include notable Indigenous voices in every one of our ten thematic sections. With Jace Weaver's *Red Atlantic* as a vital guide, we identified texts ranging chronologically from Joseph Brant's London speech to Lord George Germain and other British colonial leaders in 1776 to Arthur Parker's 1918 writing for *American Indian Magazine* on the role of American Indians in World War I. Building on Weaver's advocacy for increased study of "Red Atlantic" texts, I also decided to seek out possible writings by Charles that would have had a transatlantic dimension. I remembered Elaine's comment in her *Voice at Eve* memoir that her famous husband had the opportunity to travel to London; therefore, I sought out specific information on what that trip might have been about, when, and what textual records might be available of his journey—a step that led to my finding his speech to the Universal Races Conference of 1911. As anthology coeditor, I chose several different excerpts from his lecture for three of the collection's ten thematic sections: "Family and Domesticity," "Migration, Settlement, and Resistance," and "Religion and Secularism."[1]

I first taught the address in my own classroom by setting these excerpts in dialogue with other texts in their respective thematic sections. I also asked students to consider all three of them together as exemplifying Weaver's claim that American Indian culture had a longstanding transatlantic reach, a point echoed and extended in Coll Thrush's *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire*.[2] Eastman's address continues to be a rich source for courses featuring a transatlantic studies context.

More recently, I taught this lecture in a graduate seminar on diaspora studies. My preparation of paratextual material—headnotes and annotations—for the transatlantic anthology helped me to focus on such factors as the diverse array of speakers gathered together for the congress, including W. E. B. Du Bois, whose commentary immediately preceded Eastman's. Scholars' characterizations of the congress, as well as Charles's organizational structure, choices for various subtopics, and nuanced critique of settler colonialism prompted a deep appreciation for Charles's skill as a Indigenous rhetor. My enhanced view of Charles's own distinctive authorial abilities—and their social significance—improved my ability to teach the Eastmans' work comparatively. In addition, a shift away from a focus on their experiences with co-authorship to a relocation of Charles into a transnational rhetorical landscape made his text an ideal choice for a seminar on diaspora studies. As suggested in background on the congress below, teaching Eastman's address as part of a race-oriented collaborative enterprise incorporating transnational agendas can expand students' appreciation for the complexities he navigated in his frequently-assigned role as an American Indian spokesman, particularly during an era when individual tribal nationhood was consistently being ignored by white cultural arbiters.

Revisiting Goals of the Universal Races Congress

The Universal Races Congress (URC) offers a generative context for teaching Charles's speech. Originally envisioned as a "first" gathering that would be followed by others, the URC did not have a direct successor, partly due to the growing conflicts that would lead to the First World War. But the URC left a fascinating legacy in the publication of the proceedings, now readily accessible via Internet Archive and HathiTrust Digital Library, as well as through multiple databases available in many university libraries.[3]

John David Smith's 2022 essay, "'The greatest event of the Twentieth Century so far': The First Universal Races Congress and its Meaning Today," is only one of several helpful

sources providing useful historical context for teaching about the event.[4] As Smith points out, one goal of the URC was to calm tensions that had arisen among European colonial powers as part of the race for Africa. A number of leaders seeking "to foster world peace by mitigating the relationship between racism and colonialism" hoped that a shared study of "the link between race and imperialism" might spare global society the kind of conflict that wound up exploding as World War I. In Smith's view, the four-day series of exchanges strategically addressed "notions of inherent racial superiority and racial difference" that were promoting "racial hierarchies," and the event sought to encourage, in their place, "inter-racial amity" and "religious tolerance," as well as "international cooperation."[5]

Smith's assessment of the URC's goals is borne out in contemporary reporting. A useful exercise for students involves having them seek out, analyze, and synthesize journalistic accounts surrounding the event. Relatedly, reviews of the essay collection assembled by lead organizer Gustav Spiller provide another pathway for examining responses to the URC in an early twentieth-century context. A. C. Haddon's 1911 report for *Science* offers up assessments of both the conference itself and the hefty volume of printed materials published in its aftermath, thereby providing fruitful primary material to aid students' efforts to set Eastman's presentation in the rhetorical context of its original occasion.[6] Students can consider, for instance, how Haddon's describing the "social atmosphere" of the event as "highly charged" (306) and yet also dubbing the URC as "inspiring" (305) reflects the complicated challenges a participant like Eastman was facing. Moreover, many audience members were likely aligned with Haddon's position that "some speeches" assigned "unmerited blame" on "systems of government or on government officials without a due consideration of the special circumstances or the difficulties of the situation," and without an "appreciat[ion] … that safe progress is slow progress and that compromises have to be made" (306).What might comments by a reviewer like Haddon tell us about how speakers addressing the audience from minority stances would have needed to temper their critiques of systemic racism?

Smith notes that the URC was not the first international gathering addressing race and its links to colonialism, having been preceded by the 1900 Pan-African Conference, also in London, in 1900; he nonetheless dubs the URC groundbreaking in its attempt to use a conference occasion to promote critical engagement with misconceptions about race and race hierarchies as a way of advancing, in their place, world peace and justice.[7] While reading the entire publication Spiller assembled after the URC could promote a broad and deep understanding of both the opportunities and the constraints Eastman faced, its five hundred plus pages limits its classroom use.[8] Reading Michael Biddiss's thoughtful assessment of the event for its 1971 anniversary offers a more pragmatic approach for giving a clear sense of the URC's goals, expectations shaping all speakers' texts, as well as the mix of conflicts occasionally arising despite the tone of hope organizers promoted for the gathering.[9] Biddiss marshals useful contextual details such as the size of the in-person audience (typically around two thousand people for each lecture!), the pre- and post-conference aims of the executive council (whose goal of subsequent convenings, he explains, was undermined by the outbreak of World War I), and even descriptions of the actual venue: a "cavernous hall of the Imperial Institute," where participants faced "excessive heat and inadequate acoustics."[10] Taking such specifics into account, Biddiss's essay can also provide a reminder that speakers had submitted their contributions ahead of time, in anticipation of the massive anthology Spiller would prepare. Asking students to consider such experiential elements of Charles Eastman's talk can enhance their ability to locate it in a specific lived moment of history. Students can also benefit from Biddiss's

drawing repeatedly on the executive council's post-URC report: At just over eighty pages it's much more manageable to read than the full Spiller-edited volume of presentations. His well-chosen excerpts from the report offer additional primary text examples for locating Eastman's rhetorical choices in a challenging situation. Here is just one example: "The object of the Congress [was] to discuss, in the light of science and the modern conscience, the general relations subsisting between the peoples of the West and those of the East, between so-called white and so-called coloured peoples, with a view to encouraging between them a fuller understanding, the most friendly feelings, and a heartier co-operation."[11] For Biddiss, such aspirational goals were as much a part of the URC's legacy as the sometimes-assertive critiques of racial hierarchies and empire-building by speakers such as Baron d'Estournelles de Constant, whose speech he quotes for its complaint of how "the white man" has too often "felt himself to be more or less master, with power to act as he will, with power to oppress."[12] For students seeking to position Eastman's careful tone within the broader range of talks on the full conference menu, Biddiss's thoughtful choices of texts to highlight provide a concise set of comparative material.

Attendees of the URC from the United States included such recognized leaders as W. E. B. Du Bois, John Dewey, and Jane Addams, with an equally impressive international roster boasting representatives from Iran, India, China, South Africa, and more. Du Bois dubbed the occasion "The greatest event of the Twentieth Century so far," and pointed to the special power of people from across the globe speaking to each other in ways that fostered a strong sense of shared humanity. Like his speech (referenced in more detail below), Du Bois's 1911 story on the URC for *The Independent* evinces yet another opportunity for intertextual analysis of Eastman's contribution. For Du Bois, in retrospect, the URC was notable in large part, he says, for its "quietly spoken" yet "epoch-making" countering of the dominant ideas about race-based differences that had enabled such atrocities as "to enslave negroes" and to enact "Mexican peonage."[13] If Biddiss's assessment of the URC could be said to reflect its 1971 moment, students can discuss: How is Du Bois's 1911 summary of the occasion's meaning and potential impact a vital document of its time? How do both accounts, taken together, illuminate Eastman's presentation?

Du Bois and Eastman as Occasion-Aware Spokesmen

Du Bois and Eastman both spoke during the sixth of the conference's eight sessions entitled "The Modern Conscience (The Negro, the American Indian, etc.)," which took place on July 28. Conference attendees would surely have noted common themes in the two presentations, including their nuanced critiques of U.S. colonialism, their assertions of Black and Indigenous humanity, and such shared topics as characteristics associated with their respective race identities and questions about interracial marriage. While the speeches shared a seemingly dry tone and made broad generalizations as they provided sweeping histories of their respective races, they also made strategic efforts to undermine the supposed superiority of white civilization. As Kyle Mays explains in "Transnational Progressivism," juxtaposing the lectures of Du Bois and Eastman demonstrates benefits to be gleaned from linking African American and American Indian responses to Progressive Era social issues, especially colonialism as a global force grounded in racial oppression.[14]

Asking students to analyze Du Bois's lecture in tandem with Eastman's can begin by having them list both common topics and similar diction in the two texts. Students can

move gradually from gathering specific examples of parallels within the lectures to considering distinctions and addressing how those contrasts reflect differences in and links between the historical experiences of Black and Indigenous peoples in the United States in the decades leading up to 1911. Mays's article also points to similarities and differences in writing by Du Bois and Eastman about their views of and experiences at the URC. Asking students to explore some of the primary texts cited by Mays can lead them to a more detailed comparative analysis, as can facilitating students' close reading of Du Bois's "The First Universal Races Congress" feature story. Students might consider, for example, how, in addition to their different racial self-identifications, Du Bois's academic training and professional roles likely shaped his written response to the URC in ways distinct from Eastman's, and they might speculate on what kinds of written reports Eastman could have developed, and for which audiences.

The Context of Eastman's Larger Oeuvre

Charles Eastman's own larger oeuvre provides yet another context for teaching about his writing for the URC. When I taught Charles's URC contribution in a course on diaspora literature, for example, I asked students to connect the London presentation with excerpts from *Indian Boyhood* (1902), where Eastman introduces a sense of his youthful Indigenous identity as unbound by U.S. national borders. His depictions of his family's diasporic movement back and forth across what for whites was a U.S.-Canadian border can, when set in conversation with the later speech, be read as a foundational experience supporting an Indigenous sense of nationhood and an intense awareness of U.S. empire-building as suppressing Indigenous communities. Students in my seminar also read the 1911 speech comparatively with *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916), where he reports briefly but tellingly on the "great privilege" of attending the URC "to represent the North American Indian."[15] Setting the speech between his memoir of early life and the 1916 book points to Charles Eastman's growing sense of his own rhetorical and political role as a spokesperson for other Indigenous people. The 1916 book discussion of the URC can thus be viewed as anticipating his more activist assertions of his own Indigenous identity and American Indians' rights as he became more involved in publishing for an Indigenous audience through connections he forged with *American Indian Magazine* and colleagues like Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkála-Ša) and Arthur Parker. One path for such analysis entails extending study of Eastman's authorship into his continued engagement with race issues in later writings. A striking point of contrast with his presentation for the URC, crafted for a large mixed-race audience but one dominated by European and American whites, for instance, is an essay for *American Indian Magazine* published in 1917. Students can both contrast the assertive, indeed righteously angry tone Eastman assumes here with his far more restrained language in the URC address. Besides the differing publication venues in themselves, what other forces might have led to Eastman's stance in the 1917 essay? Eastman opens the periodical publication this way:

> We have been stirred to the dephts [*sic*] of human sympathy in behalf of the bleeding Belgians, starving Poles, and outraged Armenians. On the other hand, such excuses are made for those who wrought this havoc as "military necessity," "National exigency," and the like. If a child or a church building is in the way, blow is [*sic*] up! War is modernized, it is progressive, but does it therefore denote moral and spiritual progress?

> As an educated Sioux said the other day, "We have got the goods on the white people."[16]

Bringing *Yellow Star* into the Conversation

When I next teach Eastman's London speech, besides providing more details about its distinctive historical moment, I plan to set up an interpretive dialogue between his text and Elaine's *Yellow Star*. Having written about her novel for this special issue, I now have a heightened awareness of how—despite the eventual breakdown of their marriage—in the opening years of the twentieth century they were both using complex cross-cultural rhetoric to mount calculated critiques of white America's oppression of Indigenous peoples. With Charles's URC lecture and Elaine's novel both composed for 1911 publication, they were writing in the same historical moment with intense awareness of the many issues American Indians were facing. They were, in fact, crafting individual texts addressing compatible topics in the midst of a longstanding pattern of collaborative authorship, with each author's perspectives clearly informing the other's. Thus, as I plan for teaching both texts in spring 2024, I will ask students to identify common themes and arguments in the two works, despite their differing genres.

In terms of that similar content, Charles's speech and Elaine's novel both carried out retellings of history and offered counter-characterizations of Indigenous people, resisting prevailing stereotypes. And both sought to envision the potential of a more accepting—even equitable—society wherein Indigenous people could play an empowered role. While both their 1911 texts made assumptions about the need for Indigenous peoples to assimilate in numerous dimensions of their daily lives, they also asserted the worth of Indigenous cultural practices and communal value systems. By asking students to generate specific points of comparison on these themes, I hope to situate both these publications clearly within their specific historical moment and as affirmations of the shared sociopolitical agenda which still bound their authors in that period of their marriage.

Then, moving to considerations of gender and genre, I will ask students to note textual features in line with the different audiences being addressed in each case. How does Charles, for instance, use features consistent with his address being delivered at a conference of international leaders—almost all of them men, but from diverse nations and with diverse races represented? At the same time, since presenters at the London event had submitted copies of their remarks ahead of the conference, knowing that organizer and editor Gustav Spiller was planning a print publication, what elements in Charles's talk align with that pre-ordained authoritative context? Considering that Elaine crafted her narrative, meanwhile, with youth and family readership in mind, what features of *Yellow Star*, particularly those that differ from her husband's lecture, would have been shaped by those genre expectations? And, however much current trends in scholarship on children's literature enable us to appreciate its rhetorical effectiveness, how can juxtaposing her book's compositional situation with Charles's affirming, if challenging, moment on an international stage help us understand Elaine's dismissive commentary, in later assessments, of her novel? After devoting time and care to this comparative analysis, I'll be ready to ask students: Does Elaine's work being a novel make it less of a reliable historical source than Charles's nonfiction, despite its memoir status also leading to questions about reliable narration, if different ones? Which of the two texts would you expect was likely more successful in achieving meaningful impact on its initial audience?

Where and how might you seek evidence to support your view? Why might your answer to this question be difficult to validate?

Finally, I would ask students to address and reflect on their own standpoints as readers today. Besides identifying which text they admire more, and why, they should reflect on whether shared study has shifted their perspective on either or both texts and, if so, how. Considering whether and how a particular personal standpoint, in feminist terms, may have shaped their initial responses would be useful in itself, as doing so could promote more self-aware reading practices in the future. At the same time, though, I hope that one of their most important takeaways from this particular study would be an understanding of how being attentive to and constructing historical understandings can enrich readings of literary texts, in whatever time period or genre.

Notes

1 Linda K. Hughes, Sarah Ruffing Robbins, and Andrew Taylor, eds., *Transatlantic Anglophone Literatures, 1776–1920* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Different excerpts from Eastman's London speech appear here: 302–05, 382–84, and 553–54. The anthology has recently been issued in an open access edition to extend accessibility beyond the still-available print formats: https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/342762182/HughesEtal2022TransatlanticAnglophoneLiteratures.pdf (accessed Jan. 24, 2024).

2 Coll Thrush, *Indigenous London: Native Travelers at the Heart of Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

3 Charles Alexander Eastman, M.D. (Ohiyesa), "The North American Indian," in *Papers on inter-racial problems, communicated to the first Universal Races Congress, held at the University of London, July 26-29, 1911,* ed. Gustav Spiller (London: P. S. King, 1911), 367–76. For one example of a widely-accessible copy, see the Civil Rights and Social Justice database in HeinOnline. For an open-access copy, see the Internet Archive online edition at https://archive.org/details/papersoninterrac00univiala/page/367/mode/1up?q=Eastman (accessed Jan. 24, 2024).

4 Mansour Bonakdarian, "Negotiating Universal Values and Cultural and National Parameters at the First Universal Races Congress," *Radical History Review* 92 (Spring 2005): 118–32, focuses on contributions of attendees from Iran and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey), whom Bonakdarian views as "represent[ing] small cross-sections of cosmopolitan and secular-oriented public opinion in their countries" (119) but whose speeches are nonetheless noteworthy, in relation to Eastman's comparable stance, for their anti-imperialist arguments. See, too, Vanderlei Sebastiao de Souza and Recardo Ventura Santos, "The Universal Congress of Races, London, 1911: Contexts, Themes and Debates," *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emilio Goeidi Ciencias Humanas* 7, no. 3 (2012): 745–60, which analyzes participation by two representatives from Brazil, Joao Baptista de Lacerda and Edgard Roquette-Pinto, and situates them in sociopolitical context.

5 John David Smith, "'The greatest event of the Twentieth Century so far': The First Universal Races Congress and its Meaning Today," *Midwest Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2022): 217.

6 A. C. Haddon, "The First Universal Races Congress," *Science* 34 (Sept. 1911): 304–06. Additional examples for classroom discussion include E. L., "First Universal Races Congress," *Journal of the American Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology* 1 (Mar. 1911): 935–36, a preview of the event, and a review by Ulysses G. Weatherly, "The First Universal Races Congress," *American Journal of Sociology* 17, no. 3 (1911): 315–28.

7 Smith, "The greatest event," 218.

8 Spiller, *Papers on Inter-Racial Problems.*

9 Michael D. Biddiss, "The Universal Races Congress of 1911," *Race* 13, no. 1 (1971): 37–46.

10 Biddiss, "Universal Races Congress," 37, 38.

11 Biddiss, "Universal Races Congress," 37.

12 Biddiss, "Universal Races Congress," 40.

13 W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, "The First Universal Races Congress." *Independent* 71 (Aug. 24, 1911): 402.

14 Mays critiques what he sees as hesitancy among some historians of the Progressive Era to bring studies of Black and Indigenous culture of the time in dialogue: "While scholars have speculated why Blacks and Natives were not close allies, few have discussed the parallel opposition of Blacks and Natives to similar forms of

oppression or their common stance against colonialism. I argue that Black Americans and Native Americans found common ground in responding to colonialism, at least in part, by traveling to London" (243). Kyle T. Mays, "Transnational Progressivism: African Americans, Native Americans, and the Universal Races Congress of 1911," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 25 (Summer 2013): 243–61.

15 Charles A. Eastman (Ohiyesa), *From the Deep Woods to Civilization: Chapters in the Autobiography of an Indian* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1916), 189.

16 Charles Eastman, "The Sioux of Yesterday and To-Day," *American Indian Magazine* 5, no. 4 (1917): 233. This essay is available online via Internet Archive here: https://archive.org/details/sim_american-indian-magazine_october-december-1917_5_4/page/232/mode/2up.

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