Teaching What You're Not

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Now don’t get me wrong: I’ve got nothing against Caliban—at least not more than most people. And I’ve got absolutely nothing against classrooms—again, not more than most people. But I’m not crazy about the combination of Caliban and the classroom, especially when I’m cast in the role of Caliban. I sometimes think that a lot of us academics who are blessed with the “surplus visibility” of race or ethnicity are cast as Calibans in the classroom, lurching between student and blackboard. It seems that our hour has come round at last, that we, who may have been excluded in the past, are at last to take our rightful place in the halls of academe. But under what guise do we make our appearance there, and what is our presence taken to mean? I wonder whether we are here, not in the role of Prospero in charge of the books of magic, but still as Calibans, rough beasts slouching (maybe even shuffling) along in the ivied Bethlehems of higher education.

We are sometimes seen, it seems to me, as traveling icons of culture, both traditional (as long as we’re over there) and nontraditional (when we’re right here), unbearably ancient in our folk wisdom and childlike in our infantile need for the sophistication of the West. We are flesh and blood information retrieval systems, native informants who demonstrate and act out difference, often with an imperfectly concealed political agenda. We are the local and the regional opposed
to the universality of the West, nature to its culture, instinct to its intellect, body to its brain. We are, in fact, encased in the personal and visible facts of our visible selves, walking exemplars of ethnicity and race.

What we are not, however, is objective, impartial purveyors of truth, teachers of fact and method. We always teach, at some level, the personal but usually unspoken story of ourselves in the world. We teach with ourselves as our own most effective visual aids. The contemporary practice of choosing to insert personal, biographical details about the author into critical or theoretical articles deliberately sets out to situate and historicize authority, maybe even reveal the illusory nature of impartiality, objectivity, and authority itself. But the minority teacher does not necessarily have the choice of deliberately engaging the machinery of the personal in order to question authority. Authority has already been problematized by the fact of visible difference. The manifest personal antedates the decision to engage in the politics of the personal. Indeed, the minority teacher is already known, in personal terms: ethnicity, race, is, among other things, an already familiar genre of personality. It is a familiar if not always understood category of both analysis and interpretation.

The more elusive issue for the minority teacher is the establishment of authority, of objectivity, of impartiality—that is, of those attributes traditionally associated with the performance of teaching. What I hope to examine in this essay is that problem of the personal as it establishes or works against authority in the classroom for the teacher marked by race or ethnicity. What is the nature of authority in this particular case? What are its sources and limits? In what ways is it dependent on the personal? Can the genre of race be used to create a more supple form of authority in the classroom, perhaps by foregrounding ignorance, active or inactive, or perhaps through the strategies of performance?

The entanglement of the personal—the facts of race and ethnicity—with the professional—a teacher’s authority to speak with
credibility, and thereby to educate, to lead out—came home to me when I first began teaching, as a teaching assistant, at the start of my graduate school days. I taught freshman composition in the English department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, a predominantly white, upper-middle-class campus in southern California. I realized pretty quickly that my person in the classroom was a bit of a shocker for some students. On the first day of classes, I would deliberately wait until a few minutes into the class period to allow people time to locate a new classroom in a new school, then make my entrance, walk to the table at front and center of the room, and put down my books. It was interesting to have students approach me, and, speaking very loudly and slowly, inform me that that place was meant for the teacher. Correspondingly, during the next several days, a few students—not necessarily the same ones—would come up after class to remark on my amazingly good grasp of the language.

Most students were neither so officious nor so ingenuous. But events of this nature occurred sufficiently often to convince me, first, that I was probably sitting in the wrong place, and second, that it was admirable of me to speak English well, or, possibly, at all. By the time I was ready to leave UCSB, I was curious enough about this matter of race, authority, and the classroom to offer one class the choice of writing about prior experiences with minority teachers as one of several essay topics. And I was intrigued enough by what some students wrote that I saved several of these essays. (I don’t mean to imply that this material is in any way a scientific study, an objective, impartial, or even authoritative investigation. It’s just personal.) These students of course saw that one of the issues hidden in the essay topic was the question of prejudice. And, of course, that they chose to write on this topic for a teacher they perceived as a minority person influenced what they wrote. Given this context, it’s revealing to look at what incidents they chose to narrate, and what rhetorical strategies they employed.

Almost all the essays began with the claim that the author person-
ally had no prejudice; these students claimed to judge whether a
teacher was good or not on purely “objective” grounds. One student
wrote,

It was all perfectly normal. I walked into my third period class on the
first day of school when I was in seventh grade, and I found, sitting
behind the desk, a large black man in his mid forties. “So he’s my new
math teacher, eh?” I thought as I found my seat. “I wonder if he’s a
good teacher.” It did not even occur to me that he would not be as good
a teacher as a white man or woman.

Several thereupon proceeded to comment on how irritating they
found it when the ethnic instructor had such a strong accent that they
had difficulty understanding. I don’t want to take up this particular
debate here; rather, I would like to point out the slippage between the
references to foreign speakers of English in an essay on racial and
ethnic minorities, especially following hard on protestations of lack of
prejudice against black and Hispanic teachers.

Some chose thereafter to comment on me, despite the assignment
that they discuss minority teachers they had had prior to the current
class:

My first reaction upon you walking into class was, “How can that little
lady expect to teach a college course?” When you came in and gave a
hearty “Hi” and began talking, my fears were dissolved.

Another student wrote about an African American woman teacher he
very much disliked—okay, hated:

Although my hatred was composed of various elements (injustice, re-
bellion, frustration, anger, etc.), Mrs. [X]’s ethnicity definitely served to
strengthen and perpetuate my abhorrence. Because her racial heritage
had an ancient legacy of ethnic slurs and stereotypes, I was supplied
with a plethora of powerful, seemingly empirical justifications. In effect,
Mrs. [X]’s physical and emblematic ethnicity further reinforced and
rationalized my negative perception of her.

Immediately thereafter, the same student chose to describe me to me
in these terms:
My only other non-Caucasian teacher is my current English teacher. My first impression upon viewing her Indian ethnicity was a mixture of surprise and skepticism. I was surprised by the novelty of an Indian woman teaching English and was simultaneously skeptical of her proficiency. Despite my initially disdainful response, I was very pleasantly surprised by her competence. Her spoken English was flawless, eloquent, clear, forceful, and concise. I perceived her manner as authoritative but not domineering, poised without arrogance, lighthearted yet not giddy, and open-minded but not indecisive [a description that makes me feel like a decent, moderately priced Bordeaux: "Assertive, yet modest"]. Her literary discussions displayed an "impressive" range and depth of knowledge, commanded by a "very sharp" intellect.

The swollen ego engendered by this flattery, however, was quickly punctured by the next paragraph:

Clearly, in this instance the professor's ethnicity affected my perceptions in a positive manner. Because of racial typecasting and her professional uniqueness [which, of course, is no longer as true now as it was in 1987], I had unusually low expectations. Consequently, the more she established her competency and her affability, my esteem increased geometrically. The ability to speak correctly and articulately or to skillfully direct a literary discussion shouldn't be foreign to any English teacher, but because of my assumption of an ethnic handicap I was overly impressed by her abilities. When she exceeded my ethnic expectations, I then perceived her qualities more favorably than I would have for a Caucasian teacher.

The last of the student essays with which I'll burden you reaches some interesting conclusions that I've increasingly come to agree with. This student makes the point that the competence of minority teachers is directly related to the correlation between their race or ethnicity and the subject they teach: an African American woman who taught physical education ("Not only was this teacher good, but she was doing something we all knew she could do. Are black people not suppose [sic] to be more athletic than white?"); a "Mexican" teacher who taught Spanish III ("He, like my PE teacher was doing something that all of us, as students, knew he was capable of, teaching his language"). On the other hand, an African American man who taught
biology is judged in retrospect as not competent on the grounds of disorganization and inconsistency. At the time, however, this student writes,

We let ourselves accept this teacher as "good" even though he really was not. This is very unusual when I think of how we reacted when we had a "not so good" white teacher. This teacher would be criticized without mercy because, in my opinion, we expected more out of him. My Biology teacher was black and because of the stereotype of black people being dumb we just accepted his faults blindly.

The excerpts from these student essays obviously prove nothing. But for me, they are suggestive, if nothing more, in connecting the issues of race—as a category of the personal—and the taking or granting of pedagogical authority. While race or ethnicity alone may undermine classroom authority, it doesn’t end here. The more complex issue is contained in the last essay from which I quoted: the matching of race with subject, the disciplining and containing of ethnicity into its proper and personal field.

Admittedly, these excerpts were drawn from essays written some years ago, in a large state university, where I, like all the other freshman composition instructors, was identified in the schedule of classes in advance only as "staff," so that my appearance in the classroom affronted certain expectations. I now teach in quite a different setting, a small, liberal arts college in New England with a long history of socially progressive thought and ideals. I no longer teach freshman composition, nor do I teach pseudonymously as "staff." Instead, I teach postcolonial literature, which I refer to in more perverse moods as P.C. Lit. Because my university is so small, and because my subject and I exhibit a phenomenological fit, I do not experience the same kinds of issues with authority.

That does not mean, of course, that authority has ceased to be problematic. I have increasingly come to see that my authority, and that of other teachers who work within the differences of race or ethnicity, is granted within the confines of certain more or less clearly
defined boundaries. And the boundaries, though flexible, are drawn within the shadow lines of authenticity, the authentic and perceivable racial/ethnic self. “Authenticity,” as the ground of authority, creates at least two different genres of personality, two already available dramatic roles and dramatic narratives the ethnic teacher can perform. One role is that of Shakespeare’s Caliban (in *The Tempest*) as a kind of native informant, lurching about the island and showing Prospero its sweet and secret places, serving to provide data with which Prospero can then rule. Caliban’s claim to authority is based on natural claims—descent by blood from Sycorax. He does not have access to Prospero’s source of power, his books.

As a postcolonial person teaching postcolonial literature, my authority, too, is somewhat dependent on my bloodlines, my physical and visible affinity with my subject matter. My authority is somewhat dependent on my status as native informant, providing others with data that can then be theorized, so that I serve as the representative figure for my entire field of study. Since that field covers 85 percent of the world’s landmass, this sometimes seems a largish burden. In any case, it’s a representational responsibility that’s difficult to fulfill. Genetic authenticity is ultimately always on a sliding scale of greater and lesser degrees of raciality: a slippery scale of “more colored than thou.” The hierarchies of races and ethnicities in the United States cannot support the construction of genetic authority for very long. The role of native informant is also ultimately thankless to fulfill. In my discipline, real power and authority lie, not in the role of native informant, not with Caliban, but in theory, with Prospero.

At my current university, there is another narrative that has a prepared role for the racialized body: the narrative of resistance. Resistance, as a methodology for the examination of literatures produced by “others,” has the real and valuable function of focusing attention on what has been done by those others who have been disenfranchised or exploited by colonialism, institutional prejudice, and so on. Placing “others” center stage has salutary political and disciplinary
effects in the study of literature. But the hunt for resistance on the part of the subaltern figure can, and in some ways has already, become a formulaic approach that provides too easy, too gratifying solutions to long-enduring social, historical, political, and economic inequities that show little signs of suddenly becoming “okay.” According to the narrative, however, resistance is discovered everywhere, in every margin and periphery. Show me an other, a subaltern, a marginalized figure; I’ll show you resistance. Resistance is so prevalent that it makes one wonder that anyone has ever been oppressed anywhere, at any time.

The narrative of resistance has a ready-made role for Caliban: the authentic, organic intellectual—read revolutionary—seeking to overthrow Prospero’s rule, the postcolonial, the guerrilla fighter waging battle in the belly of the beast, the revolutionary in the arms of academe. The politicization of the role is clear, and brings Caliban closer, if not close enough, to the sources of power, Prospero’s books. But Caliban’s resistance is no real threat because he is not allowed access to those sources of power. Similarly, the postcolonial playing the role of the academic revolutionary is safely contained by that recognizable role of resistance rather than made threatening by it. Far from granting access to the centers of power, where substantive changes could be made to the university, the role of the revolutionary can instead serve the purposes of power by seeming to answer oppression with an easily recognized resistance, and, moreover, one provided by the institution itself. The revolutionary can in fact become the university’s very best alibi, while demonstrating that institution’s good intentions and virtue. To take the presence of the racialized other on university campuses for a sign of substantive change within society as a whole can create an overly simplistic narrative: a reassuring psychobabble that, while things may be bad all over outside, inside the world of academia, at least, “I’m okay, you’re okay.” In the end, to accept the narrative of resistance at face value is to confuse the real and important—and political—work that is the proper work of
academia with a misdirected call to popular, "grassroots" action to replace it. The unspoken subtext here is certainly an anti-intellectualism, more certainly a distrust of the native or subaltern intellectual; most certainly a sense that the "authentic" postcolonial is the grassroots peasant, living oppression, not the indigenous or metropolitan intellectual, theorizing postcoloniality. Caliban's authenticity is balanced by another, more culture-based (by which I mean practice-based) notion of authenticity: the figure of hybridity, of authenticity established not in reference to purity of traditions, culture, and race, but on notions of impurity and contamination. Shakespeare's Tempest does not offer a figure to encompass this identity, but Aime Cesaire's work A Tempest, his revisioning of Shakespeare's play from the viewpoint of the colonized, does. Cesaire's Ariel is not Shakespeare's figure of radical difference, a figure who finally succeeds in escaping the power struggle between Caliban and Prospero. Cesaire's Ariel is a mulatto, the house slave against Caliban's field slave, the native intellectual, having an identity crisis, as Cesaire's Prospero derisively gibes, deeply implicated in the very structures that enslave him, seeking to mediate and achieve synthesis between exploiter and exploited. Within the classroom, this Ariel role becomes that of the mediating figure of the indigenous elite. The Western-trained postcolonial academic, because of his or her cultural familiarity with and ease in the West combined with manifest racial or ethnic difference, is often perceived as the ideal bridge between Western academia and non-Western subject matter. The rewards can be great. At its furthest extreme—think of postcolonial academic superstars—Ariel's lightness is transformed into transcontinental flight: the hybrid cosmopolite, jetsetting everywhere, at home everywhere, belonging nowhere, alighting in the classroom momentarily to magic up a literary repast, perhaps to lead the class on a whirlwind literary tour of the global, yes, postmodern, literary bazaar.

The last of the potential roles lying in wait for the minority teacher in the classroom is, of course, Prospero himself. The minority teacher
can cast himself or herself as the traditional authoritarian personality, the hard-driving, brilliant, no-nonsense professional for whom the personal has nothing to do with anything. This role plays visual and epistemological games, and ultimately, it, too, establishes its own authority in reference to a standard of authenticity. Denying the visual evidence of race or ethnicity, this role insists on the authenticity of guild membership—card-carrying status in the union of academic professionals, usually demonstrated, at least in humanistic fields at the current time, by the use of complex poststructuralist concepts, language, and theory to analyze postcolonial, minority subjects. Caliban can speak with the master’s voice, perhaps even be transformed into Prospero.

This cataloguing of some of the various roles available to the minority teacher is of course both schematic and oversimplified. One major missing subject is that part of the personal that cannot be made shapely or safe for pedagogical purposes. Caliban says that Prospero has taught him to speak and his profit on’t is that he has learned how to curse. I’m not suggesting that minority teachers need to have their mouths washed out with soap. I am suggesting, however, that marginality, precisely because it is not an inborn, natural category but something learned, teaches its own discourse, its own curses.² Built into difference is real resistance to authority, to Prospero’s voice. Minority discourse is characterized more by subversion, interrogation, critique than by construction. We are all gadflies to some extent; the best of us carry lethal infection. But teaching, at least traditional ideas of the role of the teacher in the literary studies classroom, insists that criticism be constructive, that analysis lead to the new, improved model. I suggest that minority discourse does not necessarily lead to the construction of a newer model. Yet the pressure to do so is exerted in the classroom by students, and certainly within the world of scholarship by peers and tenure reviewers. The pressure to provide intellectual guides, schema, methods of analysis that will lead to more and more accurate
interpretations has already produced analytical blueprints such as blues ideology, signifying, or the idea of resistance.\(^3\)

The harder issue for me is the problem of anger, the issue of rage named in the idea of cursing. Anger, it seems to me, is antithetical to the dialogue of teaching; yet anger is a real and present fact of the personal. And if minority teachers can be figured as Calibans, Ariels, impersonators of Prospero, at what level does anger move against the children of Prospero and his heirs? This leads me to the last of the points I'd like to make. In fact, as should be no surprise, the personal, while it seems to be the ground on which the minority teacher constructs his or her myths of authority, is not the commodity in which one trades. Rather, the personal remains a matter, if not for repression, much in need of shaping according to some genre or other. One does not present the personal, one represents it. For the minority teacher especially, I think, who has historically been allowed into academia in the guise of the native informant, the use of the personal poses problems. To refuse to engage the personal—to silence it—is one way of resisting the commodification of the multicultural body.

However, the personal in this country is irrepresible; it cannot be silenced. It is inevitably part of the equipment with which one teaches, willingly or not. Perhaps the best way to use that equipment is to be aware of the preexisting roles for ethnicity, and then to playfully, inventively, eclectically subvert them. An authority derived from the ground of authenticity is ultimately self-defeating, but a self-aware, deliberate performance of race or ethnicity can provide a more powerful, more challenging authority. By “performance of race,” I mean that students should be encouraged to perceive how much “race” is made by social expectations and constructions, rather than having those expectations fulfilled. It can mean a deliberate evocation of cultural stereotypes about race or ethnicity, in order to puncture them, joke about them, insist on them. Performance of race means to make race visible, and thereby to undermine its authority in the classroom; si-
multaneously to question its meaningfulness and to insist on its importance in shaping our understanding of the world. This kind of performance is really guerrilla theater, which keeps the audience off balance, and makes them learn by shaking up their assumptions about the nature of the world. If we minority teachers are sometimes cast as Calibans, we also know our hour has yet to come round. If we are not yet slouching toward Bethlehem, yet we may shuffle off to Buffalo, in a neo-blackface minstrel show.

Performance and guerrilla theater are both strategies, and they are, I think, symptomatic. They are strategies for seizing control of the machinery of representation. They are also symptoms of powerlessness—as well as symptoms of the limited kinds of power the minority teacher does have. The demand for the personal is made on the minority teacher in many ways: from the personal levels of teaching, to teaching strategies, to subject matter. The personal is present as the ground for pedagogical authority, and certainly in the power dynamics as well as the erotics of the classroom.

Most important of all, the demand for the personal moves the marketplace into the classroom. The personal is something we produce as part of the package we sell. Academia is neither Bethlehem nor Jerusalem, neither the birthplace of the new Golden Age nor the heavenly city, although part of its mythology is the legend of past virtue that has been lost and the utopia that is to come. But it is useful to remind ourselves that it is also an industry. If academia is neither heaven nor hell, it is preeminently the place where we academics make our living by selling our services, our knowledge, and our symbolic presence. For the minority academic, all three are shaped by the personal, private and public, performed and lived.

NOTES

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