Teaching What You're Not

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Disciplines and Their Discomforts: The Challenges of Study and Service Abroad

GERARD ACHING

By the time Forrest Gump received thirteen Academy Award nominations, a discernible distinction had arisen between a "popular" appreciation for the movie's charm, humor, and pathos and a critique that decried the film's oversimplification and parody of social unrest in the sixties. What facilitated this discrepancy was an innovative series of special effects that superimposed Tom Hanks's character on news footage some thirty years old and allowed him to assume a protagonism in which his strategic insertions into American history produced an ambivalent mix of leftist nostalgia and right-wing ridicule. These superimpositions gave the film its controversial edge. Yet, as he moved almost effortlessly against the grain of these temporal and political disjunctures as the simpleton/hero who succeeded by carrying out every order to a T and keeping all his promises, I could not help but wonder about Forrest Gump's notion of his own identity and politics. Gump claimed that he was not a bright man, but in the context of the film's condensed interpretation of U.S. history as well as in the current hostility toward Washington, his briefly stated self-affirmation was brilliant because of its implicit criticism of today's political climate. I was struck by the logic and resonances of Forrest
Gump’s retort to anyone who questioned his intelligence: “Stupid is as stupid does!”

Gump’s adage does not affirm or deny his intelligence. Possessing no evident subject or object, his statement is neither self-referential nor accusatory. As in the best of maxims, his words comfortably bridge the particular and the universal. At the same time, it is this claim to universality that Gump employs to avoid answering confrontational questions about his intelligence. This strategy permits him to forgo the articulation of an identity or, at least, to defer naming himself until his actions can name him. In short, what I find most provocative about Forrest Gump’s retort is not only the way it creates a mutually constitutive relationship between identity and credibility but the fact that the contexts of his response cause the semantic and ideological weight of the affirmation to fall on the side of action and, by implication, activity and activism: one is stupid only insofar as one acts stupidly. At the end of the day, actions speak louder than words. And if, as Gump would have it, identity is commensurate with actions, then strategies become the means by which one consciously creates that identity. In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau argues that “[a] strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as proper (propre) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, ‘clientèles,’ ‘targets,’ or ‘objects’ of research)” (xix). De Certeau’s definition posits strategies as diversely situated competitive practices. Gump, however, Undercuts any such notion of a differentiated “exterior” by shifting nonchalantly between the “conservative” and “liberal” camps of the cultural politics of the 1960s. In this light, Gump’s apparent ingenuousness is not just a humorous take on recent U.S. history, but an ingeniously ambivalent strategy that reconfigures, for instance, the media’s coverage of the desegregation of education in the South.

As Gump assumes the role of the simpleton who deftly weaves his protagonism into particular historical episodes, his fatuity appears to function as a disclaimer against politicization. Gump, we are led to
believe, is such a simpleton that he could not possibly possess a political consciousness. But because his interventions recontextualize these episodes in overtly contradictory ways, his foolishness frames, at first glance, a series of narrative attempts to revisit recent moments in American history when physical confrontations at home revealed and hardened the lines that separated political camps. The strategic ambivalence of Gump's ingenuousness is especially evident, however, when he finds himself in the middle of the confrontation between Governor Wallace and the National Guard that President Kennedy had mobilized to escort a group of black students through the doors of the University of Alabama. In this episode, Gump shuttles between the polarized stances that inform the conflict by (mis)taking the racist slur "coon" (nigger) to mean "raccoon" on the one hand and running after one of the black students to give her the book that she dropped, on the other. His intervention, therefore, is not merely evocative or nostalgic for those who adhere(d) to their respective sides of this confrontation, but also highly provocative in light of today's debates on affirmative action and equal opportunity programs. At the close of this scene, Gump's double-edged strategy loses its duplicity when he follows the black students into the building. Already enrolled in that university, Gump simply walks through the door to enter an institution where his enigmatic presence as the "local idiot" who makes it to college never becomes an issue. The conflation of his stupidity and admissibility ends up mocking the endeavors of the black students who risked their lives to secure an education.

Identity and credibility are also considered mutually constitutive in academia. Hence, I would like to bring my reflections above to bear on the perception that identity issues are politicizing today's scholarship, or, more precisely, that ethnic, sexual, and cultural persuasions have become markers against which credibility in certain academic disciplines is being measured. The supposition here is that who we are determines what and, in particular, how well we do. My goal is to illustrate that this identity-based definition of credibility can
be misleading and essentialist in a debilitating and counterproductive manner for scholarship and that there are meaningful albeit uncomfortable ways to go through and beyond the territorial stand-offs that this kind of definition produces. The first section of this essay theorizes “credibility” as an area and range of competitive practices or strategies in which the polite or unspoken refusal to take a side in debates within one’s own field amounts to a tangible political stance. The second supplements the first by helping to assuage the discomforts of those who are interested in entering unfamiliar areas of scholarship and by showing how professors and students can evaluate and profit from these discomforts in new learning environments. Undoubtedly, the professor’s syllabus facilitates modes and degrees of access to knowledge. But the students’ preparation, motivation, and uncertainties also provide them with their own agencies. In this second section, I describe a study and service program that seven students and I helped launch in (Puerto) Limón, Costa Rica, in the summer of 1994. Since we were all new to the area, contentions about our status and responsibilities in the community as well as our own troubled self-appraisals emerged and coincided in illuminating ways. I am interested in interrogating what these internal and external pressures reveal about the negotiated relations between identity and credibility.

In this essay, I employ the terms “identity” and “credibility” conjointly in order to elucidate the politics of facilitating or forestalling access to knowledge. I do so to imagine a scholarly activism that would not fall into the trap of classifying “new” scholarship and academic disciplines according to essentialist criteria. It is necessary to explode the widely disseminated myth that the minority scholar, for example, not only is a purveyor of difference but also represents its most competent spokesperson. Such a purview fails to account for the fact that not all minority scholars are interested in investigating “minority issues.” This kind of institutional discrimination is harmful because it exerts pressures on these scholars to “produce” gendered,
racialized, or orientalized discourses that are locked into embattled positions within academia. This strategic segregation directly impinges on the minority scholar’s right to academic freedom. For Aijaz Ahmad, the task of the “practitioner of academic radicalism” today is equally formidable because he or she occupies “so beleaguered a space that any critical engagement with the limitations of one’s own intellectual and political formation becomes difficult” (65, emphasis added). My interest in coupling “identity” and “credibility” is also motivated by a desire to steer clear of the trap at the other end of the essentialist paradigm: the tendency on the part of some poststructuralists to valorize both sides of an argument for the sake of a supposedly objective lucidity. Herein lies the ingenious activism that Gump practiced. This coupling, therefore, is my way of insisting that providing ourselves and our students with credibility or access to knowledge occurs in contexts that are always already politicized and that our interventions there are determined by the limitations that we and/or others place on our engagements.

However, before I examine the play between identity politics and the creation of professional and institutional borders for “new” epistemologies, I should explain why it is necessary to recognize that the identity/credibility “problem” is to a certain degree a perceived one. It is useful to keep the word “perception” in mind for two reasons. The first is historical and methodological: there still exists in some quarters of academia the false assumption that ethnicity, for example, is the sole interest of ethnic and area studies and that this concept played a less political role in “traditional” European and American literatures and criticism. “Ethnicity” is now more consciously invoked to help illuminate literary texts. But it does not require a great stretch of the imagination to see that in the nineteenth century, for instance, certain conceptualizations of whiteness constituted the unmarked subjectivity in this country’s Manifest Destiny, or in Ernest Renan’s “What is a Nation?” (a speech he delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882), and in literatures also informed by such notions of commu-
nity, nationhood, and citizenship. Such an assessment, of course, is mostly available through critical hindsight. Nevertheless, that it is possible to argue today that ethnicity is not the domain of colored people only attests to the success and challenges of a powerful combination of traditional exegeses and deconstructive practices that literary critics in gender, ethnic, and postcolonial studies had begun exploring widely in the late 1980s. Their research on the formation of “peripheral” identities consistently interrogated the structures that produce marginalization, and it is this engagement with the “centers” of power that offers fresh (but not necessarily new) opportunities for scholarship. The second reason for noting the “perception” that identity issues are politicizing scholarship is rhetorical and thus open to further debate. To a large extent, the accusation is a distorted way of acknowledging that real changes are taking place in the academic interests of those students who want to keep abreast of the globalization of cultures and who, consequently, request and sometimes demand the inclusion of nontraditional epistemologies in the university’s course offerings. The distortion often occurs when these demands get refracted through various levels of administrative funding and hiring practices.

**Credentials and Credibility**

My interest in identity/credibility distinctions emerges not from the imposition of essentialisms by either side of the debate but from the unspoken or sometimes polite, professional refusal to cross disciplinary lines. Examining how the idea of theory as conversation sometimes passes itself off as Bakhtinian dialogism, Ahmad associates such “politeness, accommodation and clubby gentlemanliness” with “a peculiarly American kind of pluralism” (70). How often have we uttered or heard, for instance, “I don’t do feminism” or, with respect to other current critical approaches, “that is not my field”? There is no denying that our academic freedom gives us the right to proffer
such statements. Understandably, it is also difficult to keep abreast of new developments in every related field of inquiry. But the ready claim to ignorance and to a lack of credibility in "politically" approaches to one's own field becomes suspicious when it is not accompanied by further commentary, unfriendly or otherwise. After all, is it not precisely these encounters with the limits of our knowledge that turn us into perpetual students? If I am overstating my case, it is because I want to suggest that there lies an area of silent discomfort between the "I do this" and the "I don't do that" that sometimes gets conveniently confused with respectful equanimity. In an intriguing comparison between political correctness and critical disinterest, Larry Scanlon points out that Matthew Arnold defined criticism (in the latter's own words) as a "disinterested endeavor to learn" and that for the Victorian critic "to be disinterested was to resist the assumptions of his culture's dominant ideology. It was less a matter of being apolitical than of being oppositional in exactly the way postmodern theory understands the term" (13). According to these definitions of criticism—ones Scanlon values because of their attention to process and continuous reassessment—it makes a great deal of sense to encourage the transgression of methodological and disciplinary boundaries.

As it stands, however, my assertion is idealistic. It does not take into consideration that credibility is not only expertise in an academic field—that is, not only the approaches to knowledge, for example, that de Certeau's "expert" and "philosopher" practice (6-7)—but also an economy in which knowledge gets quantified as intellectual capital and professional investments. In this scenario, identity politics in academia are not just limited to debates about essentialisms and their relationship to epistemologies but include an intense competition to create and promote reputations. Kimberly W. Benston argues that "[t]he self of reputation commodifies identity, readying it for exchange in the public commerce of social power. But it is successfully launched into circulation only when etherealized as the 'something'
of a nonreciprocal private self-enrichment” (439). If it is certain that identities can be commodified in this manner, then the inverse—disenfranchisement or the loss of that “‘something’ of a nonreciprocal private self-enrichment”—must also play a defining role in this economy of access to knowledge and reputation. Within the notion of credibility, in other words, we should take note of the diverse ways we work toward keeping our credentials current and distinguish those methods from our attitudes toward unfamiliar areas of inquiry. Through this awareness of the political economy of professional access to knowledge, it would be easier to see how ethnicity, culture, gender, and sexuality are not “new” epistemologies to be delegated spaces of their own but innovative and, yes, politicized engagements with “traditional” disciplines.

Let us briefly look at one way engagement through methodological or disciplinary “transgressions” has enriched scholarship. We have access to radical approaches in which modernity, to name a well-researched and highly competitive area of scholarly work, may be defined in a revolutionary manner. Think, for instance, of the rich challenge to European historiography, self-definitions, and cultural ideologies that C. L. R. James presented in 1938 when he wrote in *The Black Jacobins* about the French and Haitian Revolutions, indicating that “[t]he blacks were taking their part in the destruction of European feudalism begun by the French Revolution, and liberty and equality, the slogans of the revolution, meant far more to them than to any Frenchman” (198). Similarly, there are profound implications for the study of American literature when Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* turns the table to investigate “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” (11) and claims authoritatively, “My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served” (90). And, finally, imagine the possibilities for scholarship when Paul Gilroy argues that slavery was “*internal* to the structure of western civilisation” (9) and posits the
Black Atlantic as a “counterculture of modernity.” These approaches all engage with ongoing debates on modernity and utilize discourses on oppression not to separate identities but to elucidate how historically they have been inextricably bound in various forms and degrees of social antagonism. This antagonism has not disappeared. And in academia, as I have already mentioned, it gets played out in combinations of academic and professional strategies and decision-making processes.

Yet even if we all admit that this antagonism persists, we must still find a way to address and critique one another constructively. Toward this goal, I agree with Satya Mohanty when he makes the following point in a special issue of *PMLA* on colonialism and the postcolonial condition. His words apply equally well to our focus on identity and credibility:

For we can learn from others only if we take them seriously enough to imagine situations in which they may in fact be wrong about some things in the ways that we can specify and understand. The version of multiculturalism that demands that we suspend judgment on purely a priori grounds offers at best a weak pluralist scenario of noninterference and peaceful coexistence that is based on the abstract notion that everything about the other culture is (equally) valuable. Given the lack of understanding or knowledge of the other, however, the ascription of value (and of equality among cultures) is either meaningless or patronizing. Genuine respect depends on a judgment based on understanding, arrived at through difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations.

(113)

What Mohanty calls “difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations” will occupy my attention in the rest of this essay. For it is precisely through these negotiations that the essentialist identity/credibility formulation may be resemantcized not to establish difference as an autonomous category of knowledge but to comprehend this relationship between identity and competence as self-knowledge that is a priori and asymmetrically constituted by difference.

The personal and intellectual discomforts I describe in the follow-
ing section illustrate some of the ways self-knowledge is constantly being pressured either to respect, assimilate, or ignore difference. In Costa Rica, my students were responsible for some language instruction, and I observed them as they contended with the difficulties of comprehending their own place and function in this program. Their efforts are instructive for two reasons. The first is empirical: because my students expressed themselves orally and in writing in varying degrees of candor, their discomforts provide ample proof of “difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations.” The second is pedagogical. It is crucial to emphasize that what we communicate to our students is not simply an enumeration and assembly of “facts” but the means by which they in turn can enjoy access to privileged cultural literacies. Knowledge is, after all, what knowledge does.

The Discomforts of Outsiders

The fight between my idea of the glamour of the travel-writer and the rawness of my nerves as a colonial traveling among colonials made for difficult writing.

—V. S. Naipaul, The Enigma of Arrival

In Imperial Eyes, Mary Louise Pratt employs the term “contact zones” to refer to “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4). Besides taking her cue from Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban ethnologist who invented the term “transculturation” in order to avoid the imperialist overtones of the word “acculturation” and to imagine and account for the competing subjectivities of colonials, Pratt also develops an analysis that incorporates the kinds of deconstructive practices I pointed out earlier in the works of James, Morrison, and Gilroy.¹ In
Limón, Costa Rica, my students and I were not only observers but participants in ongoing cultural changes. And because we had entered unfamiliar intellectual territory—our “contact zone”—accompanied in varying degrees by what Naipaul in the epigraph above calls the “rawness” of nerves that “made for difficult writing,” I propose for further interrogation the terms “areas or zones of disciplinary discomfort.” I employ them to describe our activities in Limón as well as to address at a wider, symbolic level some of the contingencies and consequences of entering unfamiliar fields of critical inquiry.

After successful team efforts by members of the university administration and faculty to launch the course, seven students and I undertook and completed the first Summer Study and Service in Costa Rica Program. The six-credit course incorporates interdisciplinary research and education abroad (four credits) and service to the community (two credits). The 1994 summer catalogue described the course as follows:

This eight-week course combines interdisciplinary study of the history and culture of the Afro-Caribbean and Latin American town of Limón in Costa Rica, with on-site interaction with the populace through community service placement at St. Mark’s School (kindergarten through ninth grade), where students will assist teachers with English language instruction. Knowledge of Spanish is helpful but not necessary.

The presence of the English-speaking community, whose members immigrated around the turn of the century to Central America from former British West Indian colonies, encourages an interrogation and investigation of several issues, among them: the history and status of African diaspora populations in the region and in transnational culture; the continuities and differences between immigration to Costa Rica, and to the United States; the role of the artist as historian/critic/commentator; the transactions between British imperial policies and North American economic expansion into the region; the status of English as both the lingua franca of global economics and as Limón’s “native tongue”; and the implications of the student’s own volunteerism.

This program is unique at Rutgers in combining study abroad with volunteer service. Participants will work closely with Limón’s English-
speaking community at their invitation. In return for the exceptional responsibility that students undertake, they will experience a deeper and more informative contact with this community than is typical of study-abroad programs.

The program is not housed in any one academic department, so that syllabi will vary according to the field, interests, and methodology of the professor in charge. I work in a language and literature department, and my syllabus focused on three interrelated areas of research: (1) the reading and discussion of texts on colonial Caribbean experiences (three times a week)—particularly ones in which protagonists describe their coming of age under colonialism; (2) a weekly discussion about the pedagogical practices of English instruction at St. Mark’s; and (3) comparative analyses between the students’ personal experiences of education in the United States and what they observed as teacher’s aides in their classrooms. Our texts included *West Indian Folktales*, edited by P. Sherlock; *Shakespeare’s Tempest*; Alejo Carpentier, *The Kingdom of This World*; George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin*; Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*; and *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam*, an anthology of short stories by Caribbean women writers edited by Carmen Esteves and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert. Because they were also responsible for keeping journals, the anthropological/autobiographical facet of our approach provided students with the greatest interdisciplinary flexibility and, consequently, presented me with the most unknowns, since the approach to what they observed around them would ultimately be theirs. With respect to the final paper, my only formal stipulation was that the students find ways to incorporate all three aspects of the course into their writing. They were to present me with their proposals for consultation before returning to the United States, where they would complete the final draft.

The service aspect of the course is consistent with other programs the university has developed with its surrounding communities. This time, though, we would be extending the notion of community beyond national borders. Before leaving for Costa Rica, I had intended
to develop and evaluate a theory and practice of citizenship that would emphasize the interconnectedness of our activities as individuals, students, academics, and members of national and international communities. Toward delineating a feasible scope of empirical activities for citizenship participation in this course, I juxtaposed for analysis—and for reasons that will become evident later—U.S. proposals to extend its economy across national borders through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and local efforts by communities here and abroad to contribute to the self-sufficiency and vitality of their neighborhoods and regions. Current affairs, in my opinion, oblige us to explore, propose, and critique more comprehensive and at the same time accessible notions of citizenship that would link a constructive critique of these transnational initiatives with academic preparation for a “less bordered” world. However, even though my theorizing and their ethical underpinnings seemed worthwhile, they proved more suited to a comprehensive curriculum debate than to an eight-week summer program. The reality and limits of what we could accomplish in the course soon whittled the loftiness of my ideals to manageable expectations and to a critical evaluation of the benefits of “partial success,” especially since we were only the first contingent of what we hoped would be an annual program with long-term goals. I will return to this issue later.

Before discussing the nature and contexts of my students’ discomforts, and for the sake of my argument that this disquietude is not unique to a single identity but concomitant with the vulnerabilities we risk exposing when we “acquire” knowledge of another culture, I should briefly describe the diversity of the students who took the course. Of the seven students, two were male. Six were undergraduates majoring in pre-med, English/Africana studies, sociology, political science, history/Puerto Rican and Hispanic Caribbean studies, and English respectively; the graduate student was pursuing a master’s in labor relations. All were U.S. citizens or residents, and their national/cultural backgrounds included Afro-Panamanian, Bermudan, Puerto
Rican/Dominican, Irish-American, Indo-Trinidadian, Jewish-American, and Honduran/Salvadoran. Their socioeconomic backgrounds varied from working- to upper-middle-class.

Although some of us felt at home in the diversity of this West Indian/Central American environment, all the students expressed nervousness and insecurities about the responsibilities they would be assuming as teacher’s aides. Some of these anxieties stemmed from their lack of teaching experience, a condition that time would in part remedy. But it was the cultural implications of their volunteerism that brought equally complex issues into focus. The course’s service component meant that they would have to not only observe but also participate in the socialization of St. Mark’s students to become responsible Costa Rican citizens. As if this situation were not riddled enough with culturally specific internal contradictions (such as some St. Mark’s students’ disproportionate allegiances to both a West Indian heritage and the Costa Rican state), the Rutgers students also had to face the prospect of positioning themselves in an environment they did not fully comprehend even though it physically surrounded them. As complicated and dissimilar as my students’ private negotiations about these matters might have been—for as they taught they also had reason to reflect on their own upbringing and education in the United States and elsewhere—there was a general consensus concerning the need to investigate further an important area of disciplinary discomfort. Although I managed to anticipate this area in my syllabus, I was surprised by the unexpected, even dramatic ways opinions about language acquisition became a source of contention among us (my students and myself), among members of the school’s faculty, and also on occasion between both groups. Meanwhile, it was the analysis of a certain passage from Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* in our own class that brought these issues to the fore, obliging us to evaluate our place in St. Mark’s curriculum.

The students and I discovered that teaching English at St. Mark’s was no inconsequential affair. The most immediate and resolvable
difficulties were logistical. By the beginning of our second week, however, the students began voicing their doubts about the purposes and usefulness of their presence in the school and community. As I observed them, their uncertainties paralleled my gradual awareness that the assimilation of cultural knowledge is not reducible to absolute qualifiers like success or failure and that epistemologies are also knowable by and at the limits of their claims. My students were beginning to realize that most of their students would not be proficient in English by the time they were ready to return to the United States. These feelings of inadequacy were further compounded by the ways the curiosity and affection of the St. Mark’s student body had touched us. My students could not help but wonder what good they would accomplish in eight weeks.

Even though my students were trying to ascertain the consequences of their presence and activities, it did not occur to them then that it was their very presence with all its intellectual discomforts that would make a difference in the long run. To a large extent, their frustrations exposed a restricted conceptualization of language acquisition and proficiency in which language functioned as a portable, transferable tool. While they readily acknowledged that a language was inseparable from the culture that breathed life into it, they were beginning to perceive the extent to which resistance to St. Mark’s instruction of English as a foreign language to meet Costa Rica’s educational requirements also informed their students’ outlook.³ (This issue also held great significance for those Rutgers students who had studied and/or undergone formal and informal ESL training in the United States.) This resistance has historical roots in Limón, where most of Costa Rica’s English is spoken, and maintains its vibrancy in the attitudes that some St. Mark’s students expressed toward their English curriculum. According to Trevor Purcell’s detailed study of the region and to some of the St. Mark’s teachers who remember, West Indians in Limón province adamantly refused to educate their children in Costa Rican schools for several generations, preferring instead to teach them in
their own denominational schools. Today, the official language of instruction is Spanish, and most of the student body speaks Spanish better and more frequently than English. Compounding this situation is the fact that the new generations show signs of impatience with the older generation’s preoccupation that the loss of English also means the loss of a West Indian heritage. In the midst of these generational shifts, our presence as a diverse group of English-speakers from the United States was truly enigmatic. Our limited credibility—for I was the only one formally trained in language instruction—was not in question. It was our presence and the attitude toward English in and outside the school’s classrooms that we communicated directly and indirectly to St. Mark’s students that made our intervention worthwhile.

The assertion that our presence was beneficial might sound inexcusably “political,” but the position of English in Limón province and in the rest of Costa Rica was already politicized when we arrived. In order to appreciate this context and how we entered it, we must delve further into the history of English in Limón. In the 1870s, because of the incorporation of British West Indian blacks in British and U.S. commercial ventures such as railway construction and the establishment of United Fruit Company in Central America, the most recent English-speaking populations took root on Costa Rica’s Atlantic coast. Trevor Purcell reports that a combination of high unemployment in the British West Indies and “cultural and nationalistic ties with their colonizer” made the option to migrate desirable and that “[a]ccording to the account of some first-generation migrants, American labor recruiters operating in Jamaica at the time spoke from church pulpits, explaining to prospective workers that if they went to work for the United Fruit Company they would be serving Her Majesty’s cause” (29). Costa Ricans worked on the highland portion of the railway from San José to the Atlantic coast, but as working conditions grew worse and casualties increased, mostly due to disease and the difficult terrain, the government withdrew its own laborers, and American
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contractors brought in workers from nearby British colonies. The advantage of West Indian laborers for American contractors was that they spoke English, and it was this preference for English-speaking employees and the linguistic and cultural politics that informed it that divided West Indians and Hispanics in Costa Rica, even when the latter began their strike against United Fruit in 1934. Marcus Garvey, who founded one of the still-active branches of the Universal Negro Improvement Association in Limón, and his pursuit of the rights of West Indian laborers separate from the province’s Hispanic workers contributed to a “wedge against class alliance” (37). In any case, because these contractors valued West Indian workers over their Hispanic counterparts, a division between the two groups developed and to some extent can still be perceived in the mutual suspicions and cultural politics that exist in Costa Rica today.

The North American Free Trade Agreement helps define the place of English in our transnational modernity. Because Costa Rica plans to enter the trading bloc, fluency in English has become a matter of economic competitiveness once again. This situation and the fact that the training of English teachers and curriculum development are being centralized in the capital, two and a half hours away by road, affect the pressures placed on language acquisition and proficiency at St. Mark’s and other schools in Limón province at various levels. Costa Rica is the stablest and one of the most well-off countries in Latin America. Its disbanded military, free market policies, environmental conservation, and ecotourism have created the long-standing friendship and presence of American business executives, tourists, researchers, and retirees that the country now enjoys. Of all the countries in Central America, Costa Rica is best poised to enter the free trade agreement. At one level, our presence in Limón did not differ from the host of researchers and visitors to whom the community had opened itself in the past. That we were a diverse group of English speakers from the United States added a complexity to the presence of mostly white tourists who help “to retard the encroachment of
Spanish while simultaneously slowing the sagging prestige of English” (Purcell 114). Because “[w]hite is a legitimizing color” (114) in the history and cultural politics of English in the region, our multiracial appearance for some of the school’s students must have been puzzling, but no more puzzling than the already complicated perception of English-speakers in the region. Purcell reports that a British woman teaching English in Limón found that children usually spoke to her in Spanish and that one four-year-old liked her because—and the child said this in Spanish—“although she is white, she is really Black for she speaks English” (120). At another level, we were not typical visitors. We would be preparing the school’s students in tangible ways to compete in the marketplace; we would be helping them gain access to certain kinds of knowledge.

Consciously facilitating their students’ access to knowledge became my students’ concern. This issue surfaced obliquely in one of our readings. When we were discussing Lamming’s novel about a group of adolescent friends growing up under British colonialism in the West Indies, we came across a curious reference to language as a “passport.” The narrator-protagonist uses the word to try to account for a dangerous alienation in which the language skills of British colonial subjects gave them access to a realm of social privileges in which they still could not express their desires. (One of my students had a similar experience with ESL education in the United States and wrote about it.) The novel’s narrator asserted that

[l]anguage was a kind of passport. You could go where you like if you had a clean record. You could say what you like if you know how to say it. It didn’t matter whether you felt everything you said. You had language, good, big words to make up for what you didn’t feel. And if you were really educated, and you could command the language like a captain on a ship, if you could make the language do what you wanted it to do, say what you wanted it to say, then you didn’t have to feel at all. You could do away with feeling. That’s why everybody wanted to be educated. You didn’t have to feel. You learnt this and you learnt that, and you knew a Jack for a Jack and an Ace for an Ace. You were alright.
Nothing would ever go pop, pop, pop in your head. You had language to safeguard you. (154)

This “pop, pop, pop” refers to the manner in which certain characters in the novel suddenly became overwhelmed by their inability to express and fulfill personal desires. In any case, our discussion focused on the nature of the “passport” we were helping to provide for St. Mark’s students. This question inspired my students to tackle in their papers subjects including the politics of teaching “standard,” North American English in Limón at the same time that it was necessary to acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of the Limonense-Jamaican English; the intricacies of gearing students at St. Mark’s to become Costa Rican citizens when Costa Rica, as it prepares itself for participation in NAFTA, is making demands on all its young nationals to attain fluency in English; and a few comparative and frequently moving analyses of the cultural contexts in which they and their students at St. Mark’s were disciplined in the United States and Limón respectively. By the end of our stay, it had become obvious that we had entered a situation in which a linguistic and cultural passport was still in the process of being prepared. We feared that we could not determine nor minimize the degree of alienation the children’s passport would contain; that is, the extent to which the English curriculum ignored the gap between their West Indian heritage and Costa Rica’s educational plans. This dilemma, one that has as much to do with a need to find a practical, pedagogical solution as with the Costa Rican government’s policy on English programs in Limón, intensified our discomfort, because we realized that we had arrived at the limits of our usefulness and service to the community. We had seen that some St. Mark’s students were more acquainted with English and tended to be more fluent in it than others. For the most part, this “imbalance” could be attributed not to ancestry, grade level, or any such categorization of identity, but to the degree to which their parents and grandparents encouraged them to speak English at home. Some students, therefore, required English as a foreign language and others needed it
to be taught as a second language. This situation cannot be resolved unless St. Mark’s also begins to make autonomous decisions about its own English curriculum. Despite our good intentions and differences of opinion about them, these decisions were not and could not be ours to make.

One final observation. Every St. Mark’s student is responsible for a booklet that contains such things as the school’s guidelines on comportment, civic virtues, and respect for the environment. It also has sections for keeping track of grades and attendance and blank pages specially designated for a continuous communication flow between parents and teachers on any subject pertaining to the student’s progress. Imagine our surprise when we found out that the booklet was not only a condition for classroom admissibility but was commonly called the student’s “pasaporte”!

Conclusion

My students’ efforts and disquietudes represent contextualized negotiations between how they perceived themselves and what they proposed to accomplish in our program. These negotiations took place in two areas of disciplinary discomfort that we should distinguish in order to appreciate the modes and means of access to knowledge available to those who are interested in actively contributing to current debates about scholarship. The first deals with real or empirical limitations. Analogous to professors whose work constitutes only a fraction of the intellectual production in their fields, my students acted within structures over which they could not exert control. They participated in activities whether or not they fully agreed with St. Mark’s pedagogical practices, Costa Rica’s education policies, and NAFTA’s implicit linguistic requirements for admission to the regional trading bloc. Faced with these overwhelming complexities, it was no surprise that they doubted the goals and efficacy of their volunteerism. But this inability to visualize the whole should not ham-
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per their and our interest in critiquing institutional and other forms of official knowledge. Our presence as English-speakers from the United States affected the nature of our work even before we began teaching at St. Mark’s. Critical pedagogical practices do not take place in political vacuums. Rather, they provide fresh opportunities for “difficult epistemic and ethical negotiations.”

The second area of disciplinary discomfort proved more challenging. The students found that their aspirations and good will were not sufficient to eliminate or even assuage their doubts, anxieties, and hesitations. Some of them assumed that their U.S. citizenship or residence with all its stereotypical privileges hindered their effectiveness as teacher’s aides. Others felt that being more experienced or accomplished teachers might help them cope better with their culture shock—that is, they expected that their competence would provide them with the means by which they could mitigate their outsidedness. Both sets of assumptions posit authority in individual modulations of the identity/credibility relationship that we have been examining in this essay. However, when my students came to the troubling realization from our discussions of Lamming’s novel that expertise in a language could also be used as a strategy not to clarify but to obfuscate cultural locations, they began to interrogate more productively the nature and consequences of their role in equipping their students with particular cultural “passports.”

The most satisfying experience for me was to witness how my students attempted to meet the challenges of their environment and to make use of their experiences of family life, American education systems, and American citizenship training in order to pose questions and possible solutions concerning their students’ development and future. In this scenario, the varying degrees of success that my students enjoyed in our program emerged from the gradual acknowledgment of the limitations placed on their endeavors. Moreover, unlike Forrest Gump and his facile poststructuralist activism, my students exhibited their gumption, if you permit me this pun, when
they began to imagine and appreciate the frontiers of their own self-understanding.

NOTES

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1. See Fernando Ortiz, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (Havana: Jesús Montero, 1940), 137-42.

2. Originally, nine students had enrolled in the course. I suspect that the two who dropped the course in the first week did so because of some of the physical discomforts and culture shock that we all experienced.

3. Language is a complex matter in Limón. Trevor Purcell reports that there are three main languages used in Limón province today: Spanish and a continuum extending from standard English to Limón Creole in which most speakers occupied a restricted area of competence. At the same time, because of U.S. tourism and culture industries, North American English is also entering the parlance of the young. See Trevor Purcell, *Banana Fallout: Class, Color, and Culture among West Indians in Costa Rica* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 106-7. The way these languages were spoken was also determined by generation, education, and race (Purcell 111).

4. In 1871, a contract was signed between the Costa Rican government and Henry Meiggs, a North American, to build the railway linking the Meseta Central and the Atlantic coast. Meiggs’s nephew, Minor C. Keith, later took over the contract and became one of the founders of the United Fruit Company and its representative in Costa Rica (Purcell 25).

BIBLIOGRAPHY


