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Literature courses cannot always attend to topical issues like racism, sexism, ableism, and environmental destruction. My courses, however, use literature to better understand present exploitation, oppression, and activism by connecting each to its cultural history. The significant contribution I have made as a teaching assistant is to confront these difficult issues in courses that do not *have* to take these issues on. By doing so, my students leave my courses with a better understanding of how to critically engage their worlds and actively deconstruct oppressions.

In a course I taught last fall, for example, ENGL221: American Literature Beginning to 1865, I themed the course around the invention of the “Indian” as a figure that has defined “America.” In many schools, such a survey course would focus solely on canonical white male authors. My course, still including these foundational writers, also included Native American and women authors, as well as examples of critical reception from across the centuries, in order to develop a deep and complex understanding of the invented and ever-changing concepts of race, gender, and nature.

My courses challenge my students to confront difficult and timely concepts by deconstructing them through knowledge of history. The rich conversations that take place in my service as a TA then push my own research and writing as I work to investigate my students’ questions. Questions about ever earlier historical patterns have challenged me to delve more deeply into historical research, which has greatly enhanced my own graduate experience as a twentieth-century scholar.