

Teaching World Literatures in English: Inside the US, Outside the Whale

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Abstract: bell hooks insists that ideas are not “neutral” (50). The English professor of yore, however, purported to be an objective disseminator of knowledge. What happens when that professor is replaced by a West African man or a South Asian woman? Global migration has resulted not only in a changing student body but in a changing cohort of English professors, and this new demographic often teaches in a manner that “talks back” to cultural hegemony. How might students in the American academy respond when canonical British or American texts are taught by someone they perceive as outside of that lineage and without claim to the canon? Or when professors teach both canonical and postcolonial texts in their historical and political contexts without shying away from the dialectic between literature and history or literature and politics? Is the exposition of epistemic violence perceived as a political agenda? Literature classes provide, or should provide, students with the skills to read the world as text, both critically and in context. But whose text, whose context, which literature, and, indeed, whose world? An intersectional academic approach to literary texts that interrogates the positions of power from which writing and cultural expression originate can be seen by students as somehow contaminative or even threatening. As Gayatri Spivak notes, the historian and the teacher of literature “must critically ‘interrupt’ each other, bring each other to crisis” (*Other Worlds* 241). This article explores contesting cultural, structural, and subject positions within the classroom and the academy. It discusses the problematics of ownership over stories in contemporary United States classrooms and interrogates the consequences of a pedagogical approach that foregrounds historicist/political analysis of literary texts.

Keywords: globalisation, postcolonialism, canon, ownership, epistemic violence, subjectivities

Outside the whale is the unceasing storm, the continual quarrel, the dialectic of history.

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* 100

We are here to change things. . . . African, Caribbean, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Cypriot, Chinese, we are other than what we would have been if we had not crossed the oceans. . . . We have been made again: but I say we shall also be the ones to remake this society, to shape it from the bottom to the top.

Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* 413–14

If morality is the husband or the live-in lover of fiction, Nadine Gordimer suggests in her lecture “Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics,” then politics is the illicit and opportunistic lover who picks the lock and disables the alarm system (244). This “kinky cultural affair” (Gordimer 243) constitutes the purpose of teaching literature for some professors of English but is anathema to others. In the United States, the clichéd English professor—white, male, and middle-aged, with tousled hair and a tweed coat patched with leather at the elbows—is increasingly a relic of a more arcane period in the discipline and the academy as a whole. Global migration has resulted not only in a changing student body but in a changing cohort of English professors, and this new demographic often teaches in a manner that “talks back” to the political and cultural hegemony of canonical texts. One may even say that they “teach back” in the sense of the “engaged pedagogy” that bell hooks advocates in *Teaching to Transgress* (15). This does not mean that their lessons necessarily take on the healing or confessional tone that hooks sometimes advocates. It simply means that the range of experiences and knowledges that this new cohort of professors brings to the classroom is both international and intersectional.

In the American academy today, many English professors are female, people of colour, foreign-born, or all three. Might students, consciously

or unconsciously, see such professors as outside the lineage, having no claim or connection to the canon, and not pedigreed to teach the sacred classics of British and American literature? Students may not question these professors' mastery of the language but may question their cultural access to and discursive authority in teaching such classics. As someone trained in India as an undergraduate and in the US as a graduate student, and as someone who has taught in both countries but mostly in the US, my analysis emerges from my specific situatedness. This article interrogates the consequences of a classroom approach that foregrounds historicist/political readings of literary texts. I also interrogate the classroom consequences of teaching literature "from the colony," as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o terms it (*Globalectics* 12). In the classroom, professor and students become a community of readers, and the study of a text is always transactional. Indeed we may triangulate the arrangement as professor/student/text. My observations are experiential and occasionally heuristic in nature; I write from my position as an insider/outsider who teaches inside the American academy but outside the whale.

In its most basic sense the study of literature is the study of the story and its telling. However, the ownership of the story becomes especially contested at a time when the twin forces of neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism power the dominant discourse in public spheres and social media in the US. The Arizona ethnic studies ban that puts books such as Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* "on trial" is an example. Closely related to the question of ownership is control of the story. On 14 February 1989, the world came to know just how serious a business this is. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the then spiritual leader of Iran, issued his fatwa on Indian-born author Salman Rushdie, which compelled Rushdie to go into hiding for almost a decade and caused the deaths of many involved in the production and publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* as well as those who protested against it. In his 2012 memoir, *Joseph Anton*, Rushdie writes extensively about the religious fanatics and fundamentalists that could conceive of sentencing someone to death because they found his book blasphemous. He discusses the ways in which Islam has been hijacked by religious fundamentalists, and he addresses Islam's disputed hermeneutics. Yet he places control over

the story at the centre of the controversy: “At the heart of the dispute over *The Satanic Verses* . . . behind all the accusations and abuse, was a question of profound importance: *Who shall have control over the story?*” (*Joseph* 360; emphasis in original). Ngũgĩ similarly suggests that in the world of Anansi, “ownership of the story is central in the struggle between Anansi and other animals. The owner of the story is the conqueror of time” (*Globalectics* 79).

Ownership of stories can be contested even within the confines of the classroom. Peter McLaren and Ramin Farahmandpur discuss the role of neoconservatives and organisations such as the US-based Heritage Foundation and American Enterprise Institute in infiltrating the academy with a clearly political agenda disguised as a drive for academic excellence (34). (Ironically, conservative writers and commentators frequently blast educational institutions for being bastions of liberalism.) I agree with Stanley Fish that intellectual work involves the evaluation rather than the celebration of interests, beliefs, and identities (*Save the World* 11). I also concur with his assertion that “[n]o question, issue, or topic is off limits to classroom discussion so long as it is the object of academic rather than political or ideological attention” (*Save the World* 15). We would likely disagree, however, in our understanding of what constitutes the political. The role of politics in the literature classroom does not and should not encompass party politics but instead addresses the politics of representation and the politics of reading and/or of readership. It also deals with “the politics of knowing,” as Ngũgĩ terms it in the subtitle of his *Globalectics*. Henry Giroux, quoting Pierre Bourdieu, states that “[p]olitics often begins when it becomes possible to make power visible, to challenge the ideological circuitry of hegemonic knowledge, and to recognise that ‘political subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world’” (65). But does teaching then become simply a matter of competing cognitive subversions or competing visions and worldviews? I argue that teaching is more a matter of interrupting the “ideological circuitry” so that students can reconnect that circuitry once they have a sense not only of text but of context. The task of the professor is to suture the literary text to its social, political, and economic context, even when that context is rendered figuratively or symbolically.

Literature classes provide or should provide students with the skills to read the world as text, both critically and in context. But whose text, whose context, which literature, and, indeed, whose world? What Giroux refers to as “the primacy of pedagogy as a political force,” and the relationship between culture and power as a new site of both politics and pedagogy (67), can also be perceived as a loaded and biased political agenda that has no place in the classroom, certainly not in the literature classroom. Fish rails against the surrender of the academic enterprise to political considerations (*Save the World* 17), while critics such as McLaren and Farahmandpur and Giroux see the academy as inherently political or already infiltrated by the forces of market capitalism. Giroux argues that educators are obligated “to draw upon those traditions and resources capable of providing a critical education to all students in order to prepare them for a world in which information and power have taken on new and powerful dimensions” (67), though he does not quite specify what those traditions and resources are. Literary texts can be read in a number of different ways, so for those of us who teach texts that “talk back” to power—whether an ontological power, a situated power, or the power of a canonical text—the act of talking back, in whichever way the professor or student chooses to challenge the epistemic power of the text, becomes the critical education.

Whether the student body is homogenous or heterogeneous, there is often a presumed lack of legitimacy when a professor of, say, Nigerian, Indian, or Jamaican origin teaches a canonical text of British or American literature such as a Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, or Mark Twain novel. Is the same lack perceived when the Nigerian, Indian, or Jamaican professor teaches a postcolonial text, even if it is a text by a writer not from his or her country of origin? Am I seen as more suited to teach Indian or other postcolonial authors than, say, George Orwell or G. K. Chesterton? In the groundbreaking volume *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia*, Mary-Antoinette Smith offers a personal essay on the challenges and rewards she has faced as an African American woman in higher education. She indicates that “students often have a difficult time reconciling their notions of what an English professor looks like with what [she]

look[s] like, i.e., black female teaching canonical British literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, rather than black female teaching African American literature and/or ethnic studies” (416). I cannot help but compare the unquestioning ease with which we accepted the credentials of our professors at the University of Calcutta to teach the classics of English literature or, similarly, my own Indian graduate students’ acceptance of my credentials to do the same. In the US, however, resistance may be more manifest at state institutions that rely on local communities for the vast majority of their students or smaller, regional liberal arts colleges than at more prestigious national universities and liberal arts colleges that draw upon a wider and more varied demographic. By their very mandate, state institutions admit a more local rather than national cohort of students and thus are often places where the prevailing winds blow. Selective national liberal arts colleges and top-tier private universities attract students from around the country and the world. In this article I mostly draw on my experiences teaching English at state institutions rather than private liberal arts colleges.

When I taught part-time at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS), which for the most part draws local students from a predominantly conservative and often evangelical Christian community, I found myself making pre-emptive assertions on my syllabus—pre-emptive because students would sometimes write on their evaluations that my courses included too much talk about Empire, or India, or race, and so on. This despite the fact that I was specifically using the Broadview Anthology in nineteenth and twentieth century literature survey classes because it has context sections on “Race, Empire, and a Wider World” and “India and the Orient” that validated my approach and made clear to the students that my inclusion of these issues was not part of a personal agenda arising from my own ethnic background or nationality but thematically and textually important. So I stated (or rather warned) on the syllabus that

[i]n this course we will talk about Empire and its effects. We will talk about race and racism. We will talk about class and exploitation. We will talk about gender and discrimination. We

will talk about economics and politics. We will talk about war and its effects, and we will talk about various social issues. We will talk about these subjects as they emerge through the texts we will read. Literature always overlaps with history, politics, economics and society.

Not all students were resistant, but many were. Some appreciated the fact that my ethnic background enriched their understanding of Empire and similar subjects. One student commented: “Feeling that debt of gratitude, I made it a point to personally thank Dr. Singh in my Senior Presentation to the English Department for teaching me that there is more than one way to cross a moor.” Another advised, “Go to class with an open mind and without prejudice, and you’ll do fine. She is a professor that will open you up to a whole world of third world literature that most Americans wouldn’t consider reading.” In *Presumed Incompetent* Jessica Lavariega Monforti quotes a professor who commented that for her Latino students, shared ethnicity provides a sense of comfort and a common bond (404). Similarly, a Latina student was quoted in an article in the *Colorado College Bulletin* as saying that she connected to me because “[w]e both understand what it is to be from an oppressed culture” (Detlefsen 4). However, UCCS students are predominantly white, and some betrayed a certain degree of cognitive and visual dissonance as described by Smith. Smith draws upon a lecture delivered by Dr. Tanya Pettiford-Wates on the concepts of cognitive and visual dissonance in the faculty member of colour’s classroom. Smith explains:

Through syllogistic reasoning, I ultimately deduced that—although my Masterpieces of Literature syllabus focused largely on canonical works, my students’ assumption, based on cognitive and visual dissonance, was that since their teacher was black, then the literature she was teaching must be black literature; therefore, William Blake’s “The Chimney Sweeper” was, of course, about Negro slavery. (418)

Similarly, certain students concluded that if I am Indian I must have some sort of agenda in referring to India, even if it is impossible to

discuss the British Empire without referring to its most prized colony. In contrast, it was considered “cool” that my colleague in the History Department, a white American man who spent much of his childhood in the subcontinent, had insider knowledge of India. Cognitive dissonance can result in the self-conscious performance that Smith describes (418) or in self-reflexive behaviour where I would find myself being overly conscious of the number of times I referred to India and wondering whether it was too many. Some students at UCCS described me as too political in their evaluations, but as one respondent to Monforti states, “I’ve never heard a white man who studies American politics accused of lacking objectivity” (401).

Student resistance is also moderated by more understated demographic factors: when students have travelled abroad, or come from more open-minded family backgrounds, or when the culture of the institution places a deliberate emphasis on the diversification of its faculty and student body, there may be less of what I call the “Fox effect,” in reference to Fox News’ chief religion correspondent Lauren Green’s interview with religious scholar Reza Aslan. “You are a Muslim,” Green asked, “so why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?” (Wemple). It is clear that Green did not consider Aslan “normative” as a scholar and professor on Christianity and therefore did not consider him qualified to write about this particular subject. The “normative” professor can be compared to the implied reader. Gayatri Spivak states that “[t]he figure of an implied reader is constructed within a consolidated system of cultural representation” (*Aesthetic* 36), and so it is for the “normative” or implied professor. The actual reader, Spivak points out, can appropriate or assume the position of the implied reader. She writes that “[y]ou cannot make sense of anything written or spoken without at least implicitly assuming that it was destined for you, that you are its implied reader,” but the experience can be alienating, a “cultural indoctrination that is out of step with the historical moment” (*Aesthetic* 37). The professor from a “third world” nation then becomes akin to the actual or real reader and might strive to mitigate the perception of inauthenticity by seizing the historical moment and teaching the text within the context of a wider world and not just “the one supposedly indigenous

to the literature under consideration” (*Aesthetic* 36). The demographics of a classroom and the culture of a college play a key role in the consent necessary to destabilise (some might say sabotage) canonical texts.

Spivak writes that “[l]iterature buys your assent in an almost clandestine way and therefore it is an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind For good or for ill. As medicine or as poison, perhaps always a bit of both. The teacher must negotiate and make visible what is merely clandestine” (*Aesthetic* 38). In the US, negotiating and making visible the “merely clandestine” can be risky. No doubt those teaching outside the US will encounter different experiences of the clandestine and different kinds of risks when challenging canonical works, interrogating the historical and political contexts from which those works emerged, or exploring the social and ethical values that produce and are reproduced in a literary canon.

The social position of a white, especially male, professor may go unexamined by students or even be invisible. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said states that “[n]o one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of a society” (10). Of course, while a white male professor may present as neutral, an objective disseminator of necessary knowledge, neutrality is, as Said points out, chimeric. However, even if his biases are visible to some students, his social and institutional position ensures that he can more easily claim the suprapolitical objectivity to which Said refers. When a professor from this demographic negotiates a reading that is covertly or even overtly political, students often do not gauge it as such because it is neutralised by their assumption of the professor’s independence from an ideological agenda. Were I to challenge the textual production of an Indian woman in a Victorian novel, for instance, students may assume that I am driven by a personal or political agenda rather than enacting a pedagogical exercise to encourage them to engage with the politics of representation and the production of knowledge.

The pedagogical experiences and approaches I offer here arise from the insider/outsider position I referenced earlier. My experience is one of a

permanent US resident, but an “alien resident,” as described by the older green cards. It is but one in a spectrum of experiences: teachers’ experiences are mediated by where they are situated in terms of country (both country of origin and the country in which they teach), social and institutional culture, specificities of context, and positionality and market demographics. Such factors also mediate the reception and reading of texts. Student responses to texts can also be a matter of geopolitical location. A colleague who teaches at the University of the West Indies tells me that her students tend to critique the canon in social and political terms precisely because this accords with their experiences as Caribbean people. Our readings of literary texts are mediated not only by our own situatedness as individuals but by our wider geographical and cultural coordinates. Spivak observes that “[i]t should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (“Three Women’s Texts” 243). It should not be possible, and yet a consideration of imperialism is so often occluded from nineteenth-century literature classes.

When teaching nineteenth-century literature I routinely include novels set in the nineteenth century by writers beyond the metropole, such as Andrea Levy’s *The Long Song* and Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*, not to disrupt or reclaim the space between metropole and margin so much as to collapse it. Collapsing a space is not quite the same as collapsing boundaries. Spivak states: “I should like to make clear that I am not conflating British and colonial Commonwealth literatures. Nor am I suggesting a collapsing of boundaries. I am proposing that the complexity of their relationship, collaborative/parasitical/contrary/resistant, be allowed to surface in literary pedagogy. They are different but complicit” (*Aesthetic* 44). It is that very complexity and complicity that needs to be negotiated in the classroom. To read Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* against Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* or Rabindranath Tagore’s *Gora* against Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* reconfigures the spatial arrangement of the texts as well as the spatial arrangement of the curriculum. Of course the very arrangement of space in terms of metropole and margins is

an epistemic arrangement. Often, postcolonial, Native American, and Chicano/Chicana literatures, among others, are offered as opportunities to satisfy requirements for “minority” or “alternative” literatures rather than as part of the literary mainstream. To offer core courses on these literatures not only collapses the space between metropole and margin but changes the grammar of the curriculum.

Engaged professors of literature have long endeavoured to connect the world, the text, and the critic. So what has changed? Why is this a newly urgent task? In his controversial article “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Fredric Jameson writes: “We sense, between ourselves and this alien text, the presence of another reader, of the Other reader, for whom a narrative, which strikes us as conventional or naive, has a freshness of information and a social interest that we cannot share” (66). Jameson famously (infamously for some) claims that all “third-world” texts are necessarily allegorical and to be read as national allegories. In such texts, Jameson argues, the private is also the public: “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (69; emphasis in original). With a dramatic increase in the number of professors in the American academy who are foreign-born, in many if not most cases born in an Asian, African or Caribbean nation,¹ the dialectic between the private and the public (in Jameson’s sense of the connection between the storyline and the society in which it unfolds) perhaps becomes more imperative, but it is the dialectic that is crucial in the engagement with globalisation. What has changed, as Jameson points out, is the relationship between the individual and the collectivity, which is different in the “third world” context. The one assumes the other and is always a part of the other. To acknowledge this is not to advocate a reductionist reading, such as the simple allegorical or parabolic reading of Mahasweta Devi’s “Stanadayini” that Spivak cautions against (*Other Worlds* 247). Even if Devi claims the story as a parable of India after decolonisation, the text might throw up more complex signals, as Spivak indicates (*Other Worlds* 244).

A globally-minded literature pedagogy must move the centre because, as Ngũgĩ notes, the Eurocentric view of the world, while present in all

areas of the academy, is particularly manifest in university departments of language, literature, and cultural studies in many parts of the world (*Moving the Centre* xvii). There are certainly connections, contexts, cross-currents, and correlations that necessitate going beyond the poem, essay, or novel to the worldview that undeniably played a role in producing both the work and its author. But, as Ngũgĩ insists, “It was not a question of substituting one centre for the other. The problem arose only when people tried to use the vision from any one centre and generalise it as the universal reality” (*Moving the Centre* 4). We have to make visible the space from which we teach and map out our own positionalities. This is not the same as imposing a reading, or a position from which to read, on one’s students. “The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place,” Achebe writes in *Arrow of God* (51). I often use this quotation in my teaching statement and my syllabi because it signifies the fluidity and transactional nature of subject positions. Further, it suggests that discursive authority is often derived from subject positions; if subject positions are mobile, then discursive authority is inherently unstable. What matters in the classroom is the mobility itself, the ability to move from one subject position to another. The “I-slot,” as Spivak describes it, may signify “a sociopolitical, psychosexual, disciplinary-institutional or ethno-economic provenance” (*Other Worlds* 243). The location and examination of subject-positions in the text and in the classroom are what engage us as literature teachers.

In *Presumed Incompetent* Sylvia R. Lazos argues that “[u]nconscious bias, stereotypes, and assumptions about role appropriateness are the subjective parameters that students unconsciously carry in their heads and use to shape the way they perceive their women and minority professors” (166). Kari Lerum, another contributor to the volume, addresses the intersectional experience of the professor who must attempt to maintain faculty authority “while also occupying socially stigmatized and oppressed positions” (274). Even if the professor is not directly or openly stigmatised, there is a disjunction and societal value differential when the majority of the students in a class hold a more normative social position than the professor. Lerum does not claim “a balanced or neutral view of the social world” and does not ask her students to be neutral

either; instead, she asks them to recognise that neutrality and objectivity are also social positions protected by institutional privilege and reminds them that “experience mediates the way we construct knowledge” (275). Lazos suggests that “[w]hen minority professors talk about race in their classroom, students are more likely to say they are biased or ‘spend too much time’ doing it. A minority professor can safely address controversial race issues, only if she positions herself as a ‘nonpartisan’” (183).

Monforti cautions that “[w]hen women of color teach topics related to social justice—especially about racially and sexually underrepresented groups in the US—Some, if not most, white students will meet their message with resentment” (465). For some students, my engagement with issues of race, class, and gender was objectionable or at least problematic, even though we engaged in these issues only as they arose in our texts rather than *ad hominem*. One student wrote on his or her class evaluation: “When feminism/political correctness/gender equality are crammed into every sentence, they can be clumsy and have the opposite of the intended effect.” As Monforti indicates, university is where many students are confronted for the first time with the injustices and inequities that communities of colour have faced historically and continue to face, and such students can react with surprise, anger or resentment. Sometimes such reactions arise from “white guilt.” That it is a woman of colour who stands before the class and exercises authority compounds such sentiments (*Presumed Incompetent* 466). Again, such attitudes are both more frequent and more pronounced in state schools in conservative areas. Smaller liberal arts colleges are not immune, but the college culture at many of these campuses may actively or passively discourage such attitudes. Colorado College, where I currently teach, is an example.

Resistance may surface in connection to religious issues as well as social justice issues. When I asked a student to reassess her overtly evangelical Christian reading of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Hollow Men” and probe deeper for ironies, ambiguities, and complexities, she insisted that “T. S. Eliot was a Christian, and I interpreted the poem thus so.” She went on to write in an email that “[a]s with any faith, it is dangerous to dismiss an interpretation based on that faith because one does not fully understand the analysis.” The implication was clear. As a non-Christian

I could not understand a Christian analysis and, worse, I could not tolerate one. The student also protested: “I do know that you equated Allah with God at the beginning of class one day. That is inaccurate for both the Christian and Islamic faiths.” In a class discussion of *Things Fall Apart* and a close reading of the scene where Akunna explains Igbo theology and cosmogony to the Christian missionaries I had made the point that the elders are trying to show that Chukwu is the one supreme God, just as Christians hold that there is one supreme God and Muslims hold Allah as the one supreme God. Thus a young white evangelical Christian woman establishes herself as an authority over the professor.

Monforti quotes one respondent as saying, “The problem with being a female faculty of color is that you get it from all sides—from your colleagues AND from your students” (403). The foreign female faculty of colour has an additional strike against her. All faculty must prove their credentials in the classroom and as scholars. But not all faculty must prove their credibility or their right to be a stakeholder on the campus and in the country where they teach. For example, my husband and I were at a New Jersey mall when we got into an insignificant parking dispute with a white American couple, who asked why we (expletive) foreigners did not just go back where we came from. It was as though in disputing our claim to the parking space they were simultaneously disputing the space we occupied in the nation. Along the same lines, when I joined an email discussion on a UCCS faculty listserv about whether Newt Gingrich should be invited to speak on campus and made the benign observation that, contrary to the claim that had been put forth, the US is not the only country where such a forum was possible, one of my colleagues lashed out in an email with the following: “It is perfectly acceptable for you to be a terrorist loving, anti-American, whining liberal with no backbone or understanding of colonialism or the Constitution because this is indeed the land of the free.” Another faculty member likened me to Fidel Castro, Hugo Chavez, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. If faculty members can be provoked into such hysterical responses, why would it be surprising when students at the same university harbour conscious or unconscious bias? “How could they not?” asks one of Monforti’s respondents. “They, too, are socialized in this sexist

and racist society and so are unaccustomed to seeing women of color in positions of authority” (403). The email exchange I write of provoked the Director of the Women’s and Ethnic Studies Program at UCCS to write a letter to the Chancellor of the university protesting that the intention of such professors is the intimidation and silencing of faculty of colour. Additionally, the then Chair of the English Department wrote in my evaluation: “Professor Singh challenges our students in a way that is essential in their development. She often receives evidence of lasting impressions made by her classes. If they are open to what she places before them, they can become better global citizens, which is a goal for them at the level of the department, college, and university.”

The privileged positionality of a white heterosexual male in the US makes it more likely that his teaching will be accepted as factual, Monforti points out: “When a woman of color presents the same material she may be perceived as acting like a victim or having a chip on her shoulder” (466) or, as in my case, of being an upstart or an intruder. Therefore it is probably best to let the text do the talking and allow such issues to emerge through class debate over the subjectivities of the text rather than the perceived subjectivities of the teacher. I agree with Spivak, however, that “[i]t is crucial that we extend our analysis . . . beyond the minimal diagnosis of ‘racism’” (“Three Women’s Texts” 247). In order to do so, we need to employ what she describes as a “discursive field” (247). A combination of close reading techniques and situating the literary text in a discursive field is the best way to extend the literary analysis.²

The professor must allow his or her reading of a text to meet other readings and understandings as a starting point rather than as an end point for discourse, debate, and discussion in the classroom. After all, the classroom is not just an “interpretive community,” to use Fish’s term, but a multitude of interpretive communities (*Is There a Text* 304). Fish, of course, indicates that meanings are situationally determined and always embedded in context. Complications arise, however, when an interpretive community is mediated by various social, cultural, and political understandings; as McLaren and Farahmandpur argue, “educators need to unthink their current relation to pedagogical practice as

politically decoupled from the infrastructure of capitalism's deep value system and ruling moral syntax" (20). While as an individual professor it would be presumptuous to aspire to anything as large as McLaren and Farahmandpur's consideration of "how education can be transformed in the interests of social justice" (20), an enterprise to which Fish would no doubt be averse, I can at least aim to render the classroom, in the words of Frantz Fanon, a "zone of occult instability" (183).

When I received my Ph.D. from an American public university in 1977, a *cordon sanitaire* was drawn around the discipline. My interest in connecting English literature to the complex poverty and privation of so many people in Calcutta, where I had taken my undergraduate degree, was quickly quashed as "unprofessional." Literature was to be cordoned off from real life and not tainted by its grunge—never mind that it was the grunge with which so many novelists engaged. I was seeking "relevance," that old buzz word of the Vietnam era, except that I wanted my postgraduate study of literature to be relevant to the complex social realities I would be surrounded by, if not a part of, as I envisaged my return to India to teach. A clear distinction between the private and the public and the individual and the collective was being drawn, by many in my graduate school English faculty, specifically, and by English professors in the US at the time, more generally. Here was a different sort of fatwa altogether—a soft fatwa, if you will. Arif Dirlik suggests that the university's perceived autonomy is a myth; it has never been a secure space but is instead subject to the vagaries of the social and political environment of which it is an integral part (6). As George Orwell so memorably observed, "The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude" (5), and in that sense the political is continuously operative as we read. Of course this is far more readily accepted in cultural studies departments than in most English departments because of the influence of the late Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, and others. For some, issues of race and ethnicity should remain corralled within Race and Ethnic Studies or other such programmes. For others, these issues should infiltrate the curriculum at all levels and in all disciplines and departments. McLaren and Farahmandpur feel that the time is ripe "for demanding how education can be transformed in the

interests of social justice” (20) rather than in the interests of producing human capital for the international labour market (21).

While I employ the enframing ontology advocated by Paul C. Mocombe as a teaching strategy (4), or rather ontologies of imperialism, neo-imperialism, global capital, neoliberal policies, and the conflicts they fuel when teaching texts such as Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, or even earlier novels such as Orwell’s *Burmese Days* or Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, and while I use such novels to encourage students to think critically about discursive practices as well as the experiential and emotional consequences of globalisation, a “shape shifter,” as Kwame Anthony Appiah terms it (xiii), in the end I cannot do much more than employ dialogical and culturally heterogeneous pedagogical practices. In other words, I cannot change the world. I can, however, put forth other enframing ontologies as theoretical lenses through which to read our literary texts, such as Said’s work on orientalism, Appiah’s work on cosmopolitanism, or Hall’s work on cultural identity. I can also recognize the intersectional subjectivities of my students and acknowledge their lived experiences. To teach *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* as part of a course on postcolonial literature or on race and ethnic studies feels “safer” than teaching it as part of a survey course where students do not necessarily self-select. Few scenes in literature are as potentially polarising in the US classroom as the controversial scene in Hamid’s novel in which the protagonist, Changez, smiles as he watches the World Trade Center towers come down. Although he quickly clarifies that he feels compassion for the loss of life and that his satisfaction was in seeing the downfall of the US empire, many American students for whom 9/11 has become a symbol of the country’s vulnerability and even victimisation may consider the scene shocking or immoral. Often the class will include some students who introduce the larger context of global capital and US political and economic power, thus encouraging others to contextualise the scene and appreciate its ironies. Such contexts and considerations provide perspectives without which Changez’s smile may be read as callow, a gesture of indifference rather than a gesture of resistance. Interestingly,

the most contentious site of dispute and resistance among undergraduate students tends to be canonical texts rather than postcolonial texts that engage more overtly with issues of power and political or economic hegemony. This is exactly why I use Brontë's *Jane Eyre* for my "teacher's reading" below. It is in a novel such as this that the clash of subjectivities becomes most visible. While the engagement with the political may be more direct and "in your face" in contemporary postcolonial novels, the discussion of race and Empire in a canonical work is more readily perceived as contaminative. Fish argues that the only advocacy that should occur in the classroom is the advocacy of intellectual virtues (*Save the World* 20). However, as McLaren and Farahmandpur note, the increasing commoditisation of knowledge and the privatisation of socially produced knowledge by transnational corporations contribute to the creation of a knowledge industry rather than a free-flowing academic space (33). Referencing a report by Marilyn Niemark, McLaren and Farahmandpur state that "the increasing social policies that support for-profit universities have made higher education an extension of the market economy" (33). In this context, Fish's contention that those "not in the pursuit-of-truth business . . . should not be in the university" (*Save the World* 20) sounds somewhat naive and dated.

While Fish acknowledges "the unavailability of purity" (*Save the World* 23), he also insists that it is easy to compartmentalise one's beliefs and commitments. Rather than restrict content, he urges that the classroom not be appropriated for partisan purposes. All but the most activist of professors would agree with Fish that in the classroom the subject at hand should be "an object of analysis rather than an object of affection" (*Save the World* 25). Professors are not meant to be missionaries. Yet Fish conflates the political with politics when he emphasises that professors cannot urge a particular policy on their students (*Save the World* 25). Of course they cannot. What Fish does not seem to recognise is that any educational institution is inherently political; its very make-up, policies, and practices are already political. The political is also inherent in the text and in the lesson. As bell hooks notes, "academic freedom is evoked to deflect attention away from the ways knowledge is used to reinforce and perpetuate domination, away from the ways in which

education is not a neutral process" (*Talking Back* 64). Global migration and global capital have political, social, and economic consequences for the learning community within the classroom. To connect the text with the world beyond the classroom walls or campus boundaries is neither reductionist nor sacrilegious but simply a recognition that the classroom is not merely a chamber in the old ivory tower but a marketplace of ideas as well as economic, political, social, and material realities. As Ngũgĩ observes, howling winds blow outside the walls of the ivory tower (*Globalectics* 14).

Fish writes that his classroom became so impassioned during a debate about the religion clause of the First Amendment that students jumped up and down and pumped their fists. He clarifies that they were not sharing opinions but seeking the truth. According to Fish, the question asked in the classroom should never be "What do you think?" but instead "What is the truth?" (*Save the World* 39). That, he declares, is the opposite of moral relativism (*Save the World* 38). Truth, however, can be a tricky thing and inevitably leads to the question: Whose truth? While rehearsing uninformed opinions in the classroom can indeed be a specious and empty exercise, the pursuit of truth can be slippery and equally specious. Truth, as Foucault contends, is not outside power (*Power/Knowledge* 131). As a theorist closely associated with reader-response criticism, Fish is invested in the autonomy and agency of the reader. Certainly he characterises statements such as "teaching grammatical rules is a form of social indoctrination" or "notions of correctness are devices by means of which the powers that be extend their illegitimate hegemony" as ludicrous (*Save the World* 49). Such contentions ultimately trivialise what bell hooks describes as "education for critical consciousness," an education that can occur precisely through academically, from learning "to think critically and analytically, not just about the required books, but about the world they [students] live in" (*Talking Back* 102). While Fish may be wary about "the world they live in" part of that idea, literature is indeed about the world we inhabit, and once students can understand the "worldliness" of a text, in Said's sense "that texts are always enmeshed in circumstance, time, place, and society—in short, they are in the world, and hence worldly" (*World* 35), they can

better understand and deconstruct the socially constructed “knowledge” and meanings that come at them in many different forms.

The New Critical approach was seductive for both the student and the teacher of literature. It was highly technical, even clinical, in its dissection of a literary work and, as such, offered a pseudo-scientific cast to literature that has proven particularly valuable in the increasing professionalisation of college curricula. Of all academic fields, literature is probably the most available to the non-academic. New Critical techniques can make students feel smart and privy to a specialised, even arcane knowledge as they toss around terms such as “paradox,” “ambiguity,” “tension,” and “irony.” For the professor, this approach is simply less risky. There is no betrayal of political or ideological position as he (and I say “he” deliberately) paces about the room pondering the nuances of the text and its internal structure. Although literature must lend itself to multiple interpretations and reader receptions, no matter the approach or school of theory being applied, the New Critical approach effectively rendered both the author and reader irrelevant to the text. Traditionally, the professor was a purveyor of a presumptive but ultimately putative neutrality and employing a New Critical approach could effect this neutrality through the text.

The reign of New Criticism and formalism was long and powerful in the American academy and lay behind the valorisation of close reading techniques over metanarratives. Critical analysis, critical thinking, and close reading are, however, tools; they are a means to an end rather than an end in themselves, and it is the end that draws debate and disagreement. Ngúgí asserts:

Close reading should be an important companion to poor theory. But without that broad political-cum-ideological framework, close reading and obsession with formalistic elements can turn into attempts to squeeze the world of the literary text through the eye of the critical needle, a contribution to the poverty of theory. It’s like entering a treasure trove and counting the items inside without awareness of their value, unable to relate them to anything outside. (*Globalectics* 13)

David Lurie, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*, is one prototype of a professor whose practice of the profession is self-indulgent and self-referential: "He continues to teach because it provides him with a livelihood; also because it teaches him humility, brings it home to him who he is in the world" (5). Lurie uses a New Critical methodology to teach Book 6 of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* to his class. He begins: "Let us start with the unusual verb form *usurp upon*. Did anyone look it up in a dictionary?" (21). He points to line 599 in the poem and brings the class' attention to the limits of sense-perception. Attempting to penetrate the blank incomprehension that greets his lesson he makes a lame attempt to link Wordsworth's writing about the Alps to the Drakensberg—more familiar, naturally, to his students (23). In so doing Lurie demonstrates how easy it would be to breach the tenets of New Criticism by stepping out of the parameters of the poem and gesturing toward a certain type of epistemic violence by teaching a poem about an alien landscape and expecting the students to feel invested. Using the Drakensberg referentially roots the students in their own environment. The other contravention is in the way the poem continually takes him outside its parameters to the personal, to the body of the female student in the class with whom he has had sex, not wholly consensually, and which leads to his disgrace. Multiple transgressions occur as Lurie becomes aware of the "covert intimacies" (23) he is forcing on Melanie during the class just as he (effectually) forced sex on her; he simultaneously ruptures the boundaries of the poem, his profession, and her person. Coetzee's fictional professor would no doubt consider his teaching of the Romantic poets to be politically neutral, yet his lesson is infiltrated by external social situations and structures. This leads to the question of whether a lesson can ever be neutral. hooks frankly declares that she does "not pretend that [her] approach is politically neutral, yet this disturbs students who have been led to believe that all education within the university should be 'neutral'" (*Talking Back* 101). Foucault's power/knowledge "equation" recognises that an episteme privileges certain types of knowledges while suppressing others, usually those that threaten to destabilise the dominant episteme (*Discipline* 27). The complex relationship between power and knowledge operates in

the literature classroom where Foucault's reference to a politics of truth (*Power/Knowledge* 131) and Spivak's reference to a politics of interpretation (*Other Worlds* 118) have special significance. For both Foucault and Spivak it is a given that ideology is larger than the concepts of individual consciousness and will (*Other Worlds* 118). It is essential that literature students understand how to critically analyse texts, but knowing how to do so is not an end in itself. It is instead a technique that allows students to read both text and subtext and to examine why and how an author elicits empathy for a particular character, even a flawed character or one well outside our particular range of experiences. This is indeed a form of "*Negative Capability*" (Keats 261; emphasis in original), and it allows us to respect or at least recognise a multivalence of voices, especially in modernist fiction where there is seldom an omniscient or reliable narrator. Knowing how to read the subtext enables us to better deconstruct the text as well as its context.

By their very fictionality, novels subvert regimes of truth. Terry Eagleton sees literary works as less deluded than other forms of discourse because their implicit acknowledgement of their own rhetorical status renders them ambiguous and indeterminate (126). The modern novel, in particular, with its multiple narrators, multipart perspectives, lack of linearity, distinction between sign and signifier, and postponement of meaning (as in Jacques Derrida's notion of *differance*) inherently destabilises regimes of truth. Nevertheless, such regimes can re-emerge from dominant or prescribed readings, especially of canonical novels. As such regimes of truth are reader-driven rather than author- or text-driven. The classic example of "talking back" to a canonical text is Achebe's now famous essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," written in response to Joseph Conrad's novella and its canonisation in high school and college curricula. This pairing has itself become canonised through its regular inclusion in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Twentieth Century and After*.

Achebe cannot come to terms with what amounts to a New Critical approach to Conrad's text, although he never describes it as such, that reads texts symbolically on their own terms and for their own sake, churning out what he sees as "comforting myths" (339). In *Theory*

After Theory: An Intellectual History of Literary Theory, Nicholas Birns writes: “Both de Man and Achebe wrote their essays [on Conrad] out of particular pedagogical contexts. However sweeping their theoretical reverberations, the readings were teachers’ readings that aimed to find a new angle on professing these texts in the classroom” (33). Classroom understandings of a text are then palimpsestic. Students come to realise that while books are static, texts are dynamic, and the act of reading is always an active process of ongoing revision, reconsideration, and re-examination—an understanding in tune with reader response theory. Texts become mobile rather than stationary. Transgressional teaching is teaching, not preaching, and hooks would insist that it is also transactional, involving a development of a critical consciousness that needs critical tools. Equipped with such tools the student can then resist a more prescriptive or authoritarian pedagogy, especially when there is a clash or contest of subject positions. In increasingly multicultural societies such as the US we must distinguish between political citizenship, which refers to citizens and passport holders of the nation state, and cultural citizenship. In her book *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11*, Sunaina Maira contends that after 9/11 the perception of the nation and national belonging may have shifted for some religious and ethnic groups in the US, particularly for South Asian Muslims (4). Maira reiterates that “cultural citizenship is a critical issue for immigrants and nonwhite Americans because it highlights the ways in which the trope of national belonging, so powerful in modernity, is not just based on political, social, and economic dimensions of citizenship but is also defined in the social realm of belonging” (10). The social realm of belonging comes into play not only for some students in US classrooms but also for some professors who increasingly find their own subject positions destabilised by the privileging of some types of cultural citizenship over others. Spivak writes that “[i]n a moving passage in ‘Caliban,’ Retamar locates both Caliban and Ariel in the postcolonial intellectual” (“Three Women’s Texts” 245). Might one say the same about the “minority” professor? He or she is the authority figure in the classroom yet is entrapped by the perceptions and stereotypes that structure the wider society from which students come. Although American students

might place a professor from a country or culture outside the US in the position of the “Native Informant,” we must remember that the Native Informant is still a construction of the colonial subject or the dominant societal group. While the historian unravels the text to assign a new subject-position to the subaltern, Spivak suggests, the teacher of literature “unravels the text to make visible the assignment of subject-positions” (*Other Worlds* 241). She notes, however, that the historian and the literature teacher “must critically ‘interrupt’ each other, bring each other to crisis. The teacher of literature, because of her institutional subject-position, can and must ‘re-constellate’ the text to draw out its use. She can and must wrench it out of its proper context and put it within alien arguments” (*Other Worlds* 241). This is precisely what I endeavour to achieve when teaching a canonical text such as Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*. As I remarked earlier, the perceived politicisation of a classic can generate far more classroom pushback than a discussion of more overtly and obviously political postcolonial texts. Although not usually considered a political novel, *Jane Eyre* offers a useful prototype of how the personal and the political, individual psyche and public discourse, are inevitably imbricated. I offer this analysis to indicate how the text might be connected to both the old imperialism that entwined a mercantile and geopolitical empire and the new economic empire of global capital without impeaching the integrity of other readings. Empire, in its various manifestations, is the enframing ontology in teaching this text through a transnational and intersectional methodology.

Although *Jane Eyre* is not a postcolonial text, it is frequently coupled with one of the “classics” of postcolonial literature, Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Their intertextuality has become a prototype of the “talking back” mode that is foundational in postcolonial literature, even if no longer radical. *Jane Eyre* has become, in Spivak’s words, “a cult text of feminism” (“Three Women’s Texts” 244), but Spivak persuades us to go beyond “the psychobiography of the militant female subject” (“Three Women’s Texts” 245) to locate the novel in the age of imperialism in which it was written and published. Although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar “liberate” Jane from the angel/monster dichotomy, Jane’s complicity (or lack thereof) in the imperial project is not normally a

matter of discussion. The novel sets up a series of dichotomies beyond the angel/monster, and it is our task in the classroom to examine the tension between these dichotomies and to search out moments in which the text encourages a dialectic.

The book that Jane is found reading in the opening scene, Thomas Bewick's *The History of British Birds*, is likely to appeal to Jane's lively imagination and gloomy circumstances. The book is not mentioned again and would seem at first to be a passing detail. However, *The History of British Birds* becomes a form of paratext that presents the tale about to be told as a British, or in this case English, tale, and its heroine as an Englishwoman. It is this very English perspective, point of view, and especially positionality that Rhys writes back to in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. In his definitive work, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette describes the paratext as a threshold or a fringe. Genette notes that the author's name, the book's title, the prefaces, the illustrations, and other paratextual elements are tasked with establishing the text's presence in the world. As I teach *Jane Eyre*, I adapt the idea of paratext to encompass a conceptual as well as a corporeal presence. The novel's reference to *The History of British Birds* is a fringe or edge, as Genette describes a paratext, which, while seemingly inconsequential, controls our reading of the text. In postcolonial novels such paratexts become discursive spaces that compel the reader to locate the novel within a larger discourse that concerns Empire and its impact on the postcolonial episteme. The postcolonial episteme, in turn, allows for considerations of neocolonialism and globalism in the contemporary context. The Englishness of the text is legitimised by the author through this "threshold." There is much in *Jane Eyre* that recalls and reproduces nineteenth-century Social Darwinism and its concomitant race theories. Robert Knox, author of *The Races of Man*, and others regarded Anglo-Saxons as the most energetic and driven of all races. Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* notes that Brontë had received and read *The Races of Man*. Even though Brontë does not use the term Anglo-Saxon specifically, the novel conveys a clear sense of English exceptionalism, particularly in terms of character, from which we can extrapolate a larger racial awareness.

Classroom discussions of the novel can also consider a larger narrative of transnational global capital. Jane's inheritance from her uncle, who made his fortune in Madeira, can be used to connect sugar and slavery and the source of Britain's economic and thus political power, which was constructed on the backs of slaves and subject peoples. The inheritance is key to the novel's plot development as it allows Jane financial independence and, along with Bertha's death, frees her to marry Edward Rochester. Just as distinctions are made throughout the novel between Christian and heathen, so too are distinctions made between the English and all others. The novel particularises England's "healthy heart" (Brontë 343) and singles out the British peasantry as "the best taught, best mannered, most self-respecting of any in Europe" (372). A sound English education corrects the "French defects" of Adèle (431), Jane's charge during her years as a governess at Thornfield Hall. Rochester, Jane's master, betrothed, and husband, in that order, refers to Jane as his likeness and his equal, in contrast to the "clothed hyena" (279) who is his insane wife Bertha Mason. The contrast highlights Bertha's crazed condition as well as the fact that both Rochester and Jane are English and thus racial equals in contrast to Bertha who, although white, is "contaminated" by her proximity to black people. "My bride is here," he says to Jane as he proposes to her, "because my equal is here, and my likeness" (241). The word "likeness" implies racial solidarity and parity. The positioning of Bewick's *The History of British Birds* so early in the novel points toward the possibility that its function is to present *Jane Eyre* as an English story and Jane herself as an exemplary Englishwoman: strong and defiant, perhaps, but also resilient and morally upright. By putting *The History of British Birds* into Jane's hands, so to speak, Brontë uses the book as an authorial conveyor of a commentary that establishes the prevailing English sensibility early in the novel. Englishness is the point of entry for this text, and it establishes the uniqueness of the English nature of the novel's setting and its protagonists. Bertha is excluded from this social consensus and clearly marked off by race even if she is technically white. She is described in the Social Darwinistic discourse of the nineteenth century: a woman with "a pigmy intellect" and "giant propensities" (291) who becomes inseparable from her environment. Rochester's

complaint that he could not escape the contamination of Bertha's crimes insinuates the "crime" of racial contamination as well as debauchery. Bertha is Creole and not English white and, as David Lambert indicates in *White Creole Culture, Politics and Identity during the Age of Abolition*, whiteness came to be defined in terms of Englishness and (to a lesser extent) Britishness: this was the dominant form of ethnic whiteness by the late eighteenth century (36). It is no coincidence that the wind that revives and regenerates Rochester while he is still in the Caribbean is a wind that blows from Europe.

Thus I encourage students to go beyond issues of narratology and Gothic elements, situate *Jane Eyre* in a larger episteme, and read the work not just as a period text but as emblematic of a wider discourse about Empire, an approach that indeed "academicises" the work. The novel does not end with the happy resolution of Jane and Rochester's reunion but with St. John Rivers toiling for the religion and the race in India, the "soul making" project to which Spivak refers in her article "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (249). The external focalisation at the end of *Jane Eyre* suggests that it is more than the story of two individuals. It is also the story of race and Empire. As such, the novel can also be read and taught as national allegory in Jameson's sense of the relationship between the individual story and the story of the nation. To "politicise" this beloved novel and read in it a reproduction of prevailing social relations—of class, gender, race, and Empire—might meet with some resistance in the classroom. Some students may see this "teacher's reading" as somehow corruptive or manipulative. For many students and professors, the dislocation of a canonical writer in this manner can cause discomfort or outright indignation, even if the alternative reading is offered contrapuntally, in Said's sense of the word (*Culture and Imperialism* 51).

While there are many instances of Manichean oppositions in *Jane Eyre*—heathens and savages counterpoised with Christians and civilised nations, for example—and while the text certainly expresses anxieties about racial purity and maintains the binaries that structured the Victorian social order, it equally expresses anxieties about entombment and enclosure, from the red room to the harem, as well as about control,

domination, and perhaps even Empire. In order to open up a dialectic I ask the class whether Jane's refusal to accompany St. John, despite her affirmation of his high moral purpose, can be interpreted as a subliminal refusal to participate in Empire. Thus we debate how Brontë's text both rehearses the anxieties of Empire and grapples with its problematics. It is this type of internal tension that is instructive for students, rather than an all-out invective on the ideology of Empire.

Teaching Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* in tandem with *Jane Eyre* hybridises the latter or perhaps both texts. The same is true when one teaches Levy's *The Long Song* with Austen's *Mansfield Park*, as I have. When teaching a text that "talks back" to another, I often ask the class: What happens when a writer "rewrites" or talks back to an established text? What is the writer's purpose in doing so? How does the vision of the first text change? How is its worldview affected or modified? How does the second writing deconstruct the first? How is the first writing embedded in the second? How do such texts challenge the hegemony of the canon? "Talking back" can transition into talking together, a polyphonic form of intertextuality. Speaking to the value of intertextuality in the classroom, Ngūgĩ writes:

Sembene Ousmane's great novel *God's Bits of Wood* has strong affinities with Emile Zola's *Germinal*, and my own *A Grain of Wheat* with Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*. I used to teach Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* alongside Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and Sophocles' *Oedipus*. Okot p'Bitek wrote his very African poem, "Song of Lawino," after he had read Longfellow's "Song of Hiawatha." (*Globalectics* 43)

Rather than compartmentalise texts by author, period, geography, or language, the professor can allow texts to speak to each other as a global community of texts. As Spivak suggests, "it would be difficult to find an ideological clue to the planned epistemic violence of imperialism merely by rearranging curricula or syllabi within existing norms of literary pedagogy" ("Three Women's Texts" 254). In other words, we need to look for internal evidence such as the appearance of Wordsworth's poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" in many postcolonial novels, among

them Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The daffodils serve as ideological clues to the planned epistemic violence of imperialism that Spivak references.

Situating a text in its context is a pedagogical choice that requires some understanding of a larger episteme or discourse on the part of the instructor who, in turn, ensures that the students gain such an understanding. Without an understanding of the import and consequence of epistemic violence, for example, many students would be bewildered by the intensity of Lucy's wrath in Kincaid's novel, especially since it is provoked by the seemingly innocent Wordsworth poem "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." Lucy's rage stems from her personal situation, her past experiences, and her familial issues, but she also experiences a more existential rage at the epistemic violence to which she has been subjected. The difference between Mariah's and Lucy's response to the daffodils is not simply a difference in visual or aesthetic taste, of course, but a difference in national, political, social, educational, and personal histories. It is a difference of epistemology and the constitution of power. As Foucault observes, "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (*Discipline* 27).

The idea of epistemic violence is difficult for many students to wrap their heads around. Oppression, subjugation, racism, sexism: these they can understand and perhaps empathise with because they are far more direct and visceral, but the notion of epistemic violence can often seem too abstract or esoteric. To historicise and personalise the concept I refer to Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 "Minute on Indian Education" and offer a brief description of my high school curriculum, which was set by the University of Cambridge for its overseas Senior Cambridge examination (renamed the Indian School Certificate Examination in 1963 but still the Senior Cambridge examination for a few years after). Almost two decades after India's independence, it did not include a single text by an Indian author. We read William Shakespeare, Dickens, Brontë, Sir Walter Scott, and others, in abundance, but no Premchand or Tagore. This was at The Lawrence School in the Nilgiri Hills of southern India,

a pricey boarding school that was patterned after a British public school and founded in memory of one of the heroes of the “Indian Mutiny,” Sir Henry Lawrence, in 1858. Although the texts were taught by Indian teachers, they had been trained in the British system, often by British teachers; although the grounding they provided was unparalleled, they were a product of a British based education themselves. This privileging of British literary texts was replicated in university curricula at the time. Without some understanding of the “cultural bomb” that was dropped by colonial regimes (Ngũgĩ, *Decolonising* 3), the full impact of epistemic violence cannot be realised. Illustrations of epistemic violence in literary texts are spaces where history, politics, and literature can mingle. For example, Sindiwe Magona’s epistolary novel *Mother to Mother* offers a powerful exposition of epistemic violence that students understand on a more “gut” level. Magona historicises the mob killing in a Cape Town township of American Fulbright scholar Amy Biehl by linking it to the roots of hatred: the Xhosa cattle killings and erasure of Xhosa understandings of that historical event. By rescuing the cattle killings from the realm of magical realism and implanting it in history and rationality, Magona establishes cause and effect and “academicises” the connections between literature and history.

A text is always multivocal and multivalent; each reading both deconstructs and constructs a different text but does not cancel out other readings. One is not simply historicising the text when conducting a certain kind of reading but seeing it as the subtext of a metanarrative. When we speak of canonical texts we must establish that we are speaking not only of particular texts but of particular readings of those texts. However, readings that focus on issues of race, gender, and Empire will likely be more palatable in some classrooms than others. When the ideological bent of the professor does not map with the ideological bent of the student, the student may suspect a political agenda. The danger, of course, is that the professor’s subject position may elide the student’s. This can be overcome by teaching a text with no pre-set polemic purpose but instead putting it in conversation with other texts, other epistemologies, and other readings with which the professor may disagree but that allow a dialectic or indeed a polylectic to emerge. Of course, one chooses such

pairings for an admittedly polemic purpose, but the purpose is not to degrade the “classics” or canonical texts but to destabilise our readings in the service of more open interpretations.

In *Re-thinking Theory* Richard Freadman and Seumas Miller refer to Eagleton’s argument that Henry James’ management of narrative point of view “constitutes, at the level of form, an encoding of the ‘ideological values’ of ‘humanist’ ‘moral’ discourse,” and thus texts can replicate ideological systems within formal structures (55). By the same token, texts can also contest ideological systems within formal structures. As Pierre Macherey argues, the silences of a text speak (93), and it is with the silences of Austen’s *Mansfield Park* that Said engages in his chapter on the novel in *Culture and Imperialism*. Some students may agree with Harish Trivedi when he argues that Said makes “a postcolonial political mountain out of a molehill in the case of Jane Austen, an iconic ‘artist’ among British novelists, by focusing exclusively on a couple of passing references in *Mansfield Park* to sugar-cane plantations in far away Antigua” (141). That Antigua was far away yet fuelled the wealth of absentee plantation owners in Britain is precisely the point. And that Austen does not dwell on this beyond a few passing references is also Said’s point. These are but throwaway references to a location significant in the lives of those who profited from it, such as Sir Thomas and his family, and the people on whose backs they profited. Sir Thomas’ silence when Fanny asks about slavery rehearses the silence of the text on the subject and gestures toward moral considerations. As Said points out, Austen probably would not have personally sanctioned slavery, but her membership in a society that practiced it made her complicit. However, as Said argues, that is no reason to “jettison her novels as so many trivial exercises in aesthetic frumpery” (*Culture and Imperialism* 96). Instead, we should make connections, read what is there or not there, and see “complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalised experience that excludes and forbids the hybridising intrusions of human history” (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 96). Rather than teaching students about “the world,” “reality,” or “truth,” literature thus teaches them about the process by which we construct the world, reality, or truth. Representation becomes re-presentation, what Spivak calls

“*Darstellung*” (“Subaltern” 277; emphasis in original). Representations have both interpretative and ideological components.

To situate the study of literature in English in a cultural studies framework is to tear down the fences of intellectual self-enclosure and open up the pasture to “a new order of knowing,” as Ngũgĩ phrases it (*Globalectics* 43). Ngũgĩ famously argued for the abolition of the English department. At the very least, English departments should offer world, Anglophone, and postcolonial literatures as central components of the curriculum rather than as alternative choices. Eagleton writes that a revolutionary literary criticism would assume dismantling the ruling concepts of literature and reinserting literary texts into the whole field of cultural practices; it would relate those cultural practices to other forms of social activity and articulate cultural analyses with a consistent political intervention; and, if necessary, it would mobilise literary texts by “hermeneutic violence” (98). The truth, as Rushdie tells us, is “that there is no whale” and no hiding places. For “the missiles have made sure of that,” Rushdie states (99). Like Rushdie’s writer, the teacher “is obliged to accept that he (or she) is part of the crowd, part of the ocean, part of the storm, so that objectivity becomes a great dream, like perfection, an unattainable goal for which one must struggle in spite of the impossibility of success” (*Imaginary* 100–01). To teach outside the whale is to have known all along that there is no whale, that the whale was always an illusion. As Rushdie suggests, there are no more hiding places or certainties because “we are all irradiated by history, we are radioactive with history and politics” (100). Even while we teach, missiles, guns, and bombs are ready to go off and do go off. The doors of the classroom lead into this world.

Notes

- 1 “The number of international scholars working at colleges and universities in the United States—as researchers, instructors and professors—rose to 115,000 last year, an all-time high, from 86,000 in 2001. That growth, documented by the Institute of International Education, a nonprofit group in New York, came despite the problems in obtaining visas after 9/11” (Foderaro).
- 2 Spivak’s working definition of a discursive field assumes “the existence of discrete ‘systems of signs’ at hand in the socius, each based on a specific axiomatics” (“Three Women’s Texts” 247).

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