In my Cape Town diary, I wrote:

7:39 a.m. Thursday 5-18-00

Woke up in great anger: last night I finished grading the papers on Derricotte’s *The Black Notebooks*. Two students of color—Mimi and José—never even turned in their papers. Mimi said she’d turn her paper in to me on Tues. night, but then she went to the movies w/Dagni! This is the hazard of living with one’s students! But I know she decided not to submit it—or shit, to *write* it—after I spat out at her, “Not without a penalty—but *do* turn it in,” when she asked—or told me, rather—if she could hand it to me later that evening. I was furious with her for not making the paper a priority last weekend. As for José, he has been ill with his wisdom teeth impacted, but by my observation, not so much that he could not have submitted his paper before leaving for his oral surgery, as he’d called to tell me he would. But my anger is really directed at Jennifer and Andrea: they both wrote lousy, for-shit essays that have left me truly insulted. I don’t know if they meant to insult me as much as they seem to have wanted to insult Derricotte, to mock her injunction to “tell the truth” by presenting papers that so clearly are falsehoods of their feelings. Andrea told me while doing my hair the other night that she read *The Black Notebooks* as arguing for the kind of “color blindness” that two students had insisted in class is possible between “friends” of different races. I just said, “Oh, no; not at all.” I didn’t engage her on the issue in part because I was sick of the book after a weekend of absorption with it, in part because it was so late at night (nearly midnite), and in part because I knew Andrea and I would not come to an agreement about the book’s worth. I don’t regret that decision. But I am certain that my reading of the book is right on this issue. I *am* interested in hearing Andrea talk about how she reaches this conclusion about “color blindness”—but only *if*, IF she’s also willing to disclose her feelings about other aspects of the book—less her rational inferences than her genuine feelings. That’s why I’m so perturbed: neither she nor Jennifer was willing to make the stretch that Derricotte demands. In this reading, I find that Derricotte is not as honest as I’d first thought, and I am happy to be critical of her book and some of its contentions, but there’s no getting around the challenge the book makes for readers to do what Derricotte claims she does.
Oh shit, I am just pissed off! I don’t want to be friends with two women who are so damn smart and so damn afraid! I have invested so much time and energy in them in many more ways than with others on the trip because of what I inherently believe about their politics and their past experiences. That’s it: I feel betrayed by them. As always, I ask that my friends and students put *themselves* on the line no more or less than I am willing to myself, and I feel failed by Andrea and Jennifer in this instance. Andrea did try to talk with me about her paper—no, she tried to talk to me about her resistance to the text, but I did not give her much latitude to do so: instead I asked her how far she was and inasmuch as she admitted that she had not finished the book, I insinuated that I would talk with her about the book only after she finished it. I suppose she inferred my admiration for Derricotte’s “candor” or well, her performance, for the final product, and doesn’t share it. I still think it is an important book, one that demands our introspection.

This is another problem with living among students. With Rebekah I came to infer that the students have been unwilling to take certain risks in the classroom, but now I am seeing that they were actually unwilling to take risks in their papers as well. I mean, over and over all term I have heard one student or another allude to conversations about the text to which I have not been privy: they have had these conversations in small groups with each other. Partly I’m glad to know that the texts have provoked and inspired them; that’s terrific! But partly I needed to be in on these conversations or to have them represented to me in more formal, less casual, ways if the students are to have earned credit for them. Their papers are by and large so lousy that the benefit they’ve gained from those conversations without me do not show up in their writing. Maybe they keep journals and their insights are there, but anyway while I trust that they *have* been talking about the books among themselves, I have no way of knowing the extent and utility of those other conversations—only the ones in the classroom, which have been so disappointing.

Partly I’m feeling brought up short, foolish, sheepish, victim of the mask—Andrea’s black mask that made me suppose that based on her class participation in the discussion of *The Black Notebooks* her paper was sincere, that at the very least, she would be no more evasive of the critical issues for her re Derricotte than she was of the critical issues that Sapphire’s book brought up for her. And Jennifer’s lesbian mask, perhaps strengthened by her sometime need to closet her queer identity. In other words, partly my anger is with myself and my own assumptions and desires. It’s hard not to have the desire that those FOUR students in particular would engage the text more “honestly,” more personally. What would I have done if I’d been asked to do what I asked them to do? Well, I think my personality is too much like Derricotte’s for me not to have written a paper like Jacquelyn’s, doggedly trying to clarify my own racialized subject position. Shit, I know I would have. All day every- day, goddammit: there I am with my heart out.

What’s the lesson here? That perhaps I should be more generous in my consideration of the students’ reticence. No, I will not. At the very least, I would have wanted
the kind of engagement that I got in the Sapphire papers—like Rebekah’s: *this book bothers me because ________*. It’s hard to feel generous or sympathetic when I simply feel left out of their process or frustrated that they resisted a certain process. It occurs to me that Mimi, Jennifer, and Andrea might actually have done some soul searching with each other in their conversation, but that particular combination of women—all Othered in at least one way—indeed, each (self-) Othered in several diverse ways by class, race, sexual orientation, chosen family, and so on—they would not be honest with each other because in the end they profoundly distrust each other. I guess that’s what this boils down to—not voyeurism, or petulance that my friends had a party to which I wasn’t invited, but that my friends and my students did not seize an opportunity I tried to provide for them—perhaps because they couldn’t, perhaps because they wouldn’t, perhaps because they did not perceive it as any “gift” on my part at all. Jennifer told me that she’d written in her journal exactly what I was complaining about re *The Black Notebooks*, that in it Derricotte asks me to meet her challenge of honesty and I just feel revolted and inadequate. I don’t want to be as honest as she says she is, as she intimates I need to be; I already feel inadequate to meet the challenge and I don’t want her insistent notebook to remind me of my inadequacy around exploring the depth of my internalized racism. I’m the more hurt that Jennifer would concur in my kitchen, but not in her paper. I’m angry with her, and ashamed of her that she wouldn’t take this risk. And yet all week I’ve been wondering and worrying just how—if—I can deliver on the proposal to turn this teaching experience into a chapter on the personal in pedagogy. Exactly a year ago, I was agonizing over whether or not to publish an account of my experiences as a pregnant college coed on welfare; now I find myself again having to decide just how much to disclose of my private life, my personal pain, how much to share in the name of effecting social and academic change. I wonder if this isn’t megalomania or narcissism or just plain nuts. I must have a monstrous ego. Well, as ever, I can still say no or choose another focus. Everything doesn’t have to be so personal, for Pete’s sake.

*End of diary entry*

It is the first Sunday in June 2000, the last morning I am to spend in Cape Town. I am sitting in Mug and Bean, the Waterfront store of an extensive South African coffee shop chain. I have just finished a brisk walk in dense fog with Rebekah and Aaron, two of the University of Washington students in the Study Abroad program that we have all recently completed. Before departing, I want to take advantage of this opportunity over breakfast to get some insight from them, ideas I can apply to a paper I have agreed to write on the intersection of the personal and the professional in the academy. As it happens, they are two of my brightest students, and I am already feeling nostalgic for our quarter-long course (*African American Women’s Autobiography*), only five days over now, for their enthusiastic participation in it. It is my first mention to them of the professional paper that will come out of the course, and truly curious students,
they are immediately captivated—and they have an opinion or two to share. I
tell them that I am thinking of starting the paper by revealing that all fifteen of
the students in the program, save two or three, have seen me in my underwear,
including Aaron, who narrowly escaped a glimpse of my bare brown thighs one
morning as he eagerly entered my studio flat to ask about his grade on a class
presentation. Aaron interrupts me—Aaron interrupts everyone, he is so garru-
lous—though he struggles touchingly not to be so. He launches into the mem-
ory of his growing awareness in the first few days of the program that there
would be few if any boundaries between the program participants, between the
program components. He remembers an agonizing moment after class one day
when he realized, and warned his roommate about, the encroaching borders—
or rather, the lack of them. This June Sunday, the program nearly a week over,
he shakes his head in passionate resistance still. “The world never ends,” he
announces in a mixture of anguish and awe.

Indeed not: how many times was there a knock at the door to my studio
flat, followed straight away by its bellowing open to admit a four-year-old imp,
demanding to know if her mother, the single most intelligent student I have
ever taught (luscious wonder!), can borrow today a bit of butter, yesterday
extra batteries for a Walkman, the day before my dictionary.

How did having students casually borrow from me or find me in various
stages of undress affect my teaching, especially in a graded, five-credit course?
It was sometimes very hard to keep my authoritative teaching persona sepa-
rate from the more sociable “me” I wanted to cultivate at the Cascades
Holiday Apartments where we lived for eleven weeks. While I rarely, I want to
say never, found it difficult to perform my teaching self in the classroom, it
was challenging, however, to keep my teacherly self at bay when class was not
in session. I remember how proud I felt when Savitri unexpectedly
announced her admiration for my ability to do so. I too was surprised that
some situations blurring the lines of my disparate “selves” did not burden me
more. I could see, for example, that Savitri is sharp and used to getting good
grades. Yet she worked only minimally to improve the middling grades she
consistently earned in my course. Her apathy did not disconcert me: I recog-
nized it as a greater privileging of the adventure of foreign life; in her place as
student, I might easily have made the same decision. At “home” in the
Cascades, I found it relatively easy to separate the critical, “professional” self
who marked Savitri’s papers from my black woman self eager to befriend this
fascinating British-black, Sri Lanka-born American woman. When she
remarked my ability to draw a clean line between my professional self and my
personal identity, I realized, as she apparently did not, that constructing such
a distinction required fierce concentration.
For her part, at breakfast that last Sunday Rebekah observed that I had had a tendency to mother the students. I vehemently denied it. The characterization of my professional work as “maternal” burdens me still, for though I am certain that Rebekah was unconscious of the connotations it has for me, the label disparages my work among predominantly white students as mammying. But the charge did fit. It was impossible to feel detached from them in a maternal way when I felt so keenly responsible for their safety, especially in as capricious a place as Cape Town is: its current crime rate against women especially daunted me, traveling as I was with twelve women students and a woman co-director. But Rebekah added that she appreciated my balanced sense of when to back off, which, coupled with my maternal “nature,” provided her own sense of security. Looking back, I realize I endeavored to ensure my own self-assurance as much as theirs: I dreaded the prospect of having to telephone their parents or loved ones with tragic news. Undoubtedly, this acute fear had much to do with the fact that the students were approximately the same age as my son Patrick.

Initially, I had expected to make here a case against what I deemed the ridiculous notion that it is possible, even desirable, to be objective in academic work. (Writing this now, the concept of “objectivity” seems fluid, even elusive; my comprehension of its meaning shifts with each usage.) Imagining an audience composed primarily of professors of English, I expected my readers also to devalue objectivity as impossible and undesirable. Influenced by post-structuralism, we no longer regard “reality” as hard, fast, and concrete. I believed that English professors of every ilk resist the fallacy of objective reality, and in its place erect something like perspective or performance. But as I write now, this seems an irrational expectation; after all, I can readily name professors who do not meet it. Furthermore, I had imagined arguing that my experiences in Cape Town taught me that the personal and the professional necessarily commingle and complement each other—not only when one is a Study Abroad coordinator/professor, but in any academic situation. Indeed, I have published essays arguing that literary analysis and pedagogy are sharpened, strengthened when one takes personally one’s scholarship and teaching, no less than the traditions with which one works. Now, to my amazement, I find my perspective has shifted, for I have learned in unexpected ways that my own sense of “professionalism,” however tenuous, requires me to honor barriers between my so-called professional identity and my so-called private life, borders that keep the world’s multifarious locales from bleeding into each other.

I am thinking of the Saturday morning that I lingered in bed recovering from a severe cold and reading J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace. A small group of us were waiting to see if the thick fog over the Atlantic in the harbor at Green Point would lift to permit an afternoon hike up Table Mountain. (As Disgrace is a
novel about an English professor at the Technical University of Cape Town who fuses his professional and personal identities with devastating consequences, my reading of it among students at the Cascades forms one more episode in this saga.) As I recall, Andrea came in first to share her six law school acceptances; she was followed by Jennifer, followed by Savitri, Mimi and Khathulla, followed by Dagni, followed by Jessica. Before I knew it, still lying in bed in my pajamas, I was surrounded by a roomful of women wanting my “undivided” attention for a variety of purposes—to plan the hike, but also to gossip about a lesbian love triangle, to discuss strategies for revising an essay, to nurse—if not medicate—an unrelenting cough, to mirror a black woman self-image, to dole out program funds for an individual field trip. I remember talking earnestly with Andrea—in my pajamas, still in bed—now as Professor, now as Black Woman Mentor on the Continent, when Jennifer walked in. Immediately, I shifted to a much more casual, relaxed persona—to signify to Andrea, Jennifer’s best friend, that our “formal” time was momentarily over. Perhaps because we had both been tending colds, Jennifer (a buddy from the Seattle lesbian community) and I had not had any time for private conversation in several days. The last time I had seen her literally had been the previous Thursday, the same morning I’d awoken in a rage at the poor quality of her essay on Derricotte’s *The Black Notebooks*. That morning when I had mentioned to a small group of students that I would be returning their marked papers later that afternoon, she had spoken up: “Oh, I’d like to schedule some time to meet with you about that paper.” I remember tucking my chin to hide whatever expression was in my face: fury, hurt, disappointment, amazement at her casual audacity. I remember struggling to assign her and Andrea the same grade on those wretched first versions of the Derricotte paper: my temptation had been to award to Jennifer a higher mark, to find more redeeming qualities in her equally inferior work, though in the end, after several rounds of reviewing them “with detachment,” I flatter myself, I had to award them the same unsatisfactory grade. I had been considerably more disappointed in Andrea for what seems to me her greater descent into poor work. I had realized almost immediately in our living arrangement that Andrea procrastinated in preparing her coursework. But that seemed only minorly operative in the Derricotte debacle: she procrastinated in this instance because she did not want to write the paper at all. When she and Jennifer revised their respective papers, each took extensive time, I believe because they were then committed to doing better—not simply in terms of higher grades, but also expanding the quality of their reasoning and their articulation of their revised perceptions. I took each woman’s steadfast, exemplary effort made in her revision over the next weeks as a personal triumph—hardly an “objective” perspective.
What is it about the fiction of “objectivity” that renders it so powerful in our profession? Why is it that the academy insists on it? Surely the answer has something to do with so-called empirical knowledge, with the lies we academics tell ourselves about the nature of truth. Even among literary critics, objectivity’s siblings—“detachment,” “rationality,” “disinterestedness,” “impartiality,” “neutrality”—are thought to yield a fairness deemed vital to knowledge. As if.

Back at home for only a week as I begin this essay, at some point in each day I wince at my aloneness, my separation from the group. I miss the students terribly. This is unusual for me: when I teach a course at UW, not simply for UW, I leave my students after two hours twice a week. Occasionally, one or two of them drop by my office for an additional half-hour of my time. I do not develop an abiding attachment to them as I did to the students I lived with in South Africa. At home, I thrive on solitude; by preference I live alone with my cat. I feel very fortunate in this regard, especially as a black woman. Not many of us have the means to live alone, especially in the affluent conditions as I enjoy in my private space. Conversely, many do not consider it culturally feasible or desirable to live alone, a fact that sometimes activates my black authenticity complex. At any rate, even when I feel particularly close to a group of students, such as I did in Winter 2000 with my mostly Women Studies and English majors to whom I spoke through tears about a student-cum-friend who died at age 34 of cancer, I still do not feel particularly disoriented when the course ends. More rarely, a class establishes an attachment to me, as was also the case last winter with my seminar students who manifested tremendous separation anxiety at the end. Those recent examples strike me as extraordinarily different from attachments I have had to earlier courses (though perhaps only because they are recent). However, it may be that cultural and geographical adjustments fall along a single continuum. For two consecutive nights in the week I returned from Cape Town, I dreamed of the students, and I continue to think of them in my waking hours. Although I did not enjoy the same degree of connection to each of the fifteen, I still feel very bound up with our group. Ironically, while in Cape Town, I constantly sought privacy and often locked the door to my apartment even when I was home and receptive to guests, simply because I felt it a measure of privacy and control and distance to have to choose to admit students. Had I locked the door less often, surely they would all without exception have managed to catch me in some state of undress. I quipped to my friend Barbara via email that the students seemed to intuit when I was grading their papers, for a veritable pall fell over our sixth floor flats at those times. Perhaps I should have pretended to grade papers more often so as to carve out some additional private time. For we all needed
“space” from each other’s intrusions and demands, from the sense that, as Wordsworth grieved, “the world [was] too much with us.” Not only did I need it as a private, introspective person used to living alone, but I needed it especially because my duties rendered me so intricately immersed in their lives as teacher, program coordinator, mentor, and neighbor—each an identity wrought with complexity and contradiction.

Students sometimes have ironically different understandings of notions of separateness and objectivity. More than one Study Abroad student mused (naively, as it happens) that they were all probably going to work harder for my course than for any other in their college career: it would be too shameful to encounter the prof in the Cascades having done less than their level best in the course. They implied that our proximity would make it impossible for me to remain objective, not to develop bias against their indolence or apathy. And yet the standard of objectivity seems rooted in part in defense of students, that is, in place for their protection. Like the U.S. legal system and other social institutions, the academy promises assessment—of ideas, of intelligence, of performance—controlled by theoretical paradigms rather than professors’ prejudices. Indeed, this promise constitutes one measure of what we call academic freedom.

Talking with Aaron and me that last Sunday morning Rebekah singled out as one of her best program experiences dancing with me at Café Manhattan one memorable Thursday night. Our dancing together distinguished for her the maternal hovering she experienced from me at other times. She would have pronounced me entirely (too) maternal, she reported, but for occasions like Women’s Night when I released both dorm director and prim professor to become her dancing partner. (That night also she ironically exhibited her own maternal concern for me). In my diary a few days later (on May 1) I wrote:

Rebekah and I both enjoyed ourselves—often dancing w/each other, w/Bernedette, and w/Kellye. We danced on the jam-packed little floor, and I drank red wine first, then switched to shots of tequila, mostly so that I wouldn’t have to slosh my drink or get someone to hold it for me while I was dancing. Fortunately, I also drank several tall glasses of water and kept dancing, and Rebekah and I kept going outside to give our lungs a break. She was worried that her severe allergies would act up from the heavy smoke. Plus we were sort of flirting with a lovely woman selling queer souvenirs outside. If we hadn’t been careful of the smoke and the booze, I might’ve ended up in worse shape. As it is, Rebekah insisted on my staying at the Cascades instead of taking a taxi across town back to Kenilworth [a suburb where I house-sat for ten days during our spring break]. Then Friday she and I took the train from town to Claremont with Andrea and Zipporah. The four of us spent a slow, desultory afternoon in Kirstenbosch Gardens, some one of the 9,000 different species of plants bringing on a sinus attack I suffered the rest of the evening.
Last night I babysat Zipporah while Andrea was at the Mary J. Blige concert with a UCT student. After I put her to bed, I spent a couple of hours talking quite intimately with Rebekah in her room next door. So weird how closeness develops after a certain amount of sharing. We began talking about tomorrow’s class and about teaching, about the differences between Kareem’s course [on changes in education since the end of apartheid] and mine [on black women’s autobiography], about Kareem’s personality and mine. Where his is relaxed and cozy, my class feels tight, overwrought. Of course, central to the differences between our courses is that he does not live with the students; he is not Rebekah’s next-door neighbor, for example. I tell her that, whatever Kareem thinks he is doing with the students, for myself, I want them—my white students especially—to forge significant and specific impressions of life among African American women. I say that what they take from the course not only means something to me, it means something about me: their behavior as adults in my society has far-reaching implications. I tell her that I have become a professor in large part precisely to have this kind of access to shaping the opinions of my fellow citizens. The investment Kareem makes in them as an indigenous South African is different from that I make, whatever his pedagogical goals: they will leave South Africa, he knows, whereas I am not willing to chance that any of my students will not leave the US. He is a man, too, with a man’s “natural” authority, and that matters, even to the Women Studies majors on this trip…. It was a fascinating talk, but I don’t think I learned anything that will make our class sessions more relaxed. But is being relaxed essential to learning? I dunno…. I do know it’s hard living so close together, and I guess I did come to realize that that proximity not only makes it hard for the students to share with me, to trust me, but also to take risks with each other. Rebekah and I were talking about a kind of anonymity we both covet, especially scholastically—how we create diverse personae for different courses. That can’t be done here since we live so closely together, so with each other.

I read the excerpt from my diary entry of May 18 with which I began this essay, and marvel at the shifts in terminology within my own discourse: the conflation of student with friend exposes the violation of a personal code of ethics. I have virtually never thought of students as friends while they were still under my tutelage. Instead, I have asked friends who are UW students—like Jennifer—not to take my classes so that I will not have to evaluate friends’ work. In Cape Town, however, something changed as a result of having Jennifer in my course, and also perhaps as a result of having Andrea in a fourth course. Something changed as a result of living among my students, of interacting socially with them, of having dinner together regularly, shopping together, and moreover, of facing the unknown together, of protecting each other when possibly in harm’s way, of bolstering each other against culture shocks. I find in my diary page after page lamenting my lack of privacy in the
Cascades. During the chilly, rainy week that I lived alone with a strange cat in a suburb called Kenilworth, I wrote long passionate paragraphs luxuriating in the respite that solitude wrought at Easter. In the emails I sent back to the States, I relentlessly complained of constant interaction with the group. We could not even walk alone. Though many of us exercised alone in Seattle to gain clarity and peace, there doing so seemed fraught with danger: we dare not “lose ourselves” in our thoughts while walking unaccompanied on the Sea Point Promenade for very fear of “losing ourselves” in some dangerous predicament. No wonder, then, that my May 18 journal reveals such awesome paradigm shifts as the discussion of a course text with a current student in my kitchen and the avoidance of a similar discussion with a current student who grooms my hair in my living room at midnight. By the time that I came to write that entry, contrary to previous restrictions in my personal code of professional ethics, I had developed a closeness with several of the students in the program—had even developed a dependence on them, and I felt protective of all fifteen of them. Although I have always cared deeply whether or not my students learned and though I have often been acutely affected by classroom dynamics—behaviorists tell me that I do not quickly “return to baseline”—I have also not cultivated relationships with students beyond the ten weeks when I am teaching them. Hundreds of undergrads have sat in my courses at UW without my developing the slightest interest in getting to know them personally; what I do care about is whether or not they learn from me. I have sufficient friendships in other areas of my life such that searching for friends among my students is for me neither ethical nor desirable. For all that, however, living among students in Cape Town transformed me into the kind of professor who drinks and dances with her students without experiencing an ounce of anguish about ethicality or propriety.

After dancing with Rebekah, I do not recall a moment of doubt that I would be able to read her paper “objectively.” When I am training graduate student assistants to mark my undergrads’ papers, I caution them to address the quality of the paper, never of the student. “Refer to the essay when you’re writing comments,” I tell them. “Don’t write ‘You did not . . . ’ when you mean that the essay did not do a particular thing. After all, you are not judging the student; you are judging her work, the paper itself.” Thus, dancing with Rebekah at Café Manhattan surely did not render me unable to assess her work “objectively.” Despite our exhilarating revelry on Thursday night or our compelling tête-à-tête the following Sunday, I did not worry that I could not mark Rebekah’s paper with dispassion, even with severity. We had talked briefly, haltingly of her difficulty in reading Sapphire’s American Dreams: it was a text she would not discuss with me except to say that she found it “painful to read.”
Unfortunately, her essay did not clearly articulate just what distressed her, why she was so repelled and captivated at once by the text’s horrific imagery. Indeed, after the extraordinarily close time we spent together during the last days of our interim vacation, I confess that I was the more disappointed that Rebekah had produced so ineffectual a paper—and once I returned it marked and graded, she and I never alluded to it again. To what degree, however, was my assessment of her work influenced by that enjoyable time we shared during the break? Am I right—that is, both precise and fair—to think that the pleasure of her company then did not affect my grading? Is my being in a situation that gives rise to such questions a betrayal of my own professional code as a professor of English?

Undergraduates in English courses, like their peers across the university, rightly trust not only that an “objective” set of criteria will be used to evaluate their work, but also that the discipline is disciplined by a concrete set of rules and norms that form it. My association with Rebekah aside, a paradox often develops in English courses in particular, however. On the one hand, students regard English professors with suspicion because those disciplinary conventions can seem so elusive, so nimble, as to leave the students’ work frighteningly prey to professors’ opinions. Yet on the other hand, those same students often insist on the legitimacy of their own undisciplined readings on the premise that literature by definition is so “open to personal interpretation” that any reading goes, that individual readings are only “opinions” anyway. And in the case of black professors teaching race(d) literature, are not (white) students in still graver danger of being subject to whim, to political correctness, to assessments not of their comprehension or competence, but rather of their personal attitudes toward blacks?

Disciplinarity is not the only determinant of reliability, though. For even when the professor—whatever her or his ethnicity—is a social scientist teaching about race, respect for experiments and analyses, in other words for objectively collected data, falls away. Anxiety about harmful discrimination and unethical academic practices—within and outside of the academy—has led to vast changes in national law. Certainly, grievously, the effect of this kind of distrust is the aberration of tighter regulations for greater adherence to “objectivity.” Witness Bakke, Hopwood, California’s Proposition 209, and Washington’s Initiative 200—all cases based on a perceived need to protect citizens. The recklessness of these decisions and the students’ misapprehensions undergirding them help me to recognize that whatever disappointment I had in Rebekah’s paper on American Dreams, that paper did not meet the disciplinary criteria for satisfactory work by which I evaluated all of my students’ papers on Sapphire’s text.
One student’s question about theories of objectivity and professionalism still has me reflecting on these issues. Andrea, my most outstanding student, came to me in that oblique way she sometimes deploys, to ask about the staff’s decision to get to our UCT classroom earlier that day, despite our arriving an hour late. Every Tuesday afternoon we gathered up our books and papers, and herded ourselves to the Center for African Studies for our three-hour class period. On the first Tuesday after the break, our pre-arranged driver failed to show, so we stood at intersection of Vesperdene Road and the Main Road in Green Point, desperate to hail transportation to school. No matter what time class began, we were rigidly committed to returning to the flats by five, in order to get Zipporah before her day care center shut down for the day. The money collector for the *kombi* (i.e., taxi) that we’d verbally contracted to take to school assured us that the driver would be along within seconds; in the meantime, a second *kombi* drove up to whisk us away. We wanted to honor our word to the first man, but then realized that the driver he accompanied was being given a traffic ticket a block away. We were already half-hour behind schedule at this point, and it seemed that a dispute had evolved between the driver and the cop ticketing him. So we cautiously opted to go ahead with the second driver—painfully aware that *kombi* negotiations often end in fatal and near fatal shoot-outs between these desperate drivers. By the time we got settled in our classroom at the Center, we had only two hours of class time left, one of which was to be used in discussing Jennifer Haaken’s complicated theoretical essay “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire in Women’s Trauma Stories” (which most of the students had either altogether neglected to read or had only skimmed over the vacation). I planned to use the remaining hour to begin our discussion of Sapphire’s complex and unexpurgated collection of autobiographical poems and stories about psychosexual and physical violence in American families. I knew that the students had very definite impressions of *American Dreams*, and wanted to spend some time addressing those concerns about what language ought to be used to do and to express, as well as about how different Sapphire’s little book was from the previous autobiographies we had read.

That night Andrea wondered if our decision to spend the time waiting for the taxi, then settling the taxi driver dispute that had ensued had been worth the use of class time. Specifically, she said that we had had “everything we needed”—professor, students, texts—even before we left the sixth floor. Why hadn’t we simply opted to stay in one of the apartments for the class period? Not only that day, but also each class day, especially considering that we were doling out a hefty amount of program funds to get to campus. Having had three courses with me already, she was proud of my authority. Andrea says she told the other students at the outset that no matter how casual and open I was...
with them outside of the classroom, they would know that in the classroom, I was very serious. She herself marveled at the difference in my persona. I knew it was a matter of racial pride for her. If she admires anything about me, it is clearly my tacit command of each class session: “This is my time and we will use it wisely.” Her penetrating question goes right to the heart of the arbitrariness of fundamental academic idea(l)s, among them objectivity and propriety. “So you want to have class in someone’s bedroom?” I responded. But of course, we held program meetings all the time in “someone’s bedroom,” in the living space of the student assistant—significantly never my own flat, with the exception of the spontaneous gathering of women that morning I lay reading Disgrace while waiting for the fog to lift. In the student assistant’s flat we played Spades, decided program field trips, met with somber visitors, made “bring-and-share” (i.e., potluck) dinners for each other, and watched a South African soap opera called “Backstage” that featured a vibrant diva who regaled us with stories of her childhood in a local township. Why not also hold class there as well, Andrea insisted. Why maintain the fallacy of separate spheres even here, in this foreign place? Why maintain the illusion that “the world” never ends?

I remember my initial struggle not to be teacherly at the Cascades. I remember the nearly crushing exigency of clearly demarcated lines between power and neighbor.

Pondering her question, I think, If we say we can only have class in university classrooms, then we contend that there are borders in our lives. School is only There, not Here as well. If we say we can have class wherever we have professor, texts, and students, then we expose the fallacy of separate borders in our lives. Paradoxically, however, our group affirms the reality, the fixity, as well as the permeability of separate national borders since we were in fact outside of the U.S. borders. Moreover, my (in)valid reasoning troubles the conceptualization of “class” or “school,” and provokes the juxtaposition of class with learning. For surely my students were learning when I was not with them every time they discussed the course texts in significant ways—in a kombi to or from the UCT campus, in a Cascades flat, on a walk to the Waterfront, wherever a small group chanced to be—sans professor. Perhaps Andrea includes erroneously “professor” among requisite signs of learning. Musing even further, I wonder whether the excision of “professor” from learning contexts is not increasing, as universities move to learning communities comprised solely of individuals and their (im)personal computers. Is that a move toward greater objectivity? Will the elimination of professor in the twenty-first century produce more objective “long distance” learning?

Having returned to the UW in Seattle, will I remain a “transformed” professor? I know that I cannot: there is too much at risk here. One reason that the
students were so silent during class is that they were unwilling to risk exposing the extent of their own social ills. We had started the course with Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, in which she names the North American a particularly “ugly tourist.” Her little polemic stings with its vivid reminders that here in the West we are trained from birth to be imperialists. My students in Cape Town did not relish this book, even though virtually each of them thanked me for the exposure to it, and so immediately upon our arrival in South Africa. When I taught *A Small Place* in Seattle during the months before departing for Cape Town, many of my students resented Kincaid’s “angry” tone and repelled her virulence for Americans; safely at home they could insist that they were exempt from Kincaid’s vitriolic charges. But the students abroad had to confront Kincaid’s charges in the geopolitical context of RSA (Republic of South Africa), where we formed a small homogenous community transplanted into a different world. Perhaps one interpretation of Aaron’s extraordinary pronouncement that “the world never ends” is that wherever westerners go, we inevitably, as Kincaid castigates, take our values and biases with us. Perhaps my students feared that they would reveal too much of themselves in that context.

But again, in considering the impediments to my maintaining the same “professional” attitude in Seattle as I manifested among students in Cape Town, I have to identify students’ attitudes towards race, specifically towards blackness, and therefore towards me. Not all of my students abroad were white; more than one-third of them represented American ethnic minority groups: a Filipina, a Chicano, an African American, an American Pacific Islander, a woman of both African American and Korean ancestry, the black Sri Lankan who praised my intact boundaries. And yet even were I to have in Seattle a class composed of only students of color, I could not relax my professional demeanor here in the same way that I could—by compelling circumstance—there. Above I noted that standards of objectivity, however illusory they are, are designed to protect students—students of color from racist professors and practices, women students from sexist policies, and so on. Indeed, these same standards are those to which Katouria Smith appealed when she charged the University of Washington Law School as having admitted an “inferior” student of color but rejected her (whiteness) in the late 1990s. Those same standards are in place to protect me as a woman professor of color—from allegations of unfairness, favoritism, bias.

In Cape Town, I wrote:

> Just as the students live on the same floor of the apartment complex with me, they do so with each other. Just as they cannot leave class after performing this persona today, that persona tomorrow, they also accompany each other home after class where each
remembers the classroom discussions—and at least tacitly expects and depends on a measure of consistency. Performing a self at home in the Cascades that differs from that in our University of Cape Town classroom would violate a taboo and destabilize the group. And because terms like “performativity,” “destabilization of the autobiographical self,” and “in-law” and “out-law” performances permeate our theoretical course readings⁴, we are especially sensitive to their implications for our lives in Cape Town.

Back in Seattle, I recognize the academic code that requires my own complicity: I must not not be professional, no matter where I am.

In the final week before submitting this essay to the co-editors of this volume, I spoke with Jennifer, Andrea, and Rebekah about my representations of our mutual experiences in Cape Town. In the initial voice- or electronic-mail requesting that they contact me for consultation, I provided both my home and office telephone numbers; as it happened in each case, I spoke with the student by phone from my UW office. Our conversations, still richly laced with the intimacy we shared in the Cascades, were yet distinctly different from former ones. I was myself notably different. My own voice no doubt dropped a few notes into a register of something I fancy sounds like “authority,” theirs were hesitant, cautious with concern about the need for such a conversation, given the trust they had come to place in me abroad. With each student I try to convey that I am acting from an ethical place, that the call is not to alarm her, but rather to reassure her. It has come to this (again), now that we are “home.” Thus in explaining how my essay tries to protect each of them individually, to maintain as much as anonymity as they deem warranted, and yet serve the profession with some insight into the intersection of the personal and the professional, I must needs try to protect myself. I am aware as I speak, as I disclose the contents of my diaries to them, that yet again my heart must open in this professional capacity, and that conversely, in this instance the students are guarded—by their physical absence that the telephone permits, blocking my access to their faces or body language, by no obligation to comment on how I have drawn our experience—only to grant or withhold their permission of my reconstruction of that experience. I am also aware that as students they need and merit this very border. Less than a month after our return, professional ethics, the academic dance, and ironically proximity all restrict the nature of our interactions and exchanges. The old barriers fall into place, whatever I choose to reveal; the world has edges again.

CONCLUSION

Thinking now about what it means that my teaching in Cape Town seemed so different from my teaching in Seattle, I realize that in fact my teaching in the
two locations has been less divergent than I initially thought. For one thing, it is worth noting that the students traveling with me were voluntarily in class. None of them opted out of my “required” course altogether, though certainly that option was open to them. It is easy to imagine that morale and collectivity might have suffered, had even only one of them chosen to complete Kareem’s course and the program’s required internship but not the third curriculum component that my course formed. More than one student, I learned when we returned, had elected to take my course for “Credit/ No Credit,” yet while abroad I had little reason to believe that they weren’t committed to my course, Savitri included.

Similarly, institutional structures followed us to Cape Town. We were governed by UW standards as much abroad as if we had been at home. For all the intimacy we developed, I do not flatter myself that there were not “situations” involving my Gen X students of which I was unaware. The required internship was designed in part specifically to allow students to cultivate an independent identity, an international responsibility apart from our group. My co-director dazzlingly established, then supervised working relationships between our 15 and the local organizations, activists, and institutions to which they promised volunteer service. In one instance, she and I were chagrined that some students ended up volunteering together, as this shared experience nullified a crucial aspect of the program. (In another instance, though, we were relieved that men students accompanied several women to a township medical clinic outside Cape Town.) That some of them did end up working together, however, validates all the more our faith that we directors still remain completely ignorant of some student experiences during our stint. Surely, just as I was desperate for my own separate peace and realized it, so must have my students. They created their own barriers shielding out authority—in some cases through means as simple and transparent as addressing me professionally, formally; in other cases far more egregiously, as by drinking excessively. In Cape Town as in Seattle, young people impeccably cement each other’s secrets against folks Over Thirty. In terms of professional objectivity and ethicality then, I must own that as conscientious as I tried to be, as conscious as I truly was of institutional procedures and demands and of being ever “on duty,” there as here some situations were simply beyond my control. And I won’t pretend to want to know what they all were.

However, the faculty and staff of the UW Study Abroad Program for South Africa did all we could to try to mitigate as many problems as possible. I tried to make my course as “typical” as possible, as predictable as possible. And I believe that most of the students appreciated my complex shifting of parental, personal, and professional attitudes during those three months. Perhaps what
our program illustrates is the time and space specificity of virtually every teaching experience; perhaps no learning experience involving professor, students, texts is finally formulaic, merely “academic.” Moreover, in the quarter before our program, two professors quite unsuccessfully led a Study Abroad group through southern Africa and barely lived to tell about it, they moaned. They had worked under conditions very similar to those my co-director and I faced with very happy results. One key difference, ironically, had been that they did not live among the students in their group. And when a younger colleague—black, and queer like me but male—approached me last fall for advice as he set out unaccompanied with 15 students, I heard myself blurt without hesitation, “You will want to live among them.” But who is to say that were Dagni and I to return with a different group of students—or the very same ones, for that matter—that our experience would be as gratifying? Academic success too often depends on fortuity. Perhaps the best one can do is trust one’s own sense of humility, one’s own ethicality, wherever one is.

NOTES

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1. “To Be Young, Pregnant, and Black: My Life as a Welfare Coed” is part of a collection of essays on women, rights, and welfare, currently under consideration by Temple University Press. The volume’s editors are Vivyan Adair and Sandra Dahlberg.

2. See Vanessa Bing and Pamela Trotman Reid, “Unknown Women and Unknowing Research: Consequences of Color and Class in Feminist Pedagogy,” in Knowledge, Difference, and Power: Essays Inspired by Women’s Ways of Knowing (New York: Basic, 1996). They instructively underscore “unknowing research” which they define as scholarship conducted by psychologists who refuse to know multiple dimensions of the lives of their subjects. Bing and Reid condemn a psychology studies methodology that uses “women of color when researchers are seeking to uncover atypical phenomena…. The primary consequence of this approach is to pathologize women of color while leaving their other concerns unaddressed. The continued exclusion of culturally and economically diverse women from research on ordinary problems and issues allows the entire discipline to remain ignorant of the experiences of these women” (186–87). Equally instructive, Bing and Reid identify feminist scholars who insist that “Science . . . is not value-free and theories are riddled with biases, inasmuch as ideological biases influence
the kinds of research questions raised and the results obtained” (194). And they remind us that “self-interest need not be construed as having a deleterious influence. In fact, it can be credited with bringing investigators’ assumptions into clear view” (194).

