

Book Review

Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom

Ingrid Johnston and Jyoti Mangat
Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012

Reviewed by: David H. K. Berezan
University of Alberta

Ingrid Johnston and Jyoti Mangat's compact and comprehensive text, *Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom*, provides readers, educators, researchers, policy makers, and educational administrators valuable insights into how difference in race, ethnicity, tradition, language, gender, class, and power can be negotiated through the integration of postcolonial discourse and literature into English Language Arts classrooms. This book contains an extensive and enlightening collection of participant responses, collaborative analyses, evocative interpretations, and provocative challenges arising from the five research studies. Each study is unique in its research question(s), participant demographics, choice of literature and methodological approaches. Collectively, the inquiries seek to engage participants in an interrogation of, or at least a greater attentiveness to, the "legacies of colonialism" (p. 71). The studies were conducted in secondary or post-secondary schools in the province of Alberta with the intent that "through an engagement with the texts, readers in our studies were connected with contemporary concerns in Canadian society" (p. 71).

A definition, a clarification, a specific critique, and a conceptual working space underpin the theoretical framework and research design of this book. What Johnston and Mangat refer to as postcolonial literature is defined; how postcolonial literature differs from multicultural texts is clarified; the myth of multiculturalism as a solution to differing ethnocultural tensions is critiqued; and Homi Bhabha's concept of "Third Space" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 34) provide collaborative research settings where *difference* can be mediated and negotiated.

The authors explain that "postcolonial literatures attempt to challenge the dominant literary and cultural discourses of the West and critique the discursive and material legacies of colonization" (pp. x-xi). They argue that multicultural texts simply present or represent an understanding of "plurality and diversity" (pp. x-xi) and seldom, if ever disturb, critique or replace the literary canon of "the tried and true" (p. 49) texts most often relied on in English Language Arts classrooms. According to Johnston and Mangat's analysis, multiculturalism has largely been experimental and highly unsuccessful in most places that embraced its seemingly egalitarian credo because "changes have largely been ideological rather than structural and schools continue to function largely as assimilationist agencies" (p. ix). To study how *difference* is culturally mediated through postcolonial literature in the classroom, the authors implemented Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" as a conceptual venue for their research.

Homi K. Bhabha, from Harvard University, is one of the foremost theorists in contemporary postcolonial studies and it is his proposed *Third Space* that Johnston and Mangat embrace as the contextual milieu in which each of their studies are conducted. "For Bhabha, this is an

ambivalent space that opens up a cultural space of tension for the negotiation of incommensurable differences” (p. 73). In each study, participants interact in this *space of tension(s)* with unfamiliar, often culturally distant literary texts, and are given opportunities to consider, contemplate, and imagine if “being Canadian might feel different for immigrants than for those born here” (p. 61).

Chapter 1, *Spaces of Impact: Adolescents Interrogating a Story of the Air India Bombing*, explores “the spatial, cultural and temporal disruptions that resonate from the story and the real life events surrounding the Air India plane crash” (p. 1). Ten high school students (four boys, six girls), “five with European heritage and five of Indian heritage” (p. 3), read Bharati Mukherjee’s short story, *The Management of Grief* (1988). This story “alludes to the 1985 terrorist bombing of Air India Flight 182, but in effect, it interrogates the inadequacies of official policies of multiculturalism and pluralism in coping with a domestic tragedy” (p. xi). In addition Mukherjee’s story introduces “Judith Templeton, the blonde haired, blue-eyed government social worker” (p. 5) whose cultural ignorance far outweighs any good intentions she takes with her into the convolution of human trauma caused by the incident. The student participants respond, react, and engage with this story, its characters’ experiences and actions while trying to understand the context within which the incident occurred. This “literature that may be more culturally proximate to some students than to others” (p. 12) elicits a variety of interesting and revealing comments from the participants.

Chapter 2, *Truth or Lie: Students Reading the Indeterminacies of an Aboriginal Auto/Biographical Text* explores “questions of voice, veracity and subalternity in relations to Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson’s text *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*” (p. 15) with a class of grade 11 (16-year-olds), which was “published in 1998.” Johnston and Mangat offer “this award-winning controversial Canadian text” that “deals with the imprisonment of Yvonne Johnson, a Cree woman convicted of murder” (p. 15) for the students in this study to consider and contemplate. Rudy Wiebe’s mediation of Yvonne Johnson’s story effectively articulates a voice she would not otherwise have living as a subaltern in a society that views her as just another *Indian* with all the concomitant stereotypes and connotations attributed to that racist misnomer. Tensions inherent in the story were negotiated within Bhabha’s *Third Space* where conflicted identities and participant reactions could be discussed freely and safely. The majority of students “agreed that reading *Stolen Life* allowed them access to perspectives and life experiences they would not otherwise have” (p. 21). However, there were differences between male and female respondents in matters of empathy, trust, believability, and voice. Questions arose as to whether it was Yvonne’s voice being heard or the voice Wiebe gives her by mediating Yvonne’s story and whether she was victim, victimized, or victimizing.

Chapter 3, *Telling Too Much: Cultural Translation in African Novels for Adolescent Readers*, describes a study with 16-year-old high school students who were asked to read “the first chapters of three African novels” (p. xiii). These students were “predominantly white, middle-class, [and from a] Canadian suburb; consequently, many of the students seem to live in a privileged cultural ‘bubble’ which they perceive as ‘normal’” (p. 26). The literary pieces offered for reading and contemplation were “*A Girl Named Disaster* (1996) by American author Nancy Farmer; *The Bride Price* (1976), by Ibo writer Buchi Emecheta; and *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986) by South African writer Richard Rive” (p. 25). Johnston and Mangat carefully chose works that offered “varying degrees of cultural mediation for Western readers” (p. 25). Student responses were once again varied and challenged “the humanistic assumption that language can be used to ‘represent’ cultures unproblematically and transparently. These

adolescent readers demonstrated an awareness of how authorial voice both obscures and illuminates questions of culture and ‘authenticity’” (pp. 32-33).

Chapter 4, *Outside the Comfort Zone: Re-Locating Ourselves in a Postcolonial Literary Pedagogy*, presents two studies. One involves experienced practicing teachers and the other involves pre-service teachers. In both studies Johnston and Mangat “focus on the tensions that emerged between these teachers’ professed beliefs about teaching diverse literatures and their classroom practices, and ways in which these tensions offered possibilities for developing new reading and teaching practices” (p. 35). The literature presented to the participants included “works by Rosario Ferre (1994), Ha Jin (2000), Naguib Mahfouz (1994), V.S. Naipaul (1992) and Jhumpa Lahiri (1999)” (p. xiii). In the first study, eight experienced practicing teachers volunteered as participants from three large urban, multicultural schools—six were female and two were male; all were white. In the second study, there were five pre-service teacher participants, “one male and four female, all from white European backgrounds” (p. 41). Responses to the literature varied dramatically. The experienced teachers tended to welcome change, could see such texts as alternatives to canonical texts usually adhered to in English Language Arts, and recommended ongoing professional development in postcolonial pedagogy. The pre-service teachers were “enthusiastic about the possibilities offered by postcolonial literary theories and pedagogies” (p. 46), but appeared more reluctant to follow through with these professed beliefs in practice. Tensions and differences seemed to spiral around issues of experience, power, and the controversies invoked by utterances about alternative texts. Bhabha’s *Third Space* existed in the environs of a collaborative research inquiry, but the pre-service teachers were unsure such negotiation space would be found in practice in the field.

Chapter 5, *National Identity and the Ideology of Canadian Multicultural Picture Books: Pre-Service Teachers Encountering Representation of Difference*, critiques several “issues of multiculturalism, identity, race and privilege [by postcolonial theorists such as] Bissoondath, Bannerji, Bhabha, Giroux, Kamboureli, and Mukherjee” (p. 56). Johnston and Mangat state that “as educators who share these critiques of the ‘grand narrative’ of Canadian multiculturalism, we developed a study to explore how these notions are taken up by prospective teachers as they respond to a range of Canadian multicultural picture books” (p. 56). Forty contemporary Canadian picture books were introduced to 84 pre-service teachers with the hope that they “would gain new insights into their own identities as Canadians and into possibilities for developing relationships with students from backgrounds different from their own” (p. 58). The dialogic interaction amongst these novice teachers and researchers about the inclusion of such books in their classrooms elicited diverse and striking responses, not the least of which was “the prevalent notion that whiteness remains the norm in Canada today and that being ‘white’ is a norm that allows others to be acceptably different” (pp. 68-69).

The scope and educational impact of Johnston and Mangat’s findings were somewhat limited by choice of participants in each of the studies. In studies one, two, and three, all participants were international baccalaureate or advanced placement English students. In studies four and five (Chapter 4), the participants were all teachers—department heads, teachers of considerable experience, or pre-service teachers with four (or more) years of university education. And in study six (Chapter 5), the participants were students in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. It would have been instructive to read at least one study within this book conducted with mainstream students and teachers in an Alberta school. Research resources, time, proximities to participant groups, and the practical considerations involved in developing any research inquiry always narrows its focus and outreach. Conducting

these studies, with what might be construed as elite or privileged groups that possess particular English language skills and academic abilities, begs the question, will a “new critical awareness and personal insights about the historical and current legacies of colonial domination” (p. 73) ever be developed amongst very capable, but less academically inclined or mainstream students in Alberta schools through enriched learning experiences with postcolonial discourse, literature, and pedagogy?

That said, the findings in *Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom* from so wide-ranging an array of studies ripple outward beyond Bhabha’s *Third Space* in Johnston and Mangat’s dialogic and collaborative research design. These studies, along with other postcolonial literature and discourse, offer us opportunities to think differently about race, ethnicity, tradition, language, voice, gender, class, power, and the Canadian multiculturalism enterprise. Johnston and Mangat conclude the book with their concerns that reading practices in Canadian schools continue to be “deeply rooted in assumptions that reading is a culturally and politically neutral act” (p. 75). They also “foresee that meaningful changes to literature selections and pedagogies in the classroom will occur if teachers and their students have opportunities to engage in ongoing dialogic engagement with each other and with the increasingly rich and varied postcolonial literary texts available to us today” (p. 74).

Ingrid Johnston and Jyoti Mangat’s book, *Reading Practices, Postcolonial Literature, and Cultural Mediation in the Classroom*, works both as an introduction and an in-depth look into the pedagogical and literary issues and advantages of postcolonial literature for Alberta schools. English Language Arts and English as a Second Language teachers will find this eye-opening and multifaceted research into *difference* particularly useful in navigating the cultural complexities inherent in contemporary language classrooms.

References

- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnston, I., & Mangat, J. (2012). *Reading practices, postcolonial literature, and cultural mediation in the classroom*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

David H. K. Berezan, B.Ed., M.Ed., is a PhD Candidate in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. As an educator and researcher, David believes that within the transformative powers of educational experience is the fundamental teaching/learning praxis that promotes growth, self-confidence, self-belief, and self-actualization. He has chosen a hybrid methodology including the fundamental elements of narrative inquiry, concepts of transformative learning theory, and documentary film techniques to discover what constitutes transformation within the fusion and synergy of teacher, students, and subject matter in the English Language Arts classroom. It is the selected mandate of his research to collect data and provide the meaningful analysis upon which he may extract findings from transformative experiences, and in the rendering, enlighten our profession with the knowledge and scholarship to enable educators to teach with greater potential for transformation each and every day of their careers for students and for themselves.