Journal of Feminist Scholarship

Fall 2014

Teaching Postcolonial Literature in an Elite University: An Edinburgh Lecturer's Perspective

Michelle Keown
University of Edinburgh

Recommended Citation

Teaching Postcolonial Literature in an Elite University: An Edinburgh Lecturer's Perspective

Michelle Keown, University of Edinburgh

Abstract: This reflective essay explores some of the pedagogical challenges I have faced in teaching postcolonial literature and theory at the University of Edinburgh. There are particular social dynamics at work at Edinburgh that make engaging with intersectionality, particularly in the context of colonialism and racism, a rather complex endeavor. Edinburgh is a Russell Group university, and our undergraduate constituency is overwhelmingly white, middle class and British, with a high proportion of students coming from British public-school backgrounds. Many of these students approach postcolonial writing with well-meaning liberal intentions, but often adopt what Graham Huggan (2001) would term an exoticizing perspective on cultures that are entirely unfamiliar to them. The tiny proportion of students from ethnic-minority backgrounds who study within the department, on the other hand, can feel profoundly alienated due to what Les Back (2004) terms the "sheer weight of whiteness" at Edinburgh. However, I have found that by adopting critical pedagogical models from Paulo Freire, Sara Ahmed and others, it has been possible to foster an active, dialogical and transformative learning environment that has allowed students from these diverse backgrounds to extend their epistemological parameters and feel empowered to challenge dominant ideologies within and outside the university.

In exploring the relationship between education, intersectionality and social change, I wanted to share some aspects of my experience teaching colonial and postcolonial literature and theory at the University of Edinburgh. There are particular social dynamics at work at Edinburgh that make engaging with intersectionality, particularly in the context of colonialism and racism, a rather complex and potentially problematic pedagogical endeavor. Edinburgh is a Russell Group university, and English literature is a subject often taken by students from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, given that it is not perceived as "vocational" but rather more purely "academic," preparing students for high-level thinking and writing. Partly as a consequence of these dynamics, our undergraduate constituency is overwhelmingly white, middle class and British, with a high proportion of students coming from British public-school backgrounds. (We also have increasing numbers of American and continental European students coming through our undergraduate program, but again, they are almost exclusively from white middle-class backgrounds.)

As a New Zealander born and brought up in a former British settler colony, I occupy a somewhat ambivalent position within the elitist world of Russell Group academia, as my accent—often mistaken as Australian, and therefore potentially associated with a republicanist political agenda—sets me apart from virtually all my students, as well as most other white academics working within the British higher education

sector. When I deliver lectures on colonial and postcolonial literature to our undergraduates, I am conscious that I risk raising the hackles of my audience when I discuss the British role in the exploitation of colonized peoples, given that I am likely to be perceived as maintaining a certain critical distance from (and potentially a position of moral superiority regarding) British imperialism, even though I am the descendant of British settlers embedded within that system (my mother's ancestors traveled to Aotearoa/New Zealand on one of the first British emigrant ships in the nineteenth century). However, while my nationality sets me apart from most of my Edinburgh students and colleagues, nevertheless as a white Westerner I am still a product of the networks of white privilege that undergird the British higher education system, and I think it is important to bear this in mind when teaching and researching (post)colonial writing.

I want to reflect in more detail on my small-group teaching, given that this is the forum in which I engage more dialogically with students and invite them to express their own views on course texts and the sociopolitical contexts from which they have emerged. I am anxious to avoid characterizing my students in monolithic terms, but it is worth making a few observations about some general trends I have observed across the ten years I have been teaching at this institution. As I have pointed out, our undergraduates are overwhelmingly white and British, whereas at postgraduate level our students are predominantly non-British, with many coming from former British colonies; this creates a very different dynamic within my (post)colonial literature classes at that level, as a number of the postgraduate students have actually grown up within the cultural contexts explored in the fiction and poetry we examine. With that in view, I have to be careful not to posit these students as "native informants" (to borrow a collocation from ethnography that has been extensively interrogated by postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak), but their presence often leads to some richly textured discussion, given their ability to comment on some of the cultural nuances that I or other students might misinterpret or overlook (Spivak 1999, 6).

Amongst my white, predominantly British undergraduates, on the other hand, other factors are at work. I have found it necessary to draw students' attention to the dangers of assuming that postcolonial creative writing (that is, writing that has come out of the experience of colonialism and is often but not always produced after political independence has been achieved) offers an ethnographic "window" onto the cultures referenced in these texts. At the beginning of semester, I often ask students why they have chosen to take a course on postcolonial writing, and a significant number of them say that they want to "learn more about other cultures," which bespeaks well-meaning, liberal sentiments, but also the highly problematic assumption that one can gain knowledge of a culture by reading fictional or poetic mediations of "reality." Some students reveal that they have chosen the course because they want to visit a particular country in the near future and wish to learn "more about it" by studying its literature, which suggests that they view the course at least in part as a form of intellectual or cultural tourism. In this context, I find Graham Huggan's book *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) instructive. Huggan analyzes the ways in which "postcolonial" writing is packaged, marketed and interpreted among students, academics and lay consumers, arguing that the compilation of postcolonial literary series (such as Heinemann's lists of "African Writers" and "Caribbean Writers") and the concentration of academic scholarship around certain putatively paradigmatic (post)colonial contexts (such as Africa, South Asia, the Caribbean and the Middle East) have involved processes of selection that have resulted in the formation of new or alternative canons and the emergence of "celebrity" writers and critics (such as Chinua Achebe, Salman Rushdie and Edward Said). Such processes obscure the wider diversity of material actually in print and are often motivated by preconceptions about what international (largely, Western) readers will find most engaging. Drawing on the work of Stephen Foster, Huggan argues that a process of exoticization takes place in the circulation and consumption of "postcolonial"

texts; he describes the exotic as a means of "domesticating the foreign," so that the consumer recognizes and apprehends otherness but also attempts to render it familiar within his or her own interpretive codes (2001, 13; see also Foster 1982).

Huggan's arguments are significant given the ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds of the vast majority of my students, who can often unconsciously adopt a Eurocentric position that means they are "othering" and bracketing off the cultures they are exploring rather than engaging in the more politicized, dialogical form of learning advocated, for example, by Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* ([1968] 2000). But what is enabling for me, when thinking about the institutional constraints under which British academics are operating—including having to produce course descriptions with "learning outcomes" redolent of what Freire calls the "banking concept" of education, in which students passively "receive" information from the lecturer—is that there is still a space at the university for a more active, dialogical and transformative learning experience (Freire 2008). Students might come to a postcolonial writing course with an exoticizing perspective on postcolonial literatures and cultures, but by the end of the course, having introduced them to Marxist theory and adaptations thereof by postcolonial feminists and political activists like Spivak and Frantz Fanon, I have often observed students starting to change their worldview. Some of my former students have gone on to work at rape crisis centers or refugee centers, or to take Master's degrees in cognate subject areas such as Gender and Development, demonstrating that this transformative process, from learning to activism, does take place (though I would add the caveat that becoming involved with Western "development" projects can of course operate as a form of neoimperialism, depending on the objectives of the agency involved). But in observing such transformations I think it is very important to be aware of the risk of ethnocentrism that is posed when I "teach" postcolonialism as a white Westerner embedded within a system of white privilege: Shaunga Tagore rightly warns against white feminists who imagine themselves as "the godsend intellectual paving the revolution" that will putatively transform the lives of those from oppressed and minority cultural backgrounds, when in fact those few minority students who make it into elite academic institutions can feel profoundly alienated by white scholars who (however unconsciously) immerse themselves in a solipsistic, "ivory tower" model of academia that is divorced from ongoing struggles against racism, sexism and other forms of oppression in the material world outside the university (Tagore 2011). The risk of ethnocentric bias becomes more pronounced in classroom situations where all students are white, and I have been grateful for the rare occasions upon which students from other ethnic backgrounds have enrolled on my courses.

During the decade I have been teaching undergraduates at Edinburgh, in seminars and tutorials I have worked with three black students and around a dozen students from other ethnic minority backgrounds—a tiny proportion of the hundreds of students I have encountered at this institution. Nirmal Puwar and Heidi Mirza have analyzed the ways in which those few students from ethnic minority backgrounds who make it into elite academic institutions (like Edinburgh) can suffer feelings of alienation, of being a "space invader" or "unnatural occupant" of this discursive and institutional space (Puwar 2004; Mirza 2006). Of my three black students (all of whom were female and from middle-class backgrounds), one started off in first year as a very lively, articulate and enthusiastic fresher, but when I saw her again in fourth year (having been on maternity and sabbatical leave in the interim), she was withdrawn in class, revealed she was suffering from various health problems, and was incredibly anxious about the quality of her work. Many of our fourth years experience performance anxiety (given that it is the final year of their degree), but I really felt this student was suffering acutely from some of the ontological anguish that Puwar and Mirza identify. However, in writing about her, I am aware of the risk of projecting my own potentially erroneous assumptions onto this

student, given that she was in such a high state of anxiety at the time that she did not feel able to open up a conversation about the specific reasons for her visibly intense discomfort. (Spivak [1999], drawing *inter alia* on Marxist theory, has written eloquently of the pitfalls associated with intellectuals presuming to "represent"—as in "speak for"—marginalized subjects or groups.)

Relatedly, a second black student I worked with at Edinburgh—and one who did express her feelings spontaneously on a number of occasions when we spoke in private—suffered from what appeared to be a distressingly overdeveloped "imposter" syndrome, a structure of feeling which, as Luis Aguiar observes, frequently "disarms" black and ethnic minority students in academia (Aguiar 2001, 189). This student would say "I don't write well" or "When I'm in class, I feel I don't say the right things"—and again, although she didn't explicitly attribute these feelings to what Les Back terms the "sheer weight of whiteness" at Edinburgh, there were signs that her anxieties were at least in part the product of the cultures of exclusion that operate within UK elite academic institutions (Back 2004; see also Mirza 2006). Because this student was so open about her insecurities, we were able to establish a dialogue that gave her more confidence in her work, and she went on to complete a PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Education) and is now teaching literature at a high school within the UK. Her e-mails to me since leaving Edinburgh suggest that she has embraced a vibrantly dialogical form of teaching: not only is she sharing the literature and ideas from her Edinburgh seminars with her students, but she also sent me recently a link to an online interview with Toni Morrison that she thought would be helpful for me to use with my own current students (aptly, the interview engages with the same questions of Eurocentrism I am exploring in this essay; see The AntiIntellect 2012).

A similar dynamic developed with a South Asian student I taught recently. She had chosen my postcolonial writing course partly as a consequence of her involvement in wider social movements (she belonged to various international student and social activist organizations within Edinburgh), and when we were talking about Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* in the context of the caste system, untouchability and violence against women in India, this student enriched the discussion by drawing our attention to TED conference recordings and other online resources focused on these kinds of issues.[1] Some students in the class did not respond well to this collaborative, dialogical, more flexible approach to learning, indicating on their course questionnaires that they wanted me, as course organizer, to take a more dominant role in directing discussion. However, I am a firm believer in the judicious employment of what Maria do Mar Pereira terms "didactic discomfort": an experience of "intellectual and/or emotional discomfort felt by students, which is triggered directly or indirectly by the material covered and/or methods deployed in a course, and is perceived by teachers (and often also by the students themselves) as an experience that can enable or generate learning" (2012, 129). Pereira analyzes this phenomenon with specific reference to feminist teaching, but the collocation is equally relevant to the teaching of material exploring cultures and values that are often unfamiliar to students. I particularly remember a session on Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o's novel *The River Between* (1965), which explored female genital mutilation, as an example of this kind of didactic discomfort. The students engaged in a heated debate about the ethics and politics of this practice and whether it was possible to explore its cultural significance in the novel without reference to "Western" or international condemnation of the practice as a violation of women's basic human rights. Many students present found the discussion uncomfortable but also productive, in that they were able to draw upon relevant criticism by postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who cautions against the (often unconscious) preconceptions of many Western theorists who view "Third World women as a homogeneous, undifferentiated group leading truncated lives,

victimized by the combined weight of their traditions, cultures and beliefs, and 'our' (Eurocentric) history" (Mohanty 2003, 192; see also Mohanty 1994).

This is a methodological trap of which I have had to remain acutely aware in my teaching: It is all too easy to posit "postcolonial women's writing" (and indeed, postcolonial writing more generally) within an agonistic framework involving various forms of "writing back" to an oppressive "center," whether that be patriarchy or the colonizing culture (or a combination of both), without paying due attention to the diversity of contexts, styles and genres within "postcolonial" writing that ranges beyond the ambit of the colonial dialectic. I also need to guard against such epistemic violence within my research, which focuses primarily on indigenous and postcolonial Pacific writing. Samoan writer Sia Figiel offers a spirited critique of this form of academic imperialism in her poem "What They've Been Asking… (So Far)…," which records various ways in which well-meaning but misguided Western literary critics have zeroed in on those aspects of her work that chime with their preconceptions about the "third world woman" as perpetual "victim": "Are you a feminist? / Are you oppressed? / Suppressed? / Repressed? (…) Is there violence against women and children in Samoa? / In the Pacific?" (1998, 14–15). Figiel also observes the ways in which critics often automatically posit "postcolonial" writers as necessarily politicized representatives of their communities (by asking, "Should writers be responsible to the communities they're from?"); this is a variation on Fredric Jameson's infamous claim that "Third World literature" invariably functions as "national allegory," expressing a collective sensibility that has putatively not yet evolved into the atomized individualism of "First World" writing of the twentieth century and beyond (Jameson 1986).

Yet Shaunga Tagore reminds us that writers from minority backgrounds *are* often called upon to serve their communities, and this can make it even more difficult for them to pursue mainstream standards of academic success. This differential became starkly evident to me when I attended a symposium on indigenous cultures and literatures in New Zealand a few years back, where I delivered a paper that came out of work I had undertaken for a book on Pacific literature for Oxford University Press. At the same symposium, a female scholar of Pacific Island descent spoke eloquently and movingly of her struggle to maintain the research output required of her by her university, given the expectations and demands of her own community, for which she undertook outreach work (such as school visits) and contributed to publications that would not necessarily be considered prestigious within mainstream academia. I became acutely aware that my securing of the OUP book contract was at least in part due to my access to systems of white privilege, and that no matter how careful I had been to consult indigenous writers and scholars in researching the book, in developing my research career I was (however indirectly or inadvertently) contributing to the "burnout" that Tagore has observed among ethnic minority scholars within academia.

While discouraged by this discovery, I remain committed to teaching and researching postcolonial writing as responsibly as I can, and I have found that a crucial method by which to attenuate the risk of epistemic violence is to challenge what Sara Ahmed terms academia's "default setting," in which a white male European intellectual tradition is privileged and reproduced in teaching and research "unless we consciously aim for it not to be reproduced" (Ahmed 2013). Much of the criticism and theory I use on my postcolonial writing course is produced by indigenous scholars who explicitly critique and countervail Eurocentric pedagogy and methodology. *Decolonizing Methodologies* ([1999] 2012), by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith, is a particularly good example of this kind of indigenous scholarship: Smith explores the imbrication of knowledge and research in imperial ideologies and colonial enterprises, and posits indigenous interpretive frameworks as a means by which to bring indigenous ontologies and epistemologies to the foreground of academia. The work of postcolonial feminists such as Mohanty, Spivak and Alice Walker (who coined the

term "womanism," a black-centered feminism that countervails the Eurocentrism Mohanty identifies in much white feminist scholarship) has similarly given rise to some lively seminar room debates about the relationship between literature and politics (Walker 1983). For example, I have discussed with my students the ways in which Arundhati Roy's political activism, as well as her fiction, can be considered in terms of what Spivak calls "working for the subaltern": in other words, engaging with and intervening in material struggles to overcome gendered, racist and other forms of oppression in "real world" situations beyond the realm of writing and other forms of discursive representation (Spivak 1996).

One of the most memorable examples of critical pedagogy in action that I have observed in my teaching career involved a South Asian student who described the liberating experience of reading Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness," a chapter from his book *Black Skin, White Masks* where he describes the way in which black people are "overdetermined from without" by whites due to their visible racial "difference" (1967, 115–16). This process can lead to self-objectification on the part of black people who, living within white-dominated societies, often internalize the ethnocentric and racist attitudes of the dominant culture. The South Asian student in my class found that reading Fanon gave her a means by which to articulate the sense of displacement she had felt as someone who, although not black, had been repeatedly "otherized" because of her visible ethnic difference from white students. In her case, reading postcolonial theory helped her articulate an ontological condition of which she had been only semiconscious, no doubt in part as a result of the "default settings" that had marked much of her university education up to that point.

I want to conclude by revisiting some of the main arguments I have presented in this essay with reference to Stephanie Spoto's contribution to this issue ("Teaching against Hierarchies: An Anarchist Approach"). Like Spoto (as well as Freire and other proponents of critical pedagogy), I believe that our positions as educators are central to social struggles against inequality, and that one of the ways in which we can further this agenda is not just to make our own views and positionality explicit in challenging students' "default settings" (in other words, engaging in a form of radical education), but also to embrace the notion of transformative education in which students are liberated from "receiving" knowledge from a putatively superior intellectual—the "teacher"—and instead can engage in more horizontal and actively participatory practices. As I have pointed out, some of my most rewarding teaching experiences have taken place when students have brought their own experiences and involvements to seminar discussions, sharing links to TED talks and other contemporary media emerging from activist networks, and subsequently going on to engage in their own forms of activism outside the university, or undertaking higher degrees in (for example) gender and development in order to make an intervention within the context of international relations. I like to think that although international development organizations can risk perpetuating imperialist ideologies or privileging Western values over indigenous epistemologies, students who have immersed themselves in postcolonial theory and literature within a more radical educational setting are more likely to challenge those kinds of ideologies.

In prompting students to question their own preconceptions and "default settings," particularly if they come from privileged socioeconomic backgrounds, I have found postcolonial feminist theory to be particularly enabling because, as Mohanty points out, a feminist perspective is central to a critique of the "false universalizing and masculinist assumptions" of Eurocentric humanism (2003, 224). Mohanty argues that being attentive to the "micropolitics of everyday life as well as to the larger processes that recolonize the culture and identities of people across the globe" without "falling into colonizing or cultural relativist platitudes about difference" necessitates a "race-and-gender-conscious historical materialism" (2003, 229). Noting that women and girls represent 70 percent of the world's poor and the majority of the world's

refugees; that women own less than one-hundredth of the world's property; that they do two-thirds of the world's work and earn less than one-tenth of its income; and that global capitalism has a disproportionately adverse impact upon women and girls of the "Third World," she continues:

> If we pay attention to and think from the space of some of the most disenfranchised communities of women in the world, we are most likely to envision a just and democratic society capable of treating all its citizens fairly. Conversely, if we begin our analysis from, and limit it to, the space of privileged communities, our visions of justice are more likely to be exclusionary because privilege nurtures blindness to those without the same privileges. (2003, 231)

Mohanty develops her notion of a race-and-gender-conscious historical materialism into a pedagogical model that allows students "to see the complexities, singularities, and interconnections between communities of women such that power, privilege, agency, and dissent can be made visible and engaged with"; she terms this the "comparative feminist studies/feminist solidarity model," one which theorizes "experience, agency, and justice from a more cross-cultural lens" (2003, 244). In my teaching, I have attempted to adapt this model into what one might call a "comparative postcolonial studies" approach, which is attentive to the material particularities of different cultures and communities while acknowledging that they are also situated within the wider networks of global capitalism. While the literary texts I teach are not direct "reflections" of those social realities, nevertheless they often comment upon and seek to make interventions into their sociopolitical contexts; therefore, I have often drawn students' attention to (non-fictional) reading material that can provide an insight into the intersectional oppression and material struggles of (once-)colonized peoples. Those situations in which my students have brought their own knowledge of—and involvement in— antiracist and antisexist movements to seminar discussions, or have gone on to undertake voluntary or paid work in these fields, have shown me that genuinely critical pedagogy can have a positive and transformative impact upon the wider material world.

Note

1. TED is a particularly useful resource given that it offers access to free online recordings of/by scholars and activists on the basis of its belief in the "power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and, ultimately, the world" (TED 2015).

References

Aguiar, Luis M. 2001. "Whiteness in White Academia." In *Talking about Identity: Encounters in Race, Ethnicity and Language*, edited by Carl E. James and Adrienne Lynn Shadd, 177–92. Toronto: Between the Lines.

The AntiIntellect. 2012. "Toni Morrison Refuses to Privilege White People in Her Novels!" YouTube video, 7:13, from an unidentified television interview with Toni Morrison, posted June 20, 2012. http://youtu.be/F4vIGvKpT1c.

Ahmed, Sara. 2013. "Critical Racism/Critical Sexism." *feministkilljoys* blog, December 19. http://feministkilljoys.com/2013/12/19/critical-racismcritical-sexism/.

Back, Les. 2004. "Ivory Towers? The Academy and Racism." In *Institutional Racism in Higher Education*, edited by Ian Law, Deborah Phillips, and Laura Turney, 1–6. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press.

Figiel, Sia. 1998. *To a Young Artist in Contemplation*. Suva: Pacific Writing Forum.

Foster, Stephen. 1982. "The Exotic as a Symbolic System." *Dialectical Anthropology* 7 (1): 21–30.

Freire, Paulo. (1968) 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Bloomsbury.

———. 2008. "The 'Banking' Concept of Education." In *Ways of Reading*, edited by David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky, 242–54. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Huggan, Graham. 2001. *The Postcolonial Exotic*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jameson, Fredric. 1986. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15: 65–88.

Mirza, Heidi Safia. 2006. "Transcendence over Diversity: Black Women in the Academy." *Policy Futures in Education* 4 (2): 101–13.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1994. "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s." In *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, edited by Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, 145–66. New York: Routledge, 1994.

———. 2003. *Feminism without Borders*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Pereira, Maria do Mar. 2012. "Uncomfortable Classrooms: Rethinking the Role of Student Discomfort in Feminist Teaching." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19: 128–35.

Puwar, Nirmal. 2004. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*. Oxford: Berg.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1996. "Subaltern Talk: Interview with the Editors." In *The Spivak Reader*, edited by Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, 287–308. London: Routledge.

———. 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Spoto, Stephanie. 2014/15. "Teaching against Hierarchies: An Anarchist Approach." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 7/8.

Tagore, Shaunga. 2011. "A Slam on Feminism in Academia." In *Feminism for Real: Deconstructing the Academic Industrial Complex of Feminism*, edited by Jessica Yee, 37–42. Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2011.

TED. 2015. "About: Our Organization." Accessed April 24, 2015. http://www.ted.com/about/our-organization.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. (1999) 2012. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed.

Walker, Alice. 1983. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace.