Home-Work
Sugars, Cynthia

Published by University of Ottawa Press

Sugars, Cynthia.
Home-Work: Postcolonialism, Pedagogy, and Canadian Literature.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/4460

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=252173
“You Don’t Even Want to Go There”: Race, Text, and Identities in the Classroom

ARUN P. MUKHERJEE

One cannot predict the amount of crisis a class can contain until the crisis becomes too much. But neither can one predict what will become a crisis, and so we must return to the question of anxiety in learning.
— Deborah Britzman 87

Teachers of English, postcolonialists or others, have not paid much attention to pedagogical matters. Classroom teaching is the major part of what we do, and we undergo several levels of evaluation of our teaching practices. Yet, as Heather Murray suggests, we do it in the context of the “intense privatization and isolation of the classroom” and “the lack of written record of its practices” (161). In a special issue of PMLA, devoted to “The Teaching of Literature,” Biddy Martin expresses surprise about the lack of material on pedagogy:

Given the vast attention now paid to the performativity of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nation, literature, it is surprising that there is not more writing about pedagogy and the construction of knowledge in our classrooms and in our daily interactions with one another and with undergraduate and graduate students. (23)
Murray and Martin draw our attention to a very serious gap in the research about university teaching of literature. In a field such as postcolonial studies, which is so fraught, given the many challenges that confront it, there is, I believe, a particular need to record, examine, and share the successes and failures of our teaching strategies and practices. It is curious that this need remains neglected in the burgeoning body of critical and theoretical writing on postcolonial studies. Gayatri Spivak’s “How to Teach a ‘Culturally Different’ Book,” and Richard Allen and Harish Trivedi’s Literature and Nation: Britain and India, 1800–1990, while ostensibly about teaching, are exercises in providing “background information” to cultural outsiders who can then go on to teach these texts with greater understanding. Neither Spivak nor Allen and Trivedi consider the fact that texts have both cognitive and affective dimensions. No attention is paid in studies such as these to the classroom dynamics where students and teachers with heterogeneous identities, marked by differences of race, gender, class, and sexuality, study texts that are called “multicultural” and/or “postcolonial.”

This paper is a partial attempt to address these questions through an exploration of subjects and subjectivities as they are negotiated and articulated within the parameters of a course called “Postcolonial Writing in Canada” that I have taught off and on for the last ten years. My approach is based on Martin’s suggestion that “Analyses of teaching require both the objectification of subjectivity and the use of anecdote and autobiographical experience” (23). I will be looking at some significant moments between me, a South Asian female academic, and my very heterogeneous students as we engaged with the texts of Canadian writers of racialized hyphenated identities.

The classrooms in which I teach today are profoundly different from the ones I sat in as a student in the early seventies at the University of Toronto, and entered as a teacher in the mid-seventies, first as a teaching assistant, then as an itinerant contract instructor in places as disparate as Toronto, Regina, and London, Ontario, and finally, 12 years ago, as a tenured professor at York University. Sometimes, in my moments of despair, I feel that not much really seems to have changed in terms of institutional culture and its White supremacist structures that I encountered as a student and teacher in classrooms where I would be the only person of colour. However, I do know that profound changes have oc-
curred, mainly—though not only—because the communities in which we live and work have changed so greatly. I now live in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, and work on a campus whose student body is as varied as the city in which it is situated. I presume Gayatri Spivak has a point when she claims: “Whatever our view of what we do, we are made by the forces of people moving about the world” (Death 2).

The multi-ethnic, multiracial, and multicultural classroom that this change in the demography of Canada has produced is, for me, a postcolonial space, with all its contradictions. It is a microcosm of the outside world where people of various ethnic and racial backgrounds find themselves, in John Porter’s famous words, in a “vertical mosaic.” In the particular classroom that I am going to talk about here, 35 men and women, most of them in their twenties, and their teacher, negotiate their identities as they read a body of texts that I brought together under the pragmatically chosen course title, “Postcolonial Writing in Canada.”

The choice of the course title was a Trojan horse operation, and not a declaration of the postcoloniality of the writers included in it. In fact, one of them, Thomas King, in his well-known essay, “Godzilla vs. Postcolonial,” argued forcefully how inappropriate this theoretical and temporal category was for discussing Native Canadian literature and life. And it is quite possible that the other writers on my course list may have similar reservations about being called postcolonial.

However, my decision to go with this title rather than the one I really wanted, that is, “Racial Minority Writing in Canada,” was based on my hard-nosed assessment of what a new, untenured faculty member could or could not get past a curriculum committee in 1992. I may have been wrong about what I thought of the curriculum committee. However, I believe that my anxiety is in itself instructive.

In fact, as my colleague, Terry Goldie, has shown in a recent work on this course’s title, my fears and anxieties were not simply neurotic but produced by an accurate internalization of the discipline’s proprieties. In his interchange with Goldie, our department chair, Kim Michasiw, who I suppose has to be guided by such ground realities as enrolment numbers and the curriculum committees higher up, replied that “The term ‘postcolonial’ is a brand name and a brand name that has market cachet.” Michasiw also argued that visible minority was “somewhat less safe” than postcolonial, which he saw as “post-ideological” (306–07).
I believe Michasiw is quite astute in his reading of postcolonial as “post-ideological.” I take it to mean that the postcolonial is now safely ensconced in the academy and does not give the establishment any bad dreams. Insofar as no sit-ins were carried out in postcolonialism’s name and insofar as its meaning is infinitely stretchable, being all at once a methodology, a temporal marker, and an identity for some (I remember the book of Spivak’s interviews called *The Postcolonial Critic*), it is no threat to anybody.

Postcolonialism, then, is an academic discourse, or jargon, that I do not fully control but must negotiate with. It has been both an enabling and a disabling category for me. When it becomes too predictable a theoretical grid, always ending up with “subversion” or “resistance,” it becomes disabling. Let me give you an example: A graduate student, writing on Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, commented that Sophie Mol’s death symbolized the failure of Chacko and Margaret’s marriage which, of course, was symbolic of a colonized/colonizer relationship. Ergo, all interracial and intercultural marriages will end up in divorce and death. Far too often, students want to read a text to uncover “What’s postcolonial about it.” I have written about this phenomenon, which I call “the postcolonial anxiety,” elsewhere (“Postcolonial”).

I find it enabling to think of postcolonial as a temporal category characterizing the era in which we live, a time after colonization, to be sure, but a time when we are recovering from, or trying to recover from, the material effects and mindsets of colonization. The US invasion of Iraq shows that this recovery follows the classic Marxian recipe of “one step forward two steps back.” But as someone who marched in the anti-war rallies in Toronto, I view this attempted recovery as a global process, going on in many parts of the world, including Canada, of confronting the structures of oppression and transforming human consciousness.

My classroom, I believe, is one of the arenas where this process is enacted and participated in by way of struggle against the status quo as well as resistance to change. My students and I, endowed with personal subjectivity and forms of consciousness developed in various locations within Canada’s raced, gendered, classed, and sexist/heterosexist social spaces, come together in this classroom for various reasons. The 26 weeks we spend together reading and responding to Canadian writers with racialized, hyphenated identities—Native, African-Caribbean, Indo-
Caribbean, Chinese, Japanese, and South-Asian—are, for me and my students, fraught with conflicting emotions and outcomes. Based on what they write in their journals and essays, and what I think and feel about my interactions with them, I believe this journey together is exciting, liberating, and empowering on the one hand, and explosive, enraging, and excruciatingly painful on the other.

We do not ask, perhaps cannot ask, our students to write what “really” happened in the classroom. Their journals sometimes provide a glimpse into the abyss, as when a student writes about other students rolling their eyes during her presentation or another one writes about overhearing some White students in the hallway criticizing their teacher, a behaviour that he, as a person of colour, believes to be an example of lack of respect for a woman professor of colour. Some of the opinions expressed in some of my students’ journals, and the tone in which they are expressed, make me feel terribly upset, sad, pained. I feel personally hurt when a student writes, as well as states in the classroom, that he is surprised to see such “poor writing” as Maria Campbell’s in a “university literature course.” I literally feel kicked in the stomach when I read or hear that Dionne Brand or Kerrie Charnley are practising reverse racism.

I have been poring over tons of books on critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, and anti-racist pedagogy to find out how teachers deal with these emotions of pain and hurt. However, while there is a lot of talk in these books on methods, theories, and visions, there is very little writing that deals with the psychodrama of the classroom where people give and receive pain. Among the theoretical works that do deal with affect, I found Deborah Britzman’s and Alice Pitt’s work very useful, even though they construct a universal teacher, presumably gendered and sexualized, but unmarked by race. It is a handful of works—such as bell hooks’ *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, John A. Williams’ *Classroom in Conflict: Teaching Controversial Subjects in a Diverse Society*, and Bonnie Tushmit and Maureen T. Reddy’s collection, *Race in the College Classroom: Pedagogy and Politics*—that spoke about the classroom conflicts in terms of race and made me realize that I was not the only one having these problems. However, these works are about the American academy and hence not always relevant to my situation in Canada. In Canada, while Himani Bannerji’s work addressed, perhaps for the first time, the issue of the racialized teacher’s body, only Patricia Monture-Angus and
Aruna Srivastava have provided accounts of classroom realities for racialized teachers.

John A. Williams suggests that conflict in the classroom has something to do with "the student body [becoming] increasingly diverse":

Related to this new diversity is an intense and potentially explosive political atmosphere. When controversial subjects enter the class—whether these are international conflicts, hotly debated political or social questions, or the clash of deeply held moral orientations or group identities—someone is likely to be offended, someone is likely to complain. The very possibility of discussing such matters in an atmosphere conducive to learning cannot be taken for granted. A class can break down, and the teacher is vulnerable to accusations that he or she has been insensitive or biased—serious charges in today's climate. (1)

Williams' subject is South African and American history and so his book, although extremely useful in many ways, still does not help a teacher of literature. Our dominant ideologies and our methodologies are quite different from those of history, although both disciplines do deal with texts. Secondly, he speaks as a White American male and faces challenges different from mine which have to do with my being a Canadian woman of colour.

As I said earlier, this problem of a "different" response to history or literature based on one's "complexion," to use Terry Goldie's term (300), has not been theorized much, let alone articulated. One of the earliest hints that "complexion," or bodies, or race, does matter in how we will read texts comes in Kenneth Burke's work. Although he did not go far enough with it, reading these words of his for the first time remains one of my light-bulb moments:

As . . . [an] instance of how the correctness of form depends upon the ideology, we may consider a piece of juvenile fiction for Catholic boys. The hero will be consistently a hero: he will show bravery, honesty, kindness to the oppressed, strength in sports, gentleness to women—in every way, by the tenets of repetitive form, he will repeat the fact that he is a hero. And among these repetitions will be his converting of Indians to Catholicism. To a Catholic boy, this will be one more repetition of his identity as an
ideal hero; but to the Protestant boy, approaching the work from a slightly different ideology, repetitive form will be endangered at this point. (147)

I have wondered why Burke did not even consider what the Indian boy reading this fiction might feel. Nevertheless, he is perhaps one of the first to speculate about the aesthetic effects of literary texts being differently felt based on one's identity. White feminists went on to write about their differential readings of women's writings, but did not record classroom battles about these texts.

Perhaps literary critics and theorists have harboured a naive assumption that new, radical readings of texts filter unproblematically into the classroom. Education theorists such as Alice Pitt, who write on “resistance,” do record moments of students resisting both dominant and radical agendas of their teachers, but much of this research has been highly philosophical or declamatory, unenlivened by actual classroom situations.

Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature, by Peter J. Rabinowitz and Michael W. Smith, touches on the volatility associated with the teaching of what they interchangeably call “multicultural literature” and/or “fragile texts” in the last chapter of their book. In the very last paragraph of the book Rabinowitz and Smith make the following remarks:

In the end, there are no risk-free courses of action for teachers and critics, no way to guarantee that any discussion of a text, even if it begins with an authorial reading, will be bruise-free. I'm not even sure that avoiding bruises should be a goal. Some feelings ought to be bruised, ought to be challenged. But weighing what I take to be a positive discomfort like that of Nancy's student upon reading Wilde against the bruising a gay student might feel at yet another assertion of heterosexual privilege and power is an enormously complicated task. If we take seriously the possibility that art can improve us, we have to take seriously the possibility that our reading will maim us. But even if we can never eliminate the risks involved—in fact, especially if we can never eliminate the risk involved—it is still worth discussing how to articulate them and how to confront them responsibly. And the more we raise culturally charged questions in the classroom—the more we talk about issues of sexuality, ethnicity, and global politics—the more urgent the need for such discussion becomes. (152)
I found it ironic that the book ended just when they had begun to talk about my problem, albeit in a highly roundabout way, without delving any further into why some people may feel “bruised” when being taught (once again, as in most pedagogical literature, the focus is on the students and not on the teacher) texts by “multicultural”—their term—writers, and where one goes from there. Nonetheless, I am thankful to them for the metaphors of “bruising” and “maiming.” Reading certain texts, these metaphors point out, can be a truly hurtful business.

I have not found any road map (revising my paper one year after the University of Ottawa’s “Postcolonialism and Pedagogy” conference and too soon after the Iraq “war,” I am struck by that phrase) that would help me grasp the chaotic feelings of being bruised all over that I experience when teaching these racialized Canadian writers or make sense of how they affect me as a person and a teacher, in turn affecting my students. I believe that these racialized texts have such a visceral effect on me and my students because they are about Canada and not some far away place. They cannot be othered, although they do meet denials and disavowals. Here, in this paper, I would like to articulate, and perhaps to sort out, the tangled emotions and thoughts that reading and teaching these texts have evoked in me. As to how my teaching from the standpoint of “being bruised all over” may have affected my students, I can only make speculations based on their comments and written work.

Himani Bannerji helps me begin:

It has been difficult to write about being a student and a teacher in Canada. I would rather not have learnt or taught all the lessons that I did in these classrooms which mirror our everyday world. But there is no better point of entry into a critique or a reflection than one’s own experience. It is not the end point, but the beginning of an exploration of the relationship between the personal and the social and therefore the political. And this connecting process, which is also a discovery, is the real pedagogic process, the “science” of social science. (Thinking 55)

The problems, the tangled emotions that I face in my “Postcolonial Writing in Canada” course, are of a different order from the ones I faced, for example, when, as a teaching assistant and, later, as a contract instructor, I had to teach against the celebratory narratives of White feminists in
praise of writers I found exclusionary and racist (Mukherjee, "Reading"; "Right"). They are yet again different from the gamut of thoughts and emotions I experience when teaching my course on South Asian Literature. Nonetheless, the experiences I have had in those other classrooms do impinge on what I do and how I react in this particular classroom.

Earlier, I alluded to the little jabs of pain when reading some of my students' journals and finding out their views on Native Canadian writing. I would now like to talk about some interactions around the teaching and learning about texts in my/our classroom that have stayed in my memory, evoking and provoking a lot of questions that I am still trying to work through.

The first encounter I would like to talk about has to do with Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*. After a wonderful seminar presentation by two students who had evidently worked very hard on it, the class discussion focused on Chandin Ramchandin and what may have turned him into a monster who repeatedly brutalized and raped his own daughters. Some students felt that it was the emasculation and rage he experienced when his wife eloped with her White lesbian lover who had earlier rejected his offerings of love. However, another student—a woman of colour—insisted that it was because of Chandin's experiences of colonization, that is, the migration of his family from early twentieth-century India as indentured workers, his adoption by the missionaries who wanted to convert indentured workers to Christianity, and finally, their prohibition of his desire for their daughter on the pretext that she was his sister.

This student's insistence that colonization can turn human beings into raging monsters capable of violating the ultimate taboo was passionately opposed by those who had tried to explain it by his reaction to his wife's and her lover's lesbian affair and elopement. I stepped in at this point, suggesting that both points of view had merit and perhaps Chandin's loss of control and falling apart were caused by his experiences as a colonized subject as well as his inability to come to terms with, on the one hand, Lavinia's rejection of his proffered love and, on the other, her elopement with Sarah, Chandin's wife. Feeling that the discussion was stuck in this one groove, I veered it towards other aspects of the text.

So, imagine my surprise when, after the class ended, three students, all of them White, approached me and told me, in voices that I read as reproachful, that I should not have let the view that colonization had made
Chandin a rapist go unchallenged. They insisted that colonization could not be blamed for everything people did. And they demanded that I return to this issue in the next class.

While I agreed to revisit the issue at the beginning of the next class, I found it difficult to understand why they were so upset. As far as I was concerned, I had responded to the heated argument in the class by putting the matter in terms of nature versus nurture theories, and suggesting that the ones who did not want to “excuse” Chandin’s behaviour belonged to the former camp while the others who “explained” his behaviour by shifting the blame to colonization belonged to the latter.

Was this a “race” issue, I wondered. I remembered that one of the students who had insisted that I raise the issue again and deal with it had, in an earlier class, said that she had felt stigmatized in some classes as a blond-haired, White woman. Her remark was in response to a student of colour who had referred to a new field of study called “White Studies.” Her remark about feeling stigmatized remained unanswered. Neither I nor the class picked up on it. I have thought a lot about it since and have wondered why I had not had the courage to ask, “So, why do you feel that way?”

When I look back on my connecting the student’s earlier comment about her feeling of stigmatization because of her body with her insistence that I revisit the debate on the cause of Chandin’s behaviour, I must connect the dots in my own psyche. I now think I felt that this student and her fellow students wanted to disavow the havoc of colonization, for otherwise, as Whites (White privilege is never an easy topic to discuss), they might have to shoulder the blame for the suffering of the Indo-Caribbeans shown in Mootoo’s text. By insisting that no one but Chandin was responsible for his monstrous behaviour, they could distance themselves from the text.

But when I opened the next week’s class by referring to the controversy and restated my points about nature versus nurture, I had not yet figured out my own feelings. The passions that had flared a week ago were no longer in evidence either. And yet, the student, who had insisted on the devastating effect of colonialism on people’s psyches, reiterated her views on the matter in her journal that week:

Last week’s class ended with my trying to argue the possibility of a link between incest and abuse and colonialism. What I wanted to say but chose
not to, in the light of the growing sense of irrationality among my fellow students is as follows. . . I don't see where my logic has failed me as far as the last class' discussion is concerned. Colonization has meant a doubly difficult existence for those whom it has left in its wake.

This passionate exchange (where obviously students on both sides felt that I had not handled the situation satisfactorily) reminded me of another exchange I had witnessed in 1993, not in my class, thankfully, but at a panel of students discussing Black women's autobiography. The White student had felt angry at the Black women writers' textual anger. She had felt that they were scapegoating her. Her words remain etched on my memory years after they were uttered: “I didn't put shackles around their ankles, so why are they blaming me?”

Writers of colour, particularly Black writers, are routinely deemed to be angry. On numerous occasions after the publication of my book, Towards an Aesthetic of Opposition: Essays on Literature, Criticism and Cultural Imperialism, I was told by disciplinary gatekeepers that my book was “too angry.” Dionne Brand, in her interview with Dagmar Novak, underlines how endemic the problem is:

White critics tend to describe black emotion as either angry or sad, no matter what else is going on in the text, no matter how many other emotions they are confronted by in the characters in that text. . . [T]he cultural codes which the critic uses to identify black characters are white cultural codes which see blacks in general as either angry in general or sad in general! (276-77)

I find that students either love Brand’s writing or they hate it. The haters found Land to Light On “too extreme” and “anti-Canadian.” In my class, these conflicted responses to Brand’s poetry were certainly based on race.

If texts make readers angry and uncomfortable, why is it, I wonder, that we seldom see those emotions expressed, or analyzed, in literary criticism? If critics, the vast majority of whom are also teachers, documented and dealt with these moments of anger and discomfort, we might be able to negotiate these explosive moments in our classrooms a bit more successfully.

Because of the episode related to Black women’s autobiographies that I have just recounted, I was somewhat prepared to respond to a White
student who commented that Himani Bannerji’s article, “The Sound Barrier: Translating Ourselves in Language and Experience,” had made her very angry. My prior experiences, and reflection on those experiences, gave me the courage to ask her to explain why Bannerji had made her angry rather than respond through an awkward silence. The student had many things to say. It was, she felt, the whole tone of the essay, as though Bannerji was blaming Canadians for her difficulties with writing in English. Why, she asked, did Bannerji have to write in English if she found it so hard? She felt that Bannerji had no right to portray the bank teller as she did: “How can a Toronto white bank teller’s silent but eloquent look of contempt from a pair of eyes lurking in her quasi-Madonna (is that it?) hairdo be conveyed to a Bengali speaking, Bengali audience of Calcutta?” (“Sound” 33). She also felt that Bannerji had an insulting tone towards Canadians, calling them “they.”

Several students of colour responded to her, saying Bannerji had a right to her experience. As for me, I realized that up to that moment, I had never read the article from any other point of view except the writer’s, perhaps because I, too, have experienced similar put downs in public places. However, I did understand the anger and hurt this young person, innocent and ignorant about the past, felt while reading Bannerji. Bannerji’s portrayal of the bank teller, particularly the word “lurking,” is unsettling. I should have perhaps detoured into a reading of Fanon and talked about how Fanon shows that even the most casual interracial encounter can become traumatizing. Perhaps next time such a situation occurs in my class, I will do that. But this time around, all I said to the student and to the class was that her reading showed how texts trigger very different responses for different readers, based on things such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. And then I went back to the point I was making, that according to Bannerji, her text, in drawing from the signifying systems of a non-Western culture, leaves “gaps” and “holes” for a reader from outside her culture.

Thus far I have been talking about student comments and emotions, and my responses—sometimes inadequate—to them. Now I want to turn the searchlight of hindsight towards myself and revisit my comments and my behaviours towards students.

This memory has to do with a seminar on Wayson Choy’s Paper Shadows. The student, well versed in postmodernism, talks about the
fragmented self and the constructedness of memory. He gives examples from the text where Choy's memories of childhood events differ from those of his aunt's or his friend's. Exhaustive as the seminar was, it perturbs me that the student has not looked at Choy's memories that document Chinese Canadian experience of racism: like his grandfather's burial in a Chinese-only cemetery, his excursions with various bachelor uncles, the brutal assault on his friend, or his father's stories about how he got back at his racist employer. Outwardly, I speak about the problems with applying a postmodernist reading to Choy's memoir. I suggest that postmodernism's emphasis on the unreliability of memory inadvertently suggests that his memories about the suffering of Chinatown bachelors or his father's anger with his racist employer are unreliable and, therefore, not true.

The student, who was one of the quiet ones, did not respond. I later wondered why I did not pursue my *ex cathedra* comments as questions to him and chose, instead, to engage in a diatribe against postmodernism in general. Why did I not come out in the open, so to speak, and ask him why he had ignored all the memories that document the community's suffering and Choy's own lingering pain? Why did I not ask how he would apply the postmodern destabilizing of memory to their historical truth? I also wondered whether I had not sounded too disapproving.

Although I remained dissatisfied with my tone, I could not let go, for days afterwards, of the student's ignoring of Choy's memories that document the Canadian state's and White Canadians' racism against Chinese Canadians at the time when Choy was growing up. Did the student not pay attention to these aspects of Choy's memory because we are so used to thinking about memory as an extremely private thing? Or, I wonder, is this another case of disavowal?

The next incident I want to talk about has to do with a seminar presentation on Shyam Selvadurai's *Cinnamon Gardens*. I began to feel deeply restless when the presenters opened the seminar with the statement that they felt disappointed that both the main characters in the text were defeated by their society's traditions, and that they did not have the strength to break loose of the constraints of their society. What I read as Balendran's choice to not leave his family for his lover Richard when Richard comes to Ceylon, and Annalukshmi's decision to wait until she really felt sure about which of the three alternatives available to her she liked best, were read as defeats by the students.
What disturbed me about their presentation was their laying all the blame on the “traditions” of Ceylonese/Sri Lankan society, disregarding the evidence in the novel that Balendran’s father had threatened Richard by brandishing the power of the British law of the time that criminalized homosexuality. Similarly, while Annalukshmi, for me, had choices and was shown to be acting on them, for my students, she was yet another case of defeat through “tradition’s” stranglehold. I can now say that if I felt disturbed and angry, it is because I come across this “victims of tradition” paradigm, that Chandra Mohanty has written so eloquently about in her well-known essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Critical Discourses,” far too frequently for my liking.

When thinking afterwards about my interaction with the presenters, I felt that I had upset and intimidated the students by my questioning of their interpretation. I had tried to point out passages in the text that challenged their reading. In return, they had pulled out some lines that I felt were being lifted out of context. As a teacher who does not want to be dictatorial regarding the authority of her reading, I felt deeply conflicted. I felt a sort of despair, which I have felt many times before when my students found South Asian women characters to be too passive or too oppressed, especially when they went on to compare their own freedoms and rights as Canadian women with the constraints and oppressions experienced by South Asian women, no matter what time period, class, caste, or place involved. (The flip side of my own experience is that of South Asian students who have sometimes complained to me and other South Asian teachers, about the negative picture of India that Dalit and/or feminist texts paint. They complain that such texts only further confirm the stereotypes that White Canadians harbour about South Asia.)

The students, feeling my negative vibes, spoke to me after the class. They told me that they had worked very hard on their presentation and I was being unduly hard on them. Although I won the game—if an unequal contest between students and teachers can be so called—by sitting down with them and pointing out all the passages that validated my points and proved them wrong, I did not feel good about my win. The students wanted to know their grades for the presentation and felt relieved that they hadn’t done as badly as they thought they had done, or, that I wasn’t coming down as hard on them as they had feared.

Luckily for me, Selvadurai was coming to our class the week after.
Among the many questions he was asked that day was one of mine: “Some of the students felt that Annalukshmi and Balendran are defeated by their society. They felt disappointed that characters who had started with so much promise had come to accept defeat by the end. Could you comment on that?” Selvadurai told us that Annalukshmi had not given up at all, that she was waiting before she decided on her next step. And that waiting rather than jumping into something headlong was itself an act of great courage. And as far as Balendran was concerned, he, too, had made a choice out of options available to him at a particular time and place in history. He said it in such a convincing way that the students’ journals, essays, and even exam answers echoed him!

But how often do we have the luxury to call upon an author for clarifications? And how much weight do these authorial interventions have when the author has been declared dead, anyway?

Besides reading the characters in terms of Western liberal humanist notions of motivation and action, class discussion indicated that students had also misread some crucial scenes. A scene describes an artists’ gathering where the men and women, belonging to the Ceylonese elite, are dressed “unusually”: “Instead of suits and ties, most of the men wore sarongs or vertis, clothes that were usually worn at home” (376). One student felt the gathering was suspect because “they were all inappropriately dressed.” So a scene that portrayed colonized Ceylonese elite re-appropriating the indigenous modes of dressing had been read as denoting impropriety and decadence. Selvadurai’s eloquent reflection on the passage, provoked by my question, I think, got across to many a student.

I am aware that texts cannot be policed and I, too, misread many texts, as an ESL student in my teenage years in India. That inevitable fact of life stood in my face when I read a student’s paper, in which she read Balendran’s marriage to his cousin as incestuous and as proof of his and his family’s—that word again—colonized mind. Never mind that the text does say that cousin marriages, albeit among maternal cousins, among Tamils are the norm, not the exception (Balendran and Sonia’s marriage is disapproved of in some quarters because they are paternal cousins).

Why did the above (mis)reading just amuse me as opposed to the one about Annalukshmi’s character which so bothered me? I believe it happened because of the baggage I had carried from many misreadings of South Asian women in the media, in the classroom, and in scholarly
writings. I need to learn to not respond viscerally when students carry out the interpretive operations that make non-Western women, in Chandira Mohanty’s well-known words, “a unified ‘powerless’ group,” “generally dependent and oppressed,” prior to an analysis, “archetypal victims” (58). Instead, I need to learn to challenge them, but in a non-threatening, cheerful sort of way.

The final incident, or non-incident, as it may be construed, that I wish to talk about is a student comment when we were discussing M.G. Vassanji’s Amriika. We read the text less than a week after the riots, in early March 2002, in the western Indian state of Gujarat in which, according to unofficial estimates, at least 2000 Muslims were killed by Hindu mobs. I was telling the class what a radical gesture it was on Vassanji’s part to give his Muslim hero a surname like Ramji, after the Hindu god Ram. This is the only name he goes by, and does not tell anyone what his first name is.

Predictably, the students had not heard about the destruction of the 400-year-old Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, the subsequent nationwide riots in India, the orchestrated attempts of Hindu fundamentalist groups to build a temple to Ram on the site of the demolished mosque, and how these events of the last ten years had now led to yet more violence. As I was giving this background, a White student commented about his reading about the “holocaust” Muslims had carried out in the past. I felt stunned and speechless at this moment. I did not know how to respond. I asked him where he had heard about it. He said he had read about it in many places, including the Internet.

Since the rest of the class wasn’t joining in, either to confirm or to disagree, I decided not to go any further into it, except to say that it was a very complex matter, or some such thing. I did not want to have a one-on-one dialogue on a very sensitive and personally painful topic. A lot of revisionist accounts are currently being produced in India and abroad, both by historians and lay persons, that present Muslims as “invaders” and “colonizers,” and hold Muslims responsible for all the ills of modern-day Hinduism and Indian society. My decision not to delve into these controversies was influenced by a previous experience. Some years ago, I was tripped up when, while studying Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things, a South Asian student and I got caught up in a rather heated exchange about the justness of the caste system and the glory of the Aryans. I find that while most non-South Asian students know little or next to nothing
of the complexities of social relations in South Asia, some South Asian students come in with what I would call a "mythic" narrative of South Asian history and culture, which they may have absorbed from their parents or other sources of information. And, of course, there isn't only one such mythic account, since South Asian identities, both in South Asia and in Canada, are so heterogeneous. In a classroom situation, these perspectives present huge challenges to the teacher. And yet writers like Rohinton Mistry, Michael Ondaatje, Anita Rau Badami, and M.G. Vassanji are taught and written about in Canada with scant regard for things like South Asian history, culture, and politics.

Every year, some of my students tell me via their course evaluations that they felt my course shouldn't have been called a literature course, that it was more like a social science or a history or a religion course. Or that there was too much attention paid to racism. Some admonish me for not treating "texts as texts." While I cannot do much about the opinions expressed in course evaluations, I felt disturbed enough to answer a student who had decided to write her entire paper on how Shani Mootoo's novel, like any other literary text, focused on aesthetic matters rather than on issues such as racism and gender oppression. I have attached my response to this student here as an Appendix.

The arrogance and authority with which these students express this New Critical orthodoxy about literature in criticizing my reading and pedagogical practices indicate to me how powerful the hold of formalist criticism continues to be. The message these students are sending me is that my approach to literature is abnormal or incorrect, or worse, ignorant. I wonder which classrooms these students have passed through and what makes them so sure about how literature ought and ought not to be read.

When I come across such comments in my evaluations, I wonder whether it was these students who wrote in their essays and journals that Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* was not literature, that it didn't meet their "literary standards." What is the relationship, I wonder, between those evaluations that criticize me for "doing" social science and this response to Native Canadian writers in a student's journal: "The works of literature of First Nations writers often seem [sic] to me to be one-dimensional, as it is almost always about oppression, racism, and the results that follow."

Should I place any importance on the fact that the above response is that of a White, male student? The thoughts and emotions that go through
me when I read comments like these are at once contradictory and painful. I cannot articulate them adequately.

"You see such shocking pictures on TV, you don't even want to go there," a South Asian student had said, with a shudder, on the first day of the tutorial in my course on South Asian literature. She was responding to a CTV docudrama on arranged marriage, dowry, and bride-burning in India that had been aired that week. There are things happening in many parts of the world, shown live on my TV screen, that remind me of her comment and the unsaid volumes behind it. It seems to me that in my classroom speech, there are all kinds of silences and inhibitions that I, too, have refused to deal with. I have left too much unsaid. Like my student, I, too, don't even want to go there.

When I wrote those words a year ago, I did not know the following comment of Freud: "Whatever may happen, it is imperative to go there" (qtd. in Pitt 54). I truly had a sense of the uncanny when, recently, I came upon these words in Alice J. Pitt's *The Play of the Personal: Psychoanalytic Narratives of Feminist Education*. Quoting Shoshana Felman quoting Lacan, Pitt is talking about the researcher's need to bring painful memories to the surface and confront them head on: "Pedagogy uses the creative play between prior prohibitions and their suspension. When learning is conceptualized as a linear process based on rational judgment, too easily forgotten are the traumas of confronting, losing, and refinding psychic investments that accrue to the learner. However, also forgotten are the Ego's tendencies to lay down new prohibitions at the very site of these creative acts" (79).

I, then, must give heed to Freud's injunction: "Whatever may happen, it is imperative to go there." In this paper I have attempted that difficult task. The following words of Aruna Srivastava, in a paper entitled "Anti-Racism Inside and Outside the Classroom," strike a chord in me: "I am keenly aware that one of my strongest shortcomings is my desire to avoid conflict and confrontation in the classroom; like many, I have used the concept of safety as a kind of refuge (and in so doing, have been tyrannized by it)" (120). I have found solace in the words of teachers like John A. Williams who have written honestly about their moments of distress, avoidance, and loss of control: "I make no claim that I handled these incidents in an exemplary manner. I was unprepared for them, and my main reaction was probably embarrassment, my main motivation to avoid risk for myself" (5).

Going there, or revisiting those moments of crisis management,
certainly helps a little bit, although not entirely, when a new crisis erupts, either for the teacher or for the students. This year, when once again I heard about the liberated Western norms and oppressive South Asian traditions, I asked the students whether the “pro-life” assassins of doctors who performed abortions were also a part of the liberated Western tradition. I do believe I succeeded in creating some dissonance as evidenced by one student paper’s reference to my comment as she discussed the tendency to create binary oppositions.

I don’t think I have been able to do more than scratch the surface here. Not all experience can be narrativized. But what I have tried to articulate here is that pedagogy is not only about learning the right theory or methodology. Pedagogy is also about the colour and sex of the teacher’s body. And pedagogy is as often about pain as it is about joy and freedom. I am afraid that the questions I have tried to deal with here are not the ones that are discussed in the voluminous materials being written on radical pedagogies, postcolonial or otherwise. The race of the teacher is seldom problematized in these accounts, the assumption being that the teacher is a raceless, genderless, classless figure of authority, and not a raced, gendered, classed participant in the political economy of the classroom. Through this anecdotal and autobiographical exploration, I have tried to remind my readers that our classrooms are very much a microcosm of the world, “chaotic, confusing, and disordered, a place of pain, denial, anger, and anxiety” (Srivastava 121). For me, the classroom has never been, and perhaps never will be, a “safe space.” To pretend otherwise in a world where curricula for Afghanistan and Iraq are being produced on contract by the US Faculties of Education is to delude oneself.

I believe articulating our problems is the first step towards a more open, more honest pedagogy, a pedagogy that does not fear to utter discomfiting truths. And there is no other effective method of articulating them than telling our own stories. My paper, then, is a modest step in that direction, towards lessening that “intense privatization and isolation of the classroom,” as Heather Murray enjoins us to do.

NOTE

1. Dalit is a self-chosen identity of people formerly known as “untouchables.” The word Dalit comes from Marathi and means “ground down” or “crushed.”
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX

My Comments on X's Paper

Your essay grapples with some large issues, like how literature should be studied, but fails to apply your own criteria to the two texts you say have had a profound impact on you. I would now like to itemize my observations on the various problems in your essay:

(1) The most serious problem in your essay has to do with your inadequate attention to the basic tools of writing: grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling, structure of the argument, paragraphing and transitions between paragraphs. Battling with your syntax, spellings and punctuation on the one hand, and with the lack of a clear progression in your argument on the other, I found it rather difficult to understand what you were trying to say.

(2) I am distressed to hear that "racism is a preconceived notion." Racism is not a notion but a fact. You seem to suggest that the "class," i.e., I, "twisted" the texts to "conform to the thesis of the course, that racism in Canada exists." Racism, and colonialism, were the major determinants of the experience of the writers studied in this course. It was, therefore, imperative to pay attention to them. However, I fail to see how paying attention to these important historical and contemporary realities faced by the writers and the communities they come from "twisted" the texts. I am truly perturbed to learn that the "context of the course and the way the books were read" created "distractions and barriers to an understanding of the work itself" for you. I fail to understand why attention to racism, colonialism and other important issues such as sexism and heterosexism created "barriers" and "distractions" rather than enhanced your understanding of the texts. I wonder if your discomfort with historical realities, such as racism, prevents you from fully engaging with texts that come out of those realities.

(3) You make categorical statements about literature: "Literature should not be used to defend or uphold social politics." That seems to be a rather narrow and intolerant view of what literature is or should be. Writers as
ancient and canonical as Aristophanes, Shakespeare, Milton, Voltaire, Emile Zola and Yeats have written on social politics of their time, and it would be impossible to decipher their texts without paying attention to the “temporary social needs” they were writing about. When Faulkner in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech says, “Man will prevail,” he is making a social comment. Only some literature fits concepts such as “art for art’s sake” or “Poetry should not mean but be.” For the most part, these concepts are false. Indeed, the idea that a literary text is “a well wrought urn,” to be enjoyed, appreciated and admired for its own sake is a product of the 1950s and 1960s and reflects the assumptions and politics of that time. It has no pedigree.

(4) As I have already noted on your journal entries, your categorical statements assume that there is only one way of reading literature. In this paper too, you make this argument. In fact, there are many approaches to reading literature as any basic “Introduction to Literature” will enumerate. The postcolonial approach rejects this formalist methodology, opting for one that, without disregarding formal aspects, infuses them with historical, cultural, political contexts in its analysis of texts. Since the course was on Postcolonial writing, the theoretical and critical approach was also postcolonial. The theoretical essays read in the beginning of the course should have alerted you to the “thesis” of the course.

(5) You claim that you as a reader responded to the “beauty of the language, use of motif, metaphor, descriptions of characters and place.” However, your comments fail completely to demonstrate your ability to look for them in the texts of your choice. You got sidetracked from your topic when you went into meta issues such as what literature is and how it should be read. Instead of focusing on the writers’ “use of motif, metaphor, descriptions of characters and place,” you wasted precious space in dealing with things that were irrelevant to your topic. As a result, your essay does not indicate whether or not you can speak about motifs and metaphors etc. competently. There are many handbooks, written with the undergraduate student in mind, that give detailed instructions on how to write on above-mentioned topics that you feel are the core of literary appreciation. I recommend that you start with Raman Selden’s Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction.
Afterthought: As I reread my comments to the student today, I am reminded of my desperate desire to re-establish authority that I felt had been put in jeopardy by this student. I did that by using the language of scholarly authority to communicate with her, fully conscious of the contradictions of my position.

The following words of Patricia Monture-Angus help me cope with my feelings when I have to mark essays that trouble me, be it because of their tone or the ideas expressed in them:

The examination papers were unlike any I have ever seen before. Some were openly hostile. The hostility did not manifest itself so much in overt racist comments (such that I could show them to the Dean and be certain he would understand the problem). They were subtly hostile in the way in which the students used the law. The air of European superiority found in the early cases seeped off the pages of some of the examinations. The examinations were very difficult for me to mark. I had a physical reaction, a constant nausea, to the marking of those papers. I am still angry about the racism I was forced to inflict upon myself. I am still angry because there are no current mechanisms or structures within the university that would protect me from such hostility. (62)

Monture-Angus goes on to talk about the difficulty of dealing with what we call “sensitive issues” in a large class, the challenges to her authority as a racialized professor, and, finally, the course evaluations which said that she was “not objective and that the course was about political opinions and propaganda, not law” (62). It helps to know that the problems I face are not mine alone and have a deeper cause than my own individual competence or interpersonal skills.