Teaching What You're Not

Mayberry, Katherine

Published by NYU Press

Mayberry, Katherine. 
Teaching What You're Not: Identity Politics in Higher Education. 
NYU Press, 1996. 
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7683.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7683

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=169495
As we in women's studies struggle with the Insider/ Outsider concept in attempting to teach multicultural literature and theory, we can't help but notice that we are experiencing a pervasive postcolonial crisis of authority, a crisis felt most strongly perhaps by formerly hegemonic Western discourses. Yet the problems we face and the questions they raise are of global significance. We have witnessed in academe such a scramble to recognize and celebrate the other that reactionary attitudes have emerged in resistance. In addition, the Insider/ Outsider question has arisen: who in fact should teach multicultural literature and theory? Twenty years ago, I found nothing wrong with my teaching an entire course on African American literature, because there wasn't anyone else on our campus who might do it. Now, however, I wouldn't think of teaching such a course, even if there were no minority faculty available, and I'm astounded by my own arrogance in once thinking that I could. The scenario has changed: now there are well-trained African American faculty who represent their culture as Insiders, and who may resent the idea of an Outsider speaking for them.

Yet I continue to teach courses in the civilization and literature of India, the field for which I was trained, and, perhaps more germane to world feminism, I teach a course entitled Contemporary Women's Writing: Cross-Cultural Perspectives. The latter course includes not
only African American writing, but also writing by Native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Africans. The women’s studies program at my college recognizes the need to teach works and perspectives of women of color from our own culture as well as the postcolonial world; indeed, we have committed ourselves to that goal. Yet in the process of teaching those works, one begins to question the appropriateness of Outsiders speaking on behalf of Insiders. In essence, one is disturbed by some of the same questions James Clifford raises in relation to ethnographic authority: who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture? How do self and other clash and converse in encounters of ethnography, travel, modern interethnic relations? What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for the present range of oppositional viewpoints?

The first of these questions is of great relevance to women’s studies as an issue of pedagogy: who has the authority to speak for a group’s identity or authenticity? To those of us who have undertaken the mission of trying to teach one society to another, the question seems urgent. As Clifford observes, “‘cultural’ difference is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence. A whole structure of expectations about authenticity in culture and in art is thrown in doubt.”

What gives me, an Outsider, the right to teach a work of African American literature and claim to be teaching its essence? Can I take refuge in the fact that I have read a great deal of African American literature and have gained a sense of African American culture from my forays as an Outsider into the pages of an Insider’s novel? Or can I, in the manner of an ethnographer, claim the knowledge of a participant-observer because I have African American friends and am welcome in their homes?

The same questions, applied to my teaching of South Asian culture and literature, seem even more acute. In this area, I can claim the rigors of doctoral work, a dissertation, fieldwork in the Indian sub-
continent, numerous South Asian friends, repeated research trips to many parts of India, and knowledge of Indian languages. Indeed, I am more at home with Indians and certain parts of the subcontinent than I am in my own culture. Yet I am surrounded by articulate South Asian scholars who speak with a great deal more authority about their culture than I possibly could, even though they may know only a small corner of it. Worse, as I teach South Asian literature, I sometimes feel myself guilty of trying to interpret attitudes and experiences that are not mine and that perhaps I cannot represent authentically.

Trinh T. Minh-Ha writes of how the dominant culture has moved “from obnoxious exteriority to obtrusive interiority,” how our quest for

the so-called hidden values of a person or a culture, has given rise to a form of legitimized (but unacknowledged as such) voyeurism and subtle arrogance—namely, the pretense to see into or to own the others’ minds, whose knowledge these others cannot, supposedly, have themselves; and the need to define, hence confine, providing them thereby with a standard of self-evaluation on which they necessarily depend.4

These words lead me to raise new questions about what I am trying to do in the classroom, particularly when international students or Asian-American students are part of the dialogue. Does what I say about Indian culture have any validity as interpretation, and if my interpretation varies from that of a South Asian, am I in some way limiting the Insider’s sense of self?

Even in the field of women’s studies, where there ought naturally to have been a sense of sisterhood and shared purpose, there has been a belated recognition that not all women in our culture share the same experiences and that our agendas and our syllabi need to be more inclusive. Yet as my colleague (also white) and I taught an Introduction to Women’s Studies course, and deliberately paired every article about the dominant culture with another that dealt with women of color, our affluent, white students constantly complained in their
journals that they could not relate to many of the articles. The whole enterprise took on reality only when we brought into the classroom an African American woman, who talked about growing up black in Gettysburg and being discouraged by her high school guidance counselor from aspiring to college; and a Hispanic woman, who told of challenging her father and paying for her own high school education, in order to transcend the cultural expectations for women in her Mexican community. Clearly, the two white instructors could not speak with the same authority because, even though we might have known about these things, our knowledge was secondhand.

In teaching works by women of color, white women inevitably claim an objective similar to that of ethnographers and filmmakers: “to grasp the native’s point of view” and “to realize his/her vision of his/her world.” The injunction to do so, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha points out, lies at the center of every polemical discussion on “reality” in its relation to “beauty” and “truth.” Yet the question of representing the other has become fraught with issues of rhetoric and power, as postcolonial theory takes the issue to sophisticated levels of interpretation, and political correctness becomes a creed rather than the result of changed perception. Indeed, suggests Minh-Ha, allowing the other “an aura” has become a kind of game, for even when the other is being privileged, she is also reminded of the favor she enjoys in being permitted to speak her mind.

Homi Bhabha, in turn, seeks to shift the conversation “from identification of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the processes of subjectification made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse.” By focusing on the stereotypes Colonizers have typically used in describing the other, Bhabha recognizes that both “the recognition and disavowal of ‘difference’ is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction.” His observations raise new questions about the content of my syllabi. What am I teaching when I teach The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison or Bharati Mukherjee’s Wife? Am I teaching the other as the other per-
receives herself, or as the other filtered through an Anglo understanding of what the other might be? Do I yield to stereotypes in my attempt to represent the other? How do I explain what I do not fully understand myself, even though I recognize its existence?

Bhabha’s understanding of stereotypical discourse is complicated:

Stereotyping is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, overdetermination, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of “official” and fantasmatic knowledges to construct the positionalities and oppositionalities of racist discourse.9

For Bhabha, stereotypes, and indeed colonial discourse in general, is “a complex articulation of the tropes of fetishism . . . and the forms of narcissistic and aggressive identification available to the Imaginary.”10 He perceives stereotypical racial discourse as a four-term strategy linking the metaphoric (or masking) function of the fetish and the narcissistic object-choice on the one hand and the metonymic figuring of lack with the Imaginary on the other. Here, Bhabha addresses the Colonizer’s fascination with the other, his simultaneous need to denigrate and adore that which he perceives as weak and different.

Perhaps most useful in Bhabha’s analysis of the stereotype is the recognition that what it dramatizes is separation—“between races, cultures, histories, within histories—a separation between before and after that repeats obsessively the mythical moment of disjunction.”11 If separation is the essential message of the stereotype, then it must follow that separation is the notion to avoid. Does negating separation mean that I should be focusing on similarities rather than differences? If so, wherein lies the value in exploring the other? What am I asking my students to do when I ask them to stretch their notions of what is possible and what is beautiful? Wherein lies my fascination with the other? Is it a concern for the weak, which gives me a notion of power? Is it a delight in the exotic, which makes me something of a voyeur?
Is it a reveling in things imagined, which causes me aggressively to explore the boundaries of what is possible? Or is it the desire for an originality, so lacking in myself, that I must appropriate another’s?

Minh-Ha might say that in asking these questions I am opening a space for the other, yet “the space offered is not that of an object brought to visibility, but that of the very invisibility of the invisible within the visible … the space of an activity in which everything takes on a collective value in spite of skepticism.”12 I still do not see the Insider except as the other, even though I may attempt to teach her culture. And though I, as the Outsider, am more than happy to accord recognition to and celebrate the Insider, a new set of negativities and positivities emerges in questioning and renaming otherness and unnamning the Colonizer and the other.13 I am still the Outsider, still looking in, still trying to discern the nature of the other, still gazing at skin, language, habits of conversation, music, ways of relating that are different from my own. Yet, I have taken upon myself the mission of showing what I see to others who are younger, less experienced, more afraid. How can I avoid teaching them to gaze in the same way that I do? If my own fascination with other cultures is suspect, why should I hope that they too will come to identify with the other as I do?

As a way out of this predicament, I would like to propose that we reexamine four modes of authority claimed by ethnographers, with the understanding that what we do in the classroom is, by analogy, similar to what an ethnographer does in representing the other.14 When we teach literature written by persons from cultures other than our own, we attempt to convey the essence of those cultures based on words and narratives constructed by native speakers. Like ethnographers, we offer our students enhanced access to the worlds of the other. Although any reader might conceivably gain such access via the printed page, a teacher promises additional cultural knowledge, gained either by direct experience or by scholarly work, that will fa-
cilitate the student’s access. Presumably, teachers claim as well superior ability to make sense of the words and narratives constructed by the other. The ethnographer’s strategies, therefore, are useful to the teacher in the dual processes of access and representation.

The first such strategy is that of the participant-observer, already referred to, and perhaps best known as a technique for anthropological fieldwork. The second, interpretation, consists of the ethnographer’s attempt to analyze his data and present it in the realm of public discourse. The third strategy, the dialogical mode of authority, recognizes the fact that native control over what is observed and known by the fieldworker can be considerable. Last, the polyphonic strategy recognizes not only the views of the fieldworker and the effect of his gaze on the native subject, but also the creative activity of the reader. Although each has its limitations, these modes of authority offer strategies of representation that may be used in the classroom.

Clifford describes participant observation as “a continuous tacking between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of events: on the one hand grasping the sense of specific occurrences and gestures empathetically, on the other stepping back to situate these meanings in wider contexts.”

Those Euro-Americans who have lived abroad, attended a Martin Luther King celebration, celebrated a holiday or birthday with a Hispanic or Native American family, shared a room with someone of a different race, have experienced, however briefly, the role of participant-observer. “Experiential authority is based on a ‘feel’ for the foreign context, a kind of accumulated savvy and a sense of the style of a people or place.... Like ‘intuition,’ it is something that one does or does not have, and its invocation often smacks of mystification.” How does one draw on such experiences? An instructor’s anecdote, understood to be and presented as that of the Outsider/Insider, is often arresting and appreciated, and it serves to make a piece of information memorable. Relevant students’ experiences should be elicited to achieve the same effect whenever possible. Students must be
encouraged to recognize and seek participant experiences, even if they do not fully understand their role of observers until later.

Clifford goes on to suggest that one "resist the temptation to translate all meaningful experience into interpretation. If the two are reciprocally related, they are not identical." Indeed, the instructor simply telling of an experience with an acknowledgment that she has not fully understood what happened can be more effective in claiming authority than reams of interpretation aimed at understanding a common, meaningful world. The details of concrete experience suggest a sensitive contact with that world, as well as a rapport with its people. The flaw in the participant-observer mode of authority, however, is that it is, in the end, personal. It is "my experience" that is being related, and for everyone else, it lacks the concrete perception that has inscribed it indelibly in the mind of the participant.

Interpretation as a mode of authority involves looking at a culture as an assemblage of texts to be interpreted by a single thinker. In the classroom, we can often work with texts that have already become autonomous, available to the public domain. The interpretive process is thus separated from the text and from the fictive world generated by the text. Clifford notes that the ethnographer-interpreter may be compared with the literary interpreter, or better yet, "with the traditional critic, who sees the task at hand as locating the unruly meaning of a text in a single coherent intention." I rather like his use of the term unruly, for it conveys the notion of information that has a life of its own and that must be approached assertively, perhaps even "tamed," before it is ready for presentation in the classroom. The act of preparing to teach a new text is very much like that: one first reads it, notes the major ideas and themes, savors specific imagery, wrestles with disturbing elements, and attempts to organize them all into some sort of coherent perception that can be passed on to students.

The trick here, I think, is in inviting students to do the same, to deconstruct the text by focusing on disturbing elements, ones that don’t fit neatly into conventional explanations or previous ways of
seeing. It is sometimes difficult not to tell them, if one has already figured everything out, what they should see and understand. Interpretation is an art that can be taught, but it takes time, and it sometimes goes astray because students have not had the observer-participant experience discussed earlier. Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Storyteller*, for example, appears at first to be a randomly gathered mélange of stories, personal recollections, and poems. Yet certain themes must be teased from what is actually an intricate narrative chain, to illuminate Native American attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and cultural confrontation. The vulnerability of interpretation lies, of course, in the way it too is subject to the potentially flawed understanding and expressivity of the interpreter, or, in the case of a class, interpreters. An attempt at interpretation may dissolve into participant-observer anecdotes, or it may emerge with such abstraction as to fail in its intent to illuminate.

Perhaps more desirable is “a process of dialogue where interlocutors actively negotiate a shared vision of reality.” If one is lucky, she has multicultural students in the classroom to help show the way. An insensitive professor, however, may overdo the consultative process. Such students need space in which to disagree if they need to. One can also make use of recognized Insider interpretations, which, claiming their own authority, map the way for students and professors alike. Pulling in a significant critical observation at the right moment will often push the interpretive process in a productive direction. Being able to insert a point from a lecture by Gloria Naylor, that “women are circumscribed by words,” illuminates our discussion of *Bailey’s Cafe*. Finally, at the risk of concentrating the Outsider’s gaze into a high-powered laser beam, bringing into the classroom someone the students can interact with, listen to, and ask questions of is inevitably a successful way of at least demonstrating a linkage of authenticity. The fact that the professor knows and is able to produce such informants garners her some authority. However, the recipient of the gaze may well view this opportunity to tell her story as potentially
dangerous: "what is given in the context of power relations is likely to be taken back according to where the wind blows."  

Perhaps the most workable mode of authority, however, is the polyphonic one, exemplified by Bakhtin's analysis of the "polyphonic novel," which "represents speaking subjects in a field of multiple discourses." As Clifford observes, for Bakhtin the polyphonic novel is "a carnivalesque arena of diversity ... a utopian textual space where discursive complexity, the dialogical interplay of voices, can be accommodated." For the ethnographer, this strategy may amount to a sort of "plural authorship that accords collaborators not merely the status of independent enunciators but that of writers." Indeed, suggests Clifford, the creative activity of a reader, as enunciated by reader-response theory, may also contribute to the coherence of a text. Ultimately, there is always a possible variety of readings beyond the control of any particular authority. Being able to relinquish one's own sense of a work, however, is sometimes difficult, particularly when students insist on simplistic, Disneyesque, or overly specific religious and/or political readings.

Yet this model of the polyphonic novel is perhaps the most desirable mode of authority for the classroom of the nineties, for what Bakhtin values is precisely the resistance of certain novels to totality, their inability to be subsumed under a single coherent critical perception. By acknowledging a variety of voices and possible interpretations, one avoids the possibility of the Outsider's gaze falling painfully and stereotypically on the Insider. Although the possibility of stereotyping cannot be eliminated, particularly with students reading a text in various ways, the instructor as Outsider can always gently question whether a student's reading of the text falls into the realm of stereotype. Accordingly, I have had to defuse observations about Asian reticence in a discussion of Bone by Faye Myenne Ng. Such an approach, however, assumes an initial discussion of what is involved in a stereotype, and although Bhabha's discussion is difficult, it is illuminating.
In order to provoke a multivalent reading of a novel, the instructor must not ask the question, “What does this statement mean?” Rather, she must ask a sequence of questions: (1) “What possible meanings could this statement have?” (2) “Are any of these meanings more likely than others?” and finally (3) “Why?” Theory by and about women of color is just as likely to resist simple explanation and to lend itself to polyphonic interpretation, if one asks the right questions of it. Open-ended questions like, “What might have led her to say this?” or “What sort of experiences might lie behind such a statement?” will go a long way toward allowing the texts to speak for themselves in many tongues. Acknowledging the polyphonic voices in the classroom, as well as the text, is of course a key to any successful discussion in a women’s studies class. Such an approach makes possible the teaching, by Outsiders, of multicultural literature and theory in a manner acceptable, although perhaps not ideal, for students of varied ethnic backgrounds.

To conclude, I would like to cite three texts, used in teaching an introduction to women’s studies course, that elicited something like real understanding from my white, upper-middle-class students, and perhaps even empowered them to work at trading eyes with Insiders. Each addresses the Insider/Outsider predicament and models ways of traversing the slippery terrain of perceived difference. The first, used at the beginning of the course, became a touchstone for everything else that we read all semester: an article by Maria Lugones, entitled “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception” (1990). Two phrases in particular from this article were used by students repeatedly in journals and discussion: “world”-travelling and arrogant perception. By “world”-travelling, Lugones means that one can “travel” between the worlds that construct us and can inhabit more than one of these “worlds” at the very same time. The shift from being one person to being a different person is what she calls “travel.” “Arrogant perception,” on the other hand, is an attitude
that gets in the way of “world”-travelling, and in particular, inhibits the playfulness involved in it: “the agonistic traveller is a conqueror, an imperialist.” Lugones’s article spells out very clearly what an Outsider must do to participate in the culture of an Insider. “World”-travelling, or openness to reconstruction (which sometimes means being a fool), cancels the sense of separation that results in stereotyping. It requires a sense of adventure, but—also important—it’s fun.

A second article that seems to me quite extraordinary is “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,” by Patricia Hill Collins. In this work Collins notes that “values and ideas that Africanist scholars identify as being characteristically African American often bear remarkable resemblance to ideas claimed by feminist scholars as being characteristically female.” A generous act of revelation on the part of a woman of color, this essay is an attempt to open to the Outsider the epistemology of the Insider by calling attention to four ways of constructing knowledge (not surprisingly, devalued by academy and the patriarchal culture) that they have in common: (1) living as a black woman requires wisdom and “connected knowing”; and therefore, concrete experience is valued as a criterion of meaning; (2) African American women develop knowledge claims through dialogues with others in a community; the very act of speech involves affirmation of the speaker; (3) the ethic of caring validates the appropriateness of emotions in dialogue for both black women and women in general; “ideas cannot be divorced from the individuals who create and share them”; (4) the ethic of personal accountability, in which “all views expressed and actions taken are thought to derive from a central set of core beliefs that cannot be other than personal,” is shared by black culture and women in general. By revealing commonalities, Collins invites the Outsider in, bridges the gap between, and suggests that Insiders and Outsiders occupy the same space.

Finally, in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” Audre Lorde challenges women “to reach down into that
deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears." \(^{30}\)

Insisting that it is not the place of women of color to educate white women as to their existence, differences, and relative roles in joint survival, Lorde suggests that not to study the other is an evasion of responsibility. From these three articles, we must conclude that although difference is perceptible, it is also bridgeable. Lugones and Collins show us ways to tear down the walls between the Outsider and the Insider; Lorde tells us that we must.

Minh-Ha writes of how the dominant culture has moved from caring nothing about the internal lives and emotions of non-Anglo-Saxon peoples to caring about little else. Thus we seem obsessed sometimes by the need to uncover or somehow get at Insiders’ sense of self, “supposedly through the definitions they have of themselves.” \(^{31}\) For the Insider, submitting oneself to the Outsider’s gaze can be an exhausting prospect, particularly when the Outsider shows so little willingness to engage in the sort of “world”-travel that is constantly required of minorities in Western culture. And it may be that the Outsider can trade eyes with Insiders only in fragmentary moments, unless she dwells for an extended period within the other culture and experiences the distortion of her own gaze. Nevertheless, I am heartened by women of color such as Lugones, Collins, and Lorde, who encourage and exhort the Outsider to stop gazing and start interacting, to stop being self-conscious but not lose her sensitivity, to pay attention to what Insiders are saying about themselves, and above all, to engage in “loving perception.”

**NOTES**

2. Clifford, 8.
8. Bhabha, 169.
10. Bhabha, 164.
15. Clifford, 34.
17. Clifford, 40.
18. Clifford, 43.
19. Minh-Ha, 186.
20. Clifford, 46.
24. Lugones, 400.
31. Minh-Ha, 66.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


