"I Don't Identify With the Text":
Exploring the Boundaries of Personal/Cultural in a Postcolonial Pedagogy

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"It may be that the process of allowing a particular kind of identity to develop is what contemporary writing instruction is all about."

Robert Brooke

When one has grasped the mechanism described by Lacan, one can have no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely. Only for the white man The Other is perceived on the level of the body image, absolutely as the not-self—that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man, as we have shown, historical and economic realities come into the picture.

Frantz Fanon

Anzaldúa says that the white culture is killing her people slowly with ignorance. She believes that whites look upon Chicanos as being less than human. There is a generalization being made about the entire white race as a whole that I find extremely offensive.

Student journal response to Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/La Frontera

Schooled Identities and Writing Pedagogy

How do classrooms engage student experiences? What behaviors and writing conventions do students adopt when the experiences represented by specific texts and people are perceived as “different?” Perhaps more important, when students resist, can the function of resistance be in the service of unquestioned assumptions of identity, or can resistance be part of a process approach to pedagogy in the services of a radical pedagogy? This essay responds to the significance of student “identification” by considering how student identities have historically been invited by and performed within the contexts of schooling in general and writing pedagogy in particular. As signified by the quotation from Fanon above, the essay explores the historical context of schooling in former colonies to elucidate how identities, aesthetics, and writing conventions have been fashioned, arguing that for many writers and scholars of postcolonial studies this context occurred within a paradoxical history of both embodiment and disembodiment, of “black skin white masks.” The moment of recognition when Fanon sees the extent to which he has fashioned himself to be “civilized” is also the moment when he recognizes the construction of his unalterable
difference. Such moments of self-recognition can be part of a powerful process pedagogy when students, implicated as they are in value-laden contexts of schooling, articulate the processes from resistance to considerations of history and culture in the complex processes of identity formation (their own as well as others').

Personal responses which are not always articulated to the teacher constitute what Robert Brooke has named the "underlife" of a writing classroom. Brooke argues that subversive classroom behaviors such as unsolicited talking, passing notes, and private discussions are performances of the complex identities and stances toward education that students bring to the classroom. These performances signify the imposition of the political structures of education which privilege certain social, and cultural markers of identity as desirable behaviors. They may also represent resistance toward school identity defined by year in school, academic major, grade earned, and such other aspects of a student's literacy history that incorporate perceptions of what it means to be a "good" or "bad" student.

What seems particularly significant in this concept of "underlife" is that larger historical and cultural processes are experienced in terms of the contradictions and reifications of identity defined variously, and in terms of the "conflict" between perceptions and misperceptions of identity by self and other. For my purposes, I wish to emphasize the way these cultural, historical, and social contexts, enacted in the spaces of the classroom, are simultaneously apriori to and present in the material conditions of classrooms. When teachers lecture and students take notes, when students raise their hands to be given permission to speak, when the teacher asks questions in an exegetical mode, specific ideologies about knowledge-construction are transmitted. In response to such ideologies, contemporary writing pedagogies have encouraged process and valued a writer's engagement with the text. As Lester Faigley points out, "process theory views the text as open-ended, as potentially always changeable instead of as a static object. Similarly, the widespread practices of peer reviews and multiple drafts have tended to make classroom readers active participants in the production of texts, reducing the distance between writers and readers" (Fragments 225). These contrasting pedagogies posit student "underlife" in contrasting ways—as lack of "discipline" and "control," or as the heroic efforts of students to perform themselves complexly in a situation which does not "allow" it.

Contemporary writing pedagogy attempts to engage student "underlife" in productive ways by recognizing the significance of the perspectives of race, class and gender to critical thinking, to writing and to identity. Such pedagogy is sometimes articulated as a critique of the institutional history of schooling in America which may argue that knowledge, information, and skills are universal and universally accessible. Progressive reformers argue that race, class, and gender experiences enable such a critique. As Michael Denning argues, "race, class, and gender are not the answers in cultural studies, the bottom line explanation to which all life may be reduced; they are precisely the problem posed—their history, formation, their 'articulation' with particular historical events or artistic works" (32).

Postcolonial studies make the processes of identity formation part of its project, expanding the scope of both classroom contexts and schooled identities. In so doing
postcolonial studies articulates the apriori history of classrooms and their role in creating desirable identities. As signified by the narratives of Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks, A Dying Colonialism,* and *Wretched of the Earth,* postcolonial studies emphasizes the spectrum from the psychological, to the cultural and the historical, and relate the creation of colonized/schooled identities to the construction of race, class, and gendered identity. Such narratives offer concrete embodiments of the processes of colonization and decolonization. For writing teachers, these narratives assert both the pedagogical significance of personal narratives and of writing processes.

To elucidate this aspect of my argument I will examine how educators have named and described the concept of student underlife, and argue that it can be part of a radical process pedagogy. Educators who write about oppositional student “underlife” usually inscribe students in heroic narratives of resistance. These narratives frequently include the writer’s own local, powerful resistances to the dominant culture of education. Schooled identity is about upward mobility and students (like Frantz Fanon) experience estrangement, and invisibility when their race, class, and gender identities performed in disruptive classroom behaviors and unconventional writing are devalued. bell hooks, who has been writing for some time now about schooled identity and the conditions in which students are asked to “come to voice,” writes in “Confronting Class in the Classroom” that the relationship of class to desirable schooled identities is an ideological blind spot:

> Although the behaviors hooks described may be class-based, they are also culture, race, ethnicity, and gender inflected and the emphasis is on the imperative to construct a “schooled identity” which mimics and approximates an idealized white, privileged, middle-class identity. As in bell hooks’s own autobiographical examples, institutional settings create appropriate behaviors and roles for teachers and students alike, a recognition that informs her critique of education:

> My commitment to learning kept me attending classes. Yet, even so, because I did not conform—would not be an unquestioning passive student—some professors treated me with contempt. I was slowly becoming estranged from education. (17)

This acknowledgment of a nonconformist underlife is a crucial aspect of the quest for “self-actualization” (18). As Brooke notes, inappropriate behaviors are “the underlife of the current educational system ... the identities which may be developing for students in writing classrooms are more powerful for real academic success than the traditional identity of the successful student” (141-142).

A postcolonial critique of classroom conventions and behaviors continues to point out how specific conventions value specific performances of student cultural identity. These performances are not only restricted to classroom conventions, including those of democratic classrooms which encourage questioning, allow “free
speech” and want students to have a “voice.” They are also intimately related to conventions of writing which value, in Lynn Z. Bloom’s terms, self-reliance, as in individual perspectives and focus; respectability, which produces current traditional texts; decorum when teachers respond to offensive language and issues in student texts; moderation and temperance, thrift, efficiency, order, cleanliness, punctuality, delayed gratification, and critical thinking (5-13). Middle class values are synonymous with the dominant culture’s values which pathologizes certain behaviors (incoherence, lateness, word usage, errors) in writing in order to define who desirable citizens are. As Linda Brodkey points out in “Writing in Designated Areas Only,” “while form identifies class interlopers (working-class ethnic and black students), content singles out class malcontents” (135). Nor is the significance of the teaching of writing conventions which “schools” identity unconnected to public discourse about America’s citizenry: “Women, Latinos and Illiterates are paraded before us as fetishes in a spectacle of patriotism and caricatured in narratives on national defense because a vocal and persistent minority of the middle class projects its fears onto their bodies” (Brodkey 148). Schooled identities create a separation of us and them, and writing is the medium which both invites and divides.

Just as desirable citizens could be viewed within colonial history as extremely prescribed by dominant ideology or successfully resistant to its operations, my essay inscribes writing pedagogy within both failure and success at creating new, democratic and socially-productive writers who are defined by their ability to perform the complex processes of their identity-formation. I assert that the word “performance” is not about the passive construction of identity by behaviors and writing conventions, but about actively constructing identity with existing materials so as to create new structural relationships of self and world, reflected, in part, in new forms and conventions of writing.

Can students in our writing classes write within and against writing conventions in their quest for identity-formation which necessarily articulates the relationship of self and other? And, can teachers remake the power of their roles so as not to mimic the role of the colonizer in the creation of schooled (read colonized) identity which is disciplined and punished into being?

An ideological critique of the institutional role of the writing teacher, particularly the first-year writing teacher who exists on the borders of high school and university, home and school cultures, has been powerfully articulated by Min-Zhan Lu in “Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies or Preconditions of Basic Writing” (1992). In her example, teachers of open admissions at CUNY who based their practice on the work of Shaughnessy, Bruffee, and other scholars of writing tended to treat conflicts of identity as the “enemy” and sought to empower students by “acculturation” into academic conventions, or by initially “accommodating” different viewpoints. But, Min-Zhan Lu argues “particular teaching practices ‘choose’ for students—i.e., set pressures on the ways in which students formulate, modify, or even dismiss—their position towards conflicting cultures” (901). At issue is the ideological operation of language conventions which construct a structural reality often in contradiction to pedagogical intention.
Similarly, Pamela Gay points out that within Mina Shaughnessy's description of teaching basic writing lie the tropes of a colonist project:

Like the composing process, however, the colonizing process is not linear; it's recursive. So after SOUNDING THE DEPTHS, we went back to the new frontier to what Shaughnessy called in Errors and Expectations (1977) the "pedagogical West" (very much into the colonial motif here) and tried to conquer this new "territory," as Shaughnessy characterized "basic writing" (4). Bizzell and Bartholomae and Rose emerged with a different view of the problem, a view which sent us back to "converting the natives." (32)

The solipsism of colonialism dictates that the State is a Hobbesian Leviathan which incorporates and assimilates even the most radical and democratic pedagogical intention, but as with the critique of Shaughnessy, my reading of the rhetoric of these postcolonial critiques of writing pedagogy suggests a way to build on the work of these scholars in the context of "theory hope," by going against the dominant weight of their own argumentation, which concludes that there is no way out of colonization, and with their intention of articulating the steps toward a postcolonial pedagogy.

Read another way, Shaughnessy contextualized student "errors" in terms of what I have been outlining as the processes of identity formation and also in terms of "expectations." The schizophrenia in the traces of errors, as in the syntactic convolutions described by David Bartholomae in "Inventing the University," are about the enunciation of the relationship of identity and language and the need to "invent" a powerful articulate self. Perhaps these processes are more visible among neophytes (young students and teachers, although one is in this process at any stage of life), but if the construction of powerful identities are the goals, then we need to trust in the not-as-yet known results. Perhaps accommodation and acculturation are recursive processes in the service, not of hegemony, but of what Gayatri Spivak has named a "transnational literacy" which allows us to sense that the other is not just a voice, but that others produce articulated texts, even as they, like us, are written in and by a text not of our own making. It is through transnational literacy that we can invent grounds for an interruptive praxis from within our hope in justice under capitalism (16).

In the spirit of such literacy, I would like to suggest that writing teachers:

- Re-read classroom conventions and student behaviors in both oral and written discourse in the contexts of a schooled identity that is not simply about "accommodation" and "acculturation."

- Re-read critiques of schooling and writing pedagogy in the context of a colonial history that suggests both how institutional policies construct the identity of the colonized, and how these policies cannot sufficiently embody the colonized as possessor of other knowledges and histories, and of alternate traditions.

- Re-read the perceived limitations of constructed personal narratives written by students as significant to a larger project of the politics of articulation.

In my writing classes, where students read the lives of others (in the context of multicultural texts both those required for the course and the texts of other students) in order to critically question their own, their identities are never a safe resting place. One of my students writes:
As a white male undergrad participating in these classes and interacting with these teachers, the power dynamics that exist outside of the classroom are, if not constantly, than frequently reversed. Are they? I am only validated if and when I say “I’m okay,” or “I think...” (insert correct response). Do I then earn an “A” and leave with a warrant that says “he has engaged, questioned and reorganized”? If so, than that power relationship has not been reversed and as a white male I have asserted power in the guise of my “understanding.” And it is really very easy to do, because it is seemingly very significant for a white male to “join the jamboree” (journal entry 1995).

At the time of this writing, the student was simultaneously taking a class in multicultural American literature taught by a self-identified lesbian professor and a sophomore level writing class entitled “American Experience in Literature” taught by me, identified elsewhere in his text as a female Indian teacher:

I am not a blank slate and I bring an entourage of experiences to the classroom that not only influence readings but are highlighted and somewhat defined in a multicultural setting. See, it is the juxtaposition of self and category that I am concerned with. What categories are presented in class, and are students truly representative of those categories? ... I am forced as a white male to rethink and destroy identity from class to class (journal entry 1995).

What the student resists in this writing is both the perceived reification of his identity as a “category,” and a pedagogy that does not seem to acknowledge that there may be real life experiences with difference that students bring to a class. This student’s underlife is asking, “Can a class substitute for life? Can encounters with texts and teachers that embody difference replicate what happens in the real world?”

A postcolonial pedagogy is not content with simply pointing out past hegemonies in order to chastize and disempower. The movement from critique/description of ideology to pedagogy has been powerfully named by postcolonial studies because its focus has been on how education has been a powerful tool for colonial hegemony precisely through creating desirable aesthetics and sensibilities about the identities of both the colonizer and the colonized. Both experience the disjunctures in identity, the difference between the idealized fiction of the self created by discourses, and the realities of complex and fragmentary selves; this instability has enormous pedagogical potential. As Gayatri Spivak suggests about the Derridean notion of difference:

One of the corollaries of the structure of alterity, which is the revised version of the structure of identity, is that every repetition is an alteration. This would put into question both a transcendental idealism that claims that the idea is infinitely repeatable as the same and a speech act theory that bases its conclusions on intentions and contexts that can be defined and transferred within firm outlines. (The Spivak Reader 86)

Scholars of postcolonialism make this construction of the alterity of identities the focus of their theoretical work, while also suggesting a postcolonial pedagogy for the strategic use of underlife, situating this concept in scenes of schooling and extending its implications for a democratic and multicultural society. Re-reading Robert Brooke with a post-colonial emphasis, I argue that writing teachers do not want “traditional ’good students’; they want students who will come to see themselves as unique, productive writers with influence on their environment” (Brooke 149). Voice, subjectivity, and
agency are part of a postcolonial pedagogy which is mindful of historical processes and of the transformative potential of critical consciousness: “To deny the importance of subjectivity in the process of transforming the world and history is naïve and simplistic. It is to admit the impossible: a world without people” (Freire 32).

Paulo Freire outlines the extent to which students and educators are unwittingly complicitous in their own lack of agency: “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (54). Freire’s influence on the tradition of critical pedagogy is seminal to the debates about education and schooled identities, and it is important to remember the immediacy of the colonial context which informs his work, for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* outlines a postcolonial pedagogy. In Freire’s words:

> the pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first the oppressed unveil the world of oppression, and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation. (936)

**Postcolonial Studies and the Processes of Schooled Identities**

How do students and teachers inhabit complex notions of identities? How does a student’s encounter with a text in a curriculum lay bare the operations of “schooled identities”? Is every encounter both part of a carefully crafted pedagogy, and a chance accident of history and circumstance?

Postcolonial studies has continually engaged these questions by suggesting that educational pedagogy has historically been linked to the construction of cultural and colonized identities. The culture of the colonizing nation, often in the form of its language, is “taught” to the natives in terms that are at once about dominance and neutrality. Because the colonizer/colonized encounter is based on cultural difference, there is clearly a need for a common language. Because this encounter is an economic enterprise, this “education” is a mode of economic preferment. Because indigenous culture is made invisible, the aesthetics of the dominant culture are made desirable.

What such schooling does to the identity of the colonized is explored by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) in terms of racial identity and cultural psychology. Writing in the context of the former French colony Algeria, Frantz Fanon argues that learning French implies taking on attributes of “whiteness,” which in turn reinforce the limitations of being unalterably and visibly Black. He suggests that a Freudian focus on individual psychology within familial relationships does not account for the cultural identity of the Black man in colonial Africa.

In postcolonial contexts these contradictions are easier to highlight because schooling by the western literary text and by the language of the colonizer sets out to fashion a reader with a particular sensibility. But this phenomenon is as much about “them” as it is about “us.” Gauri Viswanathan points out that when a literary curriculum was first instituted in England, it had been tested out first in colonies like India. Institutional policies saw a correlation between educating the natives of the
colony and educating the changing populations of mid-nineteenth century England. English literature was formally instituted in the Indian curriculum by the Charter Act of 1835 in a manner which portrayed it as objective, universal, and rational (as opposed to the earlier religious curriculum of British missionaries and native education which promoted "superstition" and religious divisions). It was part of an experiment and India was being used as a "fair and open field for testing the non-religion theory of education" (Alexander Duff *India and India Missions*, qtd. in Viswanathan 8). Indians were perfect subjects for this experiment precisely because, unlike English readers, they would not bring English religious and cultural associations to the text.

In colonial thinking, English literature was to have a civilizing effect paradoxically because it did not reflect the particular experiences of its readers and encouraged a kind of disembodiment. In the Indian context, "the English literary text functioned as a surrogate Englishman in his highest and most perfect stage" (20) even as its purpose was to create an underclass of bureaucratic workers for the Empire. Nor is the irony of this educational policy lost to those who implemented it. A British colonial official Charles Trevelyan remarks wryly, "[The Indians] daily converse with the best and wisest Englishmen through the medium of their works, and form ideas, perhaps higher ideas of our nation than if their intercourse with it were of a more personal kind" (qtd. in *Masks of Conquest* 20).

Postcolonial studies often focuses on how the subjectivities of the colonized have been created by histories, and by constructions of those histories within master narratives of progress and civilization. The various texts of the colonizer created the identity of the colonized "other" in the terms that I have been defining, at the same time as postcolonial narratives create new identities forged against this history of colonization. In *Manicbean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (1983) Abdul Jan Mohamed examines colonization as a manichean allegorization of self and other. "In fact the colonial mentality is dominated by a manichean allegory of white and black, good and evil, salvation and damnation, civilization and savagery, superiority and inferiority, intelligence and emotion, self and other, subject and object" (4).

These value-laden considerations of self and other describe the historical construction of binary thinking and the contradictions between pedagogy and content that created objective knowledge and aesthetic sensibilities. These continue to inform contemporary educational debates about curricula and representation, home and school literacies, and the relationships between culture and education. The debate about the western civilization requirement at Stanford in the mid '80s, for example, suggests that some students' experiences historically have been excluded or made invisible in a curriculum supposedly in the service of all students.

In *Cultural Literacy* E.D Hirsch draws on democratic nostalgia for concepts like freedom of information and of access. In his chapter entitled "American Diversity and Public Discourse" he argues that once information is removed from its cultural and historical significance it belongs to both no one and everyone equally:
Literate culture is far less exclusive, for instance, than any ethnic culture, no matter how poverty bound, or pop culture or youth culture. It has no in-group, no generational, or geographical preference. It can be mastered in the country or in the city, in a shanty or a mansion, so long as the opportunity is given. (106)

This appeal to the universal can be historicized in the American context, because in some ways education has been about access and knowledge since post World War II; education was becoming less economic and class-based and more about every American’s right to view literature as a utopian other world where it does not matter who or what you are. In Shakespeare’s America, America’s Shakespeare, for example, Michael Bristol describes the construction of an American schooled identity distinctly different from a European, Old World identity: “Shakespeare’ and ‘America’ are elective affinities, linked in a return to origins that promises both an alternative to and a compensation for the failures of tradition in its vitiated European manifestation” (123). As Northrop Frye’s The Anatomy of Criticism makes clear, removed from sociological effects and individual experience, literature was intended to project a common culture based not on common experience, but on a common fantasy.

The argument advocated by E.D Hirsch reverses the gains of various social movements in the 1960s and early 1970s to add black, ethnic, and women’s programs and curricula in both public schools and various institutions of higher learning by attributing “illiteracy” to a pedagogical emphasis of process over content, and on student experience and developmental psychology over the transmission of knowledge. As Giroux argues, this move is part of a conservative backlash against the specters of political correctness and multiculturalism on college campuses that promote special interests over a common culture from which to create academic and competitive excellence.

On the other side of the debate, however, progressive movements are in danger of losing their political power if they reduce identity to static representations of race, class, and gender. In his work on education, culture, and pedagogy, Henry Giroux has addressed the significance of postcolonial studies to current debates in identity politics, and especially to new social movements:

Theorists within these movements have addressed a number of pressing political and pedagogical issues through the construction of binary oppositions that represent both a new vanguardism while simultaneously falling into the trap of simply reversing the old colonial legacy and problematic of oppressed and oppressor. In doing so they have often unwittingly imitated the colonial model of erasing the complexity, complicity, diverse agents and multiple situations that constitute the enclaves of colonial hegemonic discourse and practice. (Bordercrossings 20)

As tried in the medias, postcolonialism is implicated in “the New Orthodoxy” that promotes and fetishizes identities. Some of the central assumptions of this version:

the academy is under siege by leftists, multiculturalists, deconstructionists and other radicals who are politicizing the university and threatening to undermine the very foundations of Western intellectual tradition. These radicals, the theory goes, are the left-wing graduate students of the ’60s who sneaked into tenured positions in the ’90s and are now promoting an agenda of cultural relativism ... silencing everyone who would dare dissent by calling them “sexist,” “racist” or anti-deconstructionist” (Fraser 6)
In response to extreme relativism which is the manifestation of the unbridled individualism of “tenured radicals,” a postcolonial pedagogy suggests that we look both backwards at the history of institutionalized education and forward in terms of reconsidering the goals of that education. A simpler view of culture, education, schooling, and identity is not now possible; perhaps it was never possible.

In _Hunger of Memory_, Richard Rodriguez writes poignantly about his development as a “scholarship boy,” ashamed of his parents’ accent, his working-class background, and his ethnic difference:

The scholarship boy: cannot afford to admire his parents. (How could he and still pursue such a contrary life?) He permits himself embarrassment. And to evade nostalgia for the life he has lost, he concentrates on the benefits education will bestowed upon him. [In the support of old certainties and consolations, almost mechanically, he assumes the procedures and doctrines of the classroom. (48-49)]

Read pedagogically, Richard Rodriguez’s memoir suggests that students be invited into the classroom in a way that does not create either empty resistance or “scholarship boy” behavior, which makes contemporaneous the “schooled identity” described by Frantz Fanon.

**Postcolonial Implications of Multicultural Classrooms**

Postcolonial contexts and their implications for student underlife are a part of American writing classrooms where students—their multi-kultures, their languages—are all implicated in a global history of education. One can draw compelling parallels between a colonizing pedagogy, the English Only Movement, and the many calls for more and more standardization and accountability. When Richard Rodriguez is asked to write about his home, he writes an approximation of “regular” white middle-class American life:

When my fourth-grade teacher made our class write a paper about a typical evening at home, it never occurred to me to actually do so. "Describe what you do with your family," she told us. And automatically I produced a fictionalized account. I wrote that I had six brothers and sisters; I described watching my mother get dressed up in a red-sequined dress before she went with my father to a party ... The nun who read what I wrote would have known that what I had written was completely imagined. But she never said anything about my contrivance. And I never expected her to either. I never thought that she really wanted me to write about my family life. (179)

The passage testifies to the costs of fictionalizing the private and the personal. Rodriguez’s insistence on keeping private and public cultures separate is powerful testimony to the kind of underlife that makes students ashamed of their “difference,” which seeks to make it invisible, inconsequential. It also marks the emotional need to clarify a student’s identity, to be the ideal student/citizen imagined by educational ideology.

Rodriguez’s argument recreates the familiar colonist insistence about the neutrality of the public sphere even as he is himself painfully aware of how much he needs to give up of himself in order to be “American.” In the call for a common culture, especially as it is made by conservative educators such as Diane Ravitch, culture is
a static body or tried and tested information, aesthetic values, and Great Books rather
than a dynamic, fluid, and contested terrain which is always already in process no
matter how much it is presented as fixed.

The modernist and postmodern notions of culture described above suggest a
crucial conceptual and pedagogical difference. Teaching form, style, and academic
conventions in writing classrooms divorced from content suggests that language is
a transparent medium and meaning exists independent of it. Such an emphasis may
also suggest that all content can be expressed in already established essay forms and
genres. Min-Zhan Lu's work in basic writing classrooms has alerted us to the pitfalls
of what she names the “politics of linguistic innocence.” In her work, poststructuralist
theories of language become part of the project of postcolonial studies:

Through one's gender; family; work; religious, educational, or recreational life; each individual
gains access to a range of competing discourses which offer competing views of oneself, the
world, and one's relation with the world. Each time one writes, even and especially when one
is attempting to use one of these discourses, one experiences the need to respond to the
dissonance among the various discourses of one's daily life. Because different discourses do
not enjoy equal political power in current-day America, decisions on how to respond to such
dissonance are never politically innocent. (27)

Here again is an argument for the importance of student underlife in the dissonances
of home and school identities. In seeking to extend the democratic project of Mina
Shaughnessy's work, Min-Zhan Lu asks that teachers make students' fears about losing
touch with their home cultures and discourses central to the class content. Or, as she
suggests, students will feel their “sense of betrayal in purely personal terms, the result
of purely personal choices” (35). The contradictions that students experience are
currently seen in unproductive ways and labeled as deficits.

Colonial paradigms suggest that one can choose one identity or the other with
no suggestion of the pain of betrayal or a recognition of fractured identities. Indeed,
only in my graduate education in the U.S did I confront the anomalies of my identity
as English speaking, British-system educated, third-world woman from New Delhi,
India, first studying and then teaching in Ohio. If I had any stirrings of the extent to
which I sought to be a “scholarship girl,” they seem to appear only in retrospect.

In 1995 I presented a paper at the Ohio Shakespeare Conference whose special
topic was Shakespeare and Multiculturalism. I talked about my experiences with texts
and how literary texts can offer concrete experiences of difference. My example was
of a graduate seminar entitled “Shakespeare I: The Tragedies” where I re-read Othello,
a play I had read many times in my life. This time, however, as we talked about A.C
Bradley's reading of this major tragedy, I began to notice the tragic negotiations that
Othello had to make as a Black man in a White world. Was Othello experiencing
something I knew about: how crossing borders is significant to the construction and
reconstruction of a self? I was beginning to understand in deeply personal and
significant terms the impetus and tragic consequences of border-crossings.

The particular professor of the Shakespeare seminar thought my reading was
interesting but ahistorical—that is, not supported by any evidence: that race was an
issue in Renaissance England the same way it is in our world, that Shakespeare had never, to her knowledge, lived outside England, that issues of racial particularity added to the tragedy of Othello. Perhaps the rhetorical address of my reading and the use of personal experience was problematic, but I had been encouraged in my American schooling to make connections between experiences and readings. I empathized with Othello, I thought myself to be him. I knew what it was like to be an “extravagant and wheeling stranger” who tells spectacular fictions about worlds beyond the horizon.

The heart of this particular personal story is about the need to maintain appropriate boundaries of text and context, reading and writing, scholarship and subjective observations. My naive disruptions later made for an analysis of the postcolonial condition: Othello’s own Fanonian admission of a white mask: “my name that was as fresh/As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black/As mine own face” (Othello 3.3.392-394). Othello has crafted his colonized identity for preferment, but there is a corresponding reinforcement of limitations. In highlighting the ways in which he has schooled himself to be White, I found that Othello represents the phenomenon of reading itself. His experience represents the experience of many readers before and since Fanon because institutionalized traditions of reading “school” readers, and especially readers from formerly colonized cultures, to be divided readers. As for Othello, this is an enterprise fraught with contradictions: one cannot be, no one can be, the ideal reader imagined by colonial imperatives.

With postcolonial lenses, it is easy to make arguments for the colonizing role of education and for the unconscious complicity of students and teachers. On the one hand, postcolonial studies brings these issues to the forefront by providing an undeniable history and a context as well as a crucial language which allows for the particular and the universal. On the other hand, the “post” in postcolonial suggests that familiar dichotomies, the binary thinking promoted by colonialism are being disrupted, and can be disrupted in fruitful ways. A postcolonial reader, as I envisage the term, embraces all the institutional and cultural conditions which construct readers, and names the new self-awareness with which all readers write about texts. Fanon, Othello, Rodriguez, I myself, and countless other readers and writers who engage texts in the classroom in order to engage the texts of their lives are testimony to the continuing underlife of institutional histories.

“I Don’t Identify With the Text” (Notes toward Classroom Issues)

When I teach various writing courses at my large mid-western university, the multicultural focus of the course is dramatized by perceptions of me as a third world woman of color. In such courses—which student underlife describes as “PC” —and particularly in the sophomore level writing course, which can also satisfy the University’s diversity requirement, students perceive institutional mandates and identity politics in particular ways. The overtly identified ideology of the class is viewed by students as particularist, and I actively disabuse students of the notion that teachers are neutral—which is not synonymous with saying that they play favorites with particular points of view. My intention is to also to demystify the notion that personal experience or “opinion” is sacrosanct and cannot be open to scrutiny,
especially in the light of contrasting and equally valid experiences. When students say that they do not “identify” with texts, it may be seen as a moment when the boundaries of identity shut down views from elsewhere, but this moment has immense pedagogical potential for teachers and students alike. The postcolonial contexts of the classroom, institutional traditions, and disciplinary divisions suggest that “teaching context” must critically engage how knowledge about difference is produced and consumed.

This theorizing of the personal is reflected in my own identity as teacher. At some level, I am teaching out of personal knowledge that is not removed from my academic work (as a postcolonial scholar of cultural studies, writing, Shakespeare, multiculturalism, and so on), but the distinctions and congruences are the subject matter of this writing class. Perhaps because I am an immigrant, I choose texts which deal with immigrant experiences: legal and illegal border-crossings, Americanization and cultural difference, issues of language and identity. But by the same token I cannot (and do not) claim to have first-hand knowledge about all immigrant cultures, or be in the position of simply performing my “immigrant identity.”

As Brooke’s concept of student underlife suggests, the pedagogical challenge is not that teachers deal with lack of knowledge (of issues of race, class, and gender, for example), but that there are resistances to opening up this knowledge to scrutiny, to make it the content of the class. Everyday, I am confronted by issues of schooling and underlife when students seek to make their “difference” invisible, and their identities generic. Students across a wide spectrum cling to the myth of neutrality and objectivity, seeking to “act out” underlife in familiar school behaviors. They seek “appropriate” teachers and “appropriate” teaching materials. Writing is about easily definable grammar, correctness, style, form, modes which parody the unquestioned and the ideological. Lately, the personal, contextualized as it is in terms of ethnicity, nationality, class, and gender, is the cultural. We are beginning to speak as types of ourselves, neither wholly separate nor totally in congruence with the personal that we experience daily.

I seek to make these concerns central to the critical work of the classroom. Writing about his experiences with Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* a student writes that he is unable to relate to the plight of an illegal immigrant because he is an American reader: “Coming from a background that is just about as close to totally opposite hers as there can be, there is the possibility that I cannot relate to the story.” As an English major and creative writer of some self-declared worth, the novel fails as a piece of literature for him, because although “Mukherjee succeeds in creating a novel describing the experience of becoming an American in sometimes graphic detail, she has failed in telling the story of becoming a person ... I see her [Jasmine] as little more than a one-dimensional character feeling little of what she’s experiencing” (Student Paper 1997).

This sustained articulation of various stances toward a text opens up central concerns of who is writing the text, for whom, and for what purposes. The student theorizes that “Mukherjee could not have thought she was writing for young Punjabi women. She knew who her audience was, and that they’d be sitting in college
classrooms all across North America picking apart her novel." This consideration of audience helps him distinguish in his own terms between what Spivak has described as the writer's signature, divided against itself: "ethnos—a writer writing for her own people, ... and ethnika, the pejoratively defined other reversing the charge, (de)anthropologizing herself by separating herself into a staged identity" ("Teaching for the Times" 15). Another student writing about the same text (as well as about Anzaldua's *Borderlands*) writes of the pedagogical work of such texts:

The recognition of difference as it is portrayed in the above passage from *Jasmine*, one of the more nuanced incidents in the book, is powerful to her because it is about the ordinariness of the encounter with difference and the everyday reactions of everyday people. This, she surmises, is the invisibility that Anzaldua is referring to, interpellating the texts that she has been reading and writing about.

In terms of writing, students engage in critiques within the context of their own experiences and learn the use and value of critical thinking skills. This progression and contextualization of the personal is significant; it has always been a part of the "underlife" of the meaning-making activities we pursue. But in the classroom, in reading, thinking, and writing about the text, the boundaries of "us and them" should be seen as porous, contingent, and conducive to agency. A student writes of such contingency as a mode of argumentation:

Thoughts and ideas like those prejudicial and stereotypical ones pointing to difference rather than likeness seem to shed light on a tendency to place people(s) into categories. As sometimes don't fit into categories, through this need and action, certain people(s) which do not fit in such categories as "American," those perceived as different or outside that "godly" realm, are transformed into something else—an other. This is where one's own perspective becomes apparent and important. Personally this is not something I do on a conscious level it's just how I think and I believe that most people react/act the same way. You see when I think about *Jasmine* I see her as an Indian immigrant living in America; Anzaldua a Mexican immigrant living in America. This apparently innate, unjust and derogatory tendency of classification is one that is troubling to me. I do not believe that these stereotypical, prejudicial statements are all true, as I may once have, but I now have a better understanding of those patterns of behavior that I have singled out. (student paper 1994)

This student, who writes about the genesis of his prejudices, had been taking what he considered to be "risks" with his writing. In his mind, some observations seem to belong
more to a reflective journal rather than an “academic paper,” but his recursiveness allows him to consider the value of writing about issues of personal prejudice:

You see though I may have attacked Anzaldúa throughout much of our study of her book, in my journals and even my papers, she was right about a lot of stuff. One of the things she was right about was working things out through her writing—there is no better way to learn things about how you feel, who you are, than through writing. It is a cathartic, metamorphic endeavor that leaves the writer with little more than the truth, provided he or she lets it rear its ugly head. (student paper 1994)

This student recognizes how his “underlife” has served as a bridge for his learning. His personal experiences show him how ideologies are constructed and how one can “work things out in writing” in a way that emphasizes the processes of becoming and being.

The radical process pedagogies that I argue for emerge in projects of recovery and contingency, making the critical investigation of identity significant by explicitly exploring the false dischotomies between student “underlife” and “schooled identity.” These projects are sustained by texts speaking to texts, as when students write responses to the processes of identity formation that they are investigating in the context of their own lives, and those of others like Gloria Anzaldúa and Bharati Mukherjee. Students may discover that the processes of identity formation are not just the experiences of others, and in so doing uncover the reciprocal nature of alterity, of difference, of self and other.

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Notes

1 The student writing used in this essay has been reproduced with their permission. Their names have been kept confidential at their request.

2 Some of this material was presented at a paper presentation by Jeff Gabel and myself during the CCCCE’s annual convention in March 23-25 1995. The paper presentation was entitled “Literacies of Argumentation: Reading Multiculturally, Writing Well.”


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