Overwhelmed by the World: Teaching Literature and the Difference of Nations

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The premise of this essay is twofold: that we live in a world of shared destinies and that literature has some part to play in enabling connections across nations and cultures. Either of these component assumptions can be explored or challenged, I admit, but it is not my intention here, in this essay, to debate their validity. The institution at which I am located is urban, nonresidential, and serves primarily working-class and recent immigrant populations. At the undergraduate level, our student body is remarkably diverse, but the graduate students are predominantly white and U.S.-born. I teach a graduate seminar called Teaching of Literature, which typically attracts three types of students: those interested in pedagogy and contemplating teaching at the high-school or community college level, high-school teachers of English who are seeking a graduate degree in the discipline, and students considering a doctoral degree who realize that a grounding in pedagogy will help them as teaching assistants.

In the four years that I taught the course, I attempted deliberately to infuse pedagogy with politics, believing that in the crossfire of debate significant learning takes place. The teachers and potential teachers in my course are challenged to consider why a classroom that takes risks may, in fact, engender more sophisticated critical thinkers than one that does not. The focus of these political considerations has varied—for instance, one year, the issue was race; another, it was sexual orientation; and in the fall of 2003, I chose to focus on whether through the teaching of literature it is possible to create a global perspective.

In this essay, I examine the very specific challenges I encountered in engaging my students to consider the necessity of teaching literature that requires immersion in the history and politics of locations other than the United States. In particular, I take up two texts: Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1991) and Merle Feld’s play *Across the Jordan* (1997). The first requires an understanding of the conflicted relationship between India and Pakistan; the second, a knowledge of Israeli-Palestinian political history. Feld
is a Jewish American playwright and Bapsi Sidhwa a Pakistani American writer. Both writers thrust into our consciousness the urgencies and traumas of places other than the United States. To do justice to these writers and their works, to teach these texts with integrity, one must accompany literary analysis with historical and political “immersion.”

It is around this pedagogical directive that my students and I debate. What is the appropriate amount of historical and political background in a class that purports to be about literature? How do we select the relevant background material so as to ensure a “balanced” perspective, given the biases and provocations inherent in the situation? If the instructor is not already familiar with the history and politics of the region, how can he or she craft a responsible pedagogy? What are the questions that we can pose to our students? The teachers and potential teachers in my course not infrequently observe that there is so much to learn that they do not know how or where to begin. They are, they claim, overwhelmed by the world. How then can they expect to be informed guides to their own students? These are the issues I take up in this essay.

In the apprehension my students exhibit, they stand in significant contrast to the students whom Donald Hall writes about in his essay (in this issue) “Cluelessness and the Queer Classroom”: they enter his classroom (where his queer politics are explicit), he declares, fully convinced of the validity of their perspective, which is frequently one of harsh judgment against the homosexual experience. One could say of Hall that he is in the position of having to engage an aggressive pedagogy of ignorance. In such a pedagogy, as explicated by Barbara Johnson (1987: 84–85), “to teach ignorance is . . . to teach to un-know, to become conscious of the fact that what one thinks is knowledge is really an array of received ideas, prejudices, and opinions—a way of not knowing that one does not know.” Hall’s challenge of moving his students to examine their homophobic preconceptions and consider that they might be wrong—to get them to suspend their judgments, as it were—is not dissimilar to my challenge of needing to release students from their paralysis when confronted by texts that are set in geographical and cultural locations unfamiliar and strange to them. In their paralysis, there is both an anxiety about knowing and a refusal to know. While Hall might engage his students by teaching them to un-know before they can be taught again, I must teach my students to ask the “questions [they] did not even know [they were] unable to formulate” (Johnson 1987: 172–73). I must teach them to move from a state of voluntary or involuntary cluelessness.
Janet Powers, a specialist in South Asian literature and the civilization of India, observes in her essay “The Outsider’s Gaze” (1996: 71 – 72) that despite her long years of acquired expertise in South Asian studies—including the “rigors of doctoral work, a dissertation, fieldwork in the Indian subcontinent, numerous South Asian friends, repeated research trips to many parts of India, and knowledge of Indian languages”—she considers herself an outsider to South Asia and sometimes feels “guilty of trying to interpret attitudes and experiences that are not mine and that perhaps I cannot represent authentically” (72).² My students rightly protest Powers’s invocation of authenticity as it relates to identity and her undervaluing of her own assiduous labor at learning the complexities of the region and cultural landscape about which she teaches. Merely being born Indian or living in India does not make one an expert on the country, they object, and one cannot dispute that assertion. But what they fail to appreciate about Powers’s self-deprecation and humility is that it stems from an engagement with questions of power and the legacy of centuries of Western colonialism. Powers invokes Trinh T. Minh-ha, quoting her to note that the dominant culture has moved “from obnoxious exteriority to obtrusive interiority” and that the Westerner’s quest for “the so-called hidden values of a person or culture has given rise to a form of legitimized . . . voyeurism and subtle arrogance—namely the pretense to see into or to own the others’ minds, whose knowledge these others cannot, supposedly, have themselves” (qtd. in Powers 72; Minh-ha 1989).³ Powers’s essay, because of the strong reaction it provokes in my students, who find in her academic humility a “holier than thou” attitude they have no tolerance for, provides a critical starting point for examining the issue of power as it operates along the continuums of insider-outsider and expert-novice. In this context, her invocation of polyvocality as the corrective to singular interpretations is valuable. Yet, despite her recognition of the crucial dimension of power and its function in the sociopolitical and historical realities being studied, Powers does not adequately discuss how power hierarchies play out in polyvocal critiques of the text. For instance, if students are exposed to the multiple perspectives and voices provided by Powers, in her role as a scholar of South Asian studies; a South Asian, who may or may not have formal academic training in South Asian studies; and students’ own reactions, based on knowledge gleaned from a variety of sources—including popular culture representations of South Asia—then it is important that students learn how to evaluate and weight the different perspectives and voices. Simply to say that the mix of perspectives and voices will yield the necessary sophisticated understanding is to capitulate to the lure of uninterrogated
heterogeneity. Just as Powers subjects her authority to scrutiny, so also should she and her students subject the native informant’s view to rigorous analysis: What is the class position of the informant? What is his or her access to or distance from privilege, given factors such as gender, age, religious belief, and occupation? Ultimately, what constitutes the basis of the informant’s authority to speak?

The intriguing story by Borges, “The Ethnographer,” which Marcy Schwartz discusses in her essay in this symposium, reveals the complex dynamics involved in fieldwork and the acquisition of knowledge of peoples “unlike” oneself. On the one hand, Anglo-American anthropology student Fred Murdock’s refusal to reveal what he has learned about the Native Americans among whom he has lived is similar to Janet Powers’s self-effacement as expert on South Asia. On the other hand, his stance is different from her willingness to provide her students with different pathways into the interstices of South Asia’s cultural landscape. Murdock’s silence is total, because he believes that each individual must discover his or her own route to the secret of the Native American tribe. Shu-Mei Shih (2004: 20) asks, apropos of the difficulties associated with speaking or writing of the other who is distant from oneself—racially, culturally, nationally: “What amount of work on a literature is necessary before one can generalize about it? Silence or withdrawal (‘I cannot speak of you, or to you, because you are different’) is not the answer. . . . Responding to otherness is not a zero-sum game of relativistic silence and problematic recognition but a matter of responsible attentiveness that works hard to give non-Western reality, however hybridized, as much due as one can.” The answer to Shih’s question, I would argue, is not to dwell in self-imposed cluelessness about that which is unfamiliar or different (because of one’s lack of confidence that one can ever become wholly clued in to that unfamiliar ethos), but rather to reject the binary of ignorance and omniscience and instead make transparent one’s labor of journeying along the continuum between the polarities. Thus, while Powers is responsible in refusing the mantle of expertise, she is insufficiently deconstructive of the alternate scaffolding she erects for her students in that she accepts without interrogation the validity and superiority of the insights of the “native informant.”

The one variable that appears to have the most salient influence on perspective is power—in particular, proximity to or distance from the centers of power that sustain the status quo of any given environment. Understanding power is vital to making responsible selections and evaluations of reading material as one begins to acquaint oneself with the historical and
political landscape of an unfamiliar region or culture. With this in mind, let us turn to Sidhwa’s *Cracking India*. Published originally as *The Ice-Candy Man* in 1988, the novel was later retitled *Cracking India* and published in the United States in 1991. It employs a child narrator, Lenny, a young Parsi girl slightly under ten years of age. Lenny, incapacitated by polio and prevented from participating in the games of other children her age, is therefore left largely in the care of Ayah, the female servant with whom she wanders the streets of Lahore (currently in Pakistan) and comes to know its working-class inhabitants—the ice-candy or popsicle vendor, the masseur, the butcher, the zookeeper. These men belong to the three dominant religious groups (Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh) in Lahore in pre-Partition India. Lenny’s anxiety and confusion regarding the politics she hears and does not comprehend—in settings as diverse as her parents’ dinner party and the roadside restaurant where the city’s vendors eat—are also the reader’s; thus she becomes the perfect conduit through which the reader unfamiliar with South Asian history and the trauma of Partition is introduced to that specific historical moment and geographical region.\(^4\)

Lenny is from the Parsi community, the smallest minority in pre- and post-Partition South Asia; the leaders of the Parsi community in 1947 believed that only by being “extra wary,” “adopting a discreet and politically naïve profile” (26), could they survive. They could not afford to be seen as being too closely aligned to any of the dominant groups—British, Muslim, or Hindu—in this volatile time at the close of the British Raj and the impending breakup of the subcontinent into the two nations of India and Pakistan. At a meeting of the Parsi community of Lahore, Lenny witnesses a heated exchange of opinions about the troubling times and their impact on the Parsis. Colonel Bharucha, a doctor and prominent member of the community, delivers a speech: “It is no longer just a struggle for Home Rule. It is a struggle for power. Who’s going to rule once we get Swaraj? . . . Hindus, Muslims, and even the Sikhs are going to jockey for power: and if you jokers [meaning his fellow Parsis] jump into the middle you’ll be mangled into chutney!” Colonel Bharucha advises his community to stay out of the way, out of trouble. But Dr. Mody, another important figure in the community, objects: “I don’t see how we can remain uninvolved. . . . Our neighbors will think we are betraying them and siding with the English.” This remark prompts another speaker to counter, “Which of your neighbors are you not going to betray? . . . Hindu? Muslim? Sikh?” (45). The colonel cautions them by declaring forcefully, “No one knows which way the wind will blow. . . . There may be not one but two—or even three—new nations! And the Parsees
might find themselves championing the wrong side if they don’t look before they leap!” To this, a speaker asks impatiently, “Does it matter where they look or where they leap? . . . If we’re stuck with the Hindus they’ll swipe our businesses from under our noses and sell our grandfathers in the bargain: if we’re stuck with the Muslims they’ll convert us by the sword! And God help us if we’re stuck with the Sikhs!” (46). This exchange is the first of several debates that Lenny hears in different settings about what is likely to happen once colonial rule ends.

One of Colonel Bharucha’s pronouncements, which she hears on an earlier visit to his clinic, impresses itself powerfully on Lenny’s consciousness: “We must hunt with the hounds and run with the hare” (26). This double position that the Parsis feel they must occupy gives them a unique perspective. Their extreme vulnerability and lack of power paradoxically affords them access to all the contending groups. They work hard to project their neutrality by underscoring their small size as a people (the Parsis numbered 120,000 worldwide in 1947 and are roughly the same number today; there are about 69,000 in present-day India, with the majority located in Mumbai).

The approach that Colonel Bharucha advocates — to hunt with the hounds and run with the hare — is highly useful advice to follow in the selection of background materials to prepare to teach this or any other literary text requiring immersion in unfamiliar history and politics. It is imperative that we identify the players and equip ourselves with the arguments of those both with and without power so that we might assess how we wish to use the material. At the same time, just as the Parsis were astute enough to recognize their vulnerability and simultaneously to see advantage in their neutrality, so also it is necessary that as educators we be scrupulous about recognizing our own subject positions both in the kinds of materials we seek and in the assessments we make of those that we ultimately do select.

As instructors, we are expected to exhibit expertise, to delineate clearly for our students the borders of the domain we wish them to inhabit intellectually and the specifics of that territory. I would argue, however, that in situations where the subject matter is vastly unfamiliar, volatile, and highly complex, it is impossible, given the time that most educators have for preparation, to claim expertise or even to seek it. In such a case, the most ethically and pedagogically responsible approach would be to teach the journey and to teach the gaps in the journey (I am borrowing the structure of my formulation from Gerald Graff’s call to “teach the conflicts” within the context of the culture wars and their impact on literary curricula). I don’t mean by this that you prescribe a methodology or a mere listing of the journey’s itinerary for
your students, but rather that you instill in them an appreciation for the many detours you have taken, the unexpected halts and encampments for further study of particular areas of interest not initially part of the travel plan, and the reflections and interpretations of places visited and peoples encountered.

The ultimate objective, from my perspective, is to get students to engage the philosophical and ideological questions that they ought to be raising at every stage of their journey to acquiring appropriate supporting information in the teaching of a literary text. It is important that students understand how I arrive at the readings I ultimately include in the syllabus; the rationale behind my selections; my assessment of these items and those I had hoped to find but could not, and those I discovered unexpectedly. In other words, it is critical to me that students—especially potential teachers—recognize that syllabi do not spring from some naturally occurring fount of endorsed and proven knowledge but that they are constructed by instructors with specific worldviews and objectives. Giving students insight into the forces impinging on an instructor’s choices and rejections enables them to critique the syllabus and the materials it includes, thereby teaching them how to assess the process by which we construct our knowledge and, as educators, that of others. None of this is, of course, new, but I reiterate it because the syllabus is rarely seen as a document to deconstruct or critique. How frequently do instructors treat the syllabus as text, subjecting it to the same critical and interpretive rigor as the material it includes?25

Ideally, in our selection of primary and secondary texts, we ought to include material that will yield a reticulate and nuanced perspective in our students, a perspective in which ideas and positions ricochet off one another, and the interplay among various arguments complicates and enriches our ability to examine in depth and ask appropriate questions. In this effort, it is useful to consider the caveats and encouragements that Graff (2003) offers in discussing the culture of debate and opposition that he believes pervades (in mutant form) the academic and political realms in the United States. We argue, he says, merely for the sake of confrontation and sensationalized pugilistic opposition rather than to enter into ever-deepening crevices of significance. Responding to the work of Deborah Tannen and Peter Elbow, Graff does not advocate an abandonment of argument and opposition in education but calls for a commitment to restoring argument to its original sense of “an intellectual process” characterized by “a connected series of statements leading to a definite proposition” (88–89). Invoking a Monty Python sketch called “The Argument Clinic,” Graff points to the importance of distinguishing between genuine argument, on the one hand, and
abuse and mere contradiction, on the other. Graff’s thoughtful comparison of mere opposition and true debate reminds us of the dangers of a simplistic point-counterpoint framework in the selection of readings and background material. For a truly meaningful interplay among the historical documents, political essays, films, photographs, and audio stimuli available for selection, instructors and potential instructors might be advised to make their choices with Peter Elbow’s advice in mind: “balance[ing] our proneness to engage in the ‘doubting game’ (where we are ready to attack as invalid what we hear from a person whose view is contrary to ours) by . . . participat[ing] in the ‘believing game,’ in which, before we attack a belief, we imagine what it would feel like to hold it” (Graff 2003: 86). Thus, by choosing those authors, artists, and scholars whose works best exhibit the “believing game,” or by sequencing and orchestrating discussion of the material in a manner that permits the attitude embodied in that game, instructors can feel reasonably confident that they are constructing a complex historical and political landscape to contextualize the literary text.

I recognize of course that to get students to play the believing game is particularly difficult when issues of morality come into the picture. Donald Hall speaks of certain students’ strong belief in the sinfulness of homosexuality and wonders whether one can successfully dismantle that position so as to get students to engage critically with their beliefs. Here is where I would differ with the polarizing stance implied in Johnson’s (1987: 83) observation that “learning seems to take place most rapidly when the student must respond to the contradiction between two teachers.” Rather than contradiction, which does not necessarily generate the mental climate essential to responsible consideration of multiple positions, I would suggest a continuum of perspective: in other words, students should be exposed to extreme positions as well as those that occupy intermediate points along the spectrum. For instance, in the context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, such an approach might translate into students being offered the extreme positions of the militant Palestinian group Hamas, on the one hand, and the militant Israeli settlers who protested the dismantling of settlements on the Gaza strip, on the other, and, in addition, intermediate positions, which might include that of an organization such as Yesh Gvul, comprising Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories, believing that such service compromises the ideals of their nation’s commitment to justice and human rights, or the position of activist organizations with combined membership of Palestinian and Israeli women seeking nonmilitary and nonviolent solutions. In examining the assertions of those individuals and groups that are not on the extreme,
one typically encounters a greater attention to the question of power. (Israeli refusenik soldiers, for instance, realize that they hold power over the Palestinians who live in the occupied territories. I have characterized the refusenik soldiers as being in the middle because their refusal to serve is not total: to defend their nation, they are ready to bear arms, and they believe passionately in the Jewish state of Israel; their nonextreme position comes from the selective nature of their refusal—they will not serve in the occupied territories, because they believe that Israel’s hold on these territories is unlawful and a violation of international human rights.)

At the 2004 Modern Language Association (MLA) convention, Pen妮 Ticen’s presentation, titled “Reading What We Are Not: White Male Readers in the Lands of the ‘Other,’” foregrounded the anger and disconnect of white male readers when confronted by texts by writers of color. These readers felt guilty and questioned their “right” to engage with or critique such material. Her paper explained the process whereby two male students in a class she taught at the Virginia Military Institute narrowed the distance between themselves and the texts. A significant component of the approach they used had to do with their first expressing their discomfort and rage and then seeing the protagonist of color as a distinct entity, “a singular other,” not as a member of a group over which they, as white men, historically had power. While I am optimistic that the white male reader may be made to care about the hare through this process (to return to the metaphor in Sidhwa’s book), I am less confident that this process can lead the white male reader to understand his historical role as the hound. The role of power is obscured in this individualized focus on the protagonist.

Graff, too, fails to address how the issue of power affects the believing game. In the final analysis, one must ask whether it is possible as a hound to feel like the hare or even to care how the hare feels. Thus, any document or text that offers the perspective of a group or person in power in the act of empathetically imagining the suppressed or disempowered other provides a relatively rare and invaluable complication to the historical and political landscape.

Merle Feld’s play “Across the Jordan” is one such literary text. Feld is Jewish American and a deeply observant Jew. She has spent time in Israel and believes unequivocally in the state of Israel. But Feld also sees herself as a feminist and a supporter of women’s causes, and, while in Israel, she became involved in the efforts of Palestinian and Israeli women working toward coexistence and peace. She writes that she has a long interest in giving voice to groups on the margin, to those whose narratives go unheard.
The two female protagonists of her play are Daphna, a twenty-something Israeli lawyer, and Najah, a twenty-year-old Palestinian woman who is in jail for a suspected act of terrorism. Daphna has been assigned to Najah’s defense. Says Feld (1997: 333),

Daphna . . . is hard at work simultaneously on two intimate processes. First, in mourning her father, she is struggling to separate from him and his traditional religious and political attitudes: How do I honor him sufficiently so that my soul is not torn apart by guilt? How do I individuate, establish boundaries between us so that I can come to know who I am and what I believe and can have the courage to act on that in the world? Secondly, . . . Daphna poses the question of boundaries and trust as it is played out in her relationship to her Palestinian client.

The relationship between Daphna and Najah is set against the backdrop of the Biblical story of Sarah and Hagar as they both vie for Abraham’s respect. Feld is emphatic that to approach the characters of Daphna and Najah with a preconceived political bias is to undermine the work of challenging and disturbing everyone in the audience. The audience must not “know” to what extent Najah is innocent or guilty of the list of charges brought against her. They cannot “know” what she has or has not done because that is the ultimate test of trust that Daphna undergoes, and we must experience this same test, we must live through this tension with her. You can never “know” the other, yet you must at some point decide what it is you believe about them, how you will proceed, how you will behave. (334)

The final encounter between the two women is rich: neither overly optimistic nor excessively pessimistic, it presents the enormous difficulty of the situation and the almost insurmountable obstacles to building trust between two peoples. Najah is unsparing in her education of the idealistic Daphna, who believes that all she has to do to prove Najah’s innocence is present the appropriate evidence. Najah declares, “Just because you can prove it wasn’t me, with that bomb, on that day, doesn’t mean they’ll let me go. And if they let me go—in six months, in two years—if they let me go—I’ll go home to Silwan, which is also prison. What is my future there? You’ll tell some of your friends that I am one of the ones who can be trusted, and they will let me come to wash their floors and scrub out their toilets—” (366). Daphna cries out, “What are you doing?! Stop it!” “If you can’t hear the truth, then you are too fragile for this work,” Najah informs her.

Although Feld’s treatment of Najah and Daphna forces us to attend to them as individuals with very specific desires and motivations and not as
representatives of two groups at war, nevertheless, the inescapable reality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict informs every scene. The Biblical story of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah, against which the contemporary situation plays out, provides the thematic trajectory of the possibility of forging a feminist resistance to patriarchal territorial aspirations. This hope of the author and the protagonists can itself be subjected to critical interrogation—whether in her desire to privilege female solidarity across cultural and national borders, Feld glosses over the unbridgeable gaps between Najah and Daphna.

I choose to anchor the cultivation of students’ global consciousness in two works that explore the significant national traumas of Partition and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because I believe that traumas test, disrupt, and force a reevaluation of a nation’s psyche, its binding principles, and its power structures. Moreover, thrusting the traumas of other nations onto the consciousness of students in the United States enables them to imagine, I would hope, the urgent realities of other regions that are connected directly and indirectly to our own.

Despite this hope, I am mindful of Sara Ahmed’s (2000: 4) warning against simply “lov[ing] the stranger as a basis for an ethics of alterity or a non-universalist form of political activism.” Although Ahmed concedes that refusing to see the stranger as a threat is salutary, she insists that such celebration of the stranger fetishizes the stranger, that is, marks the stranger as a figure of significance cut off from the histories and social relations that give the stranger dimensionality beyond his or her function as a figure of our imagination. In clarifying her resistance to stranger celebration, Ahmed explains that “much recent critical theory is deeply invested in figures such as the figure of the migrant or the nomad and that this investment constitutes a form of fetishism that conceals histories of determination and forms of difference” (182). I find extremely helpful her caution against making a fetish of the global literary text as a means of embracing unfamiliar peoples and landscapes. Those of Ahmed’s ilk would warn against a too ready embrace of texts from Africa, or Latin America, or Asia simply to assuage one’s guilt at a previous indifference or ignorance. One way to avoid such a pitfall is to ask students to consider carefully the reasons for their cluelessness about a particular geographical or cultural or historical location. Is it an imposed lack of knowledge (resulting from information being deliberately withheld from the student), or is it a voluntary rejection of information? As part of this self-interrogation, Johnson’s (1987: 76–77) provocative questions serve as valuable probes: “Are our ways of teaching students to ask some questions always correlative with our ways of teaching them not to ask—indeed to be
unconscious of—others? Does the educational system exist in order to pro-
mulgate knowledge, or is its main function rather to universalize a society’s
tacit agreement about what it has decided it does not and cannot know?”

Ultimately, the choice of text from an unfamiliar part of the world
cannot be a casual matter. We must know why we have chosen at a particular
moment to read this text and not another. Why are we reading a narrative
located in South Africa over, say, one located in Kenya? To make the selec-
tion on the basis of the relevance to one’s life of a particular geographical area
or cultural ethos is, no doubt, problematically narcissistic. Nevertheless, it
is pragmatic and comprehensible to students. Although they may question a
sensibility such as Martha Nussbaum’s and her advocacy of cosmopolitanism
over a narrow nationalism, they will accept that it may be important to know
and become familiar with the histories and politics of Middle East and North
African nations or the conflict between India and Pakistan, given the inter-
twined nature of the histories of these regions with the future of the United
States. At some level, one’s interest in the unfamiliar is always linked to the
personal. Such was the case with my interest in South Africa, a region of the
world that I was deeply interested in but had no formal academic training on.
I taught myself how to teach about South Africa.

Students benefit greatly when they witness the process by which one
becomes an expert or sufficiently informed to teach a subject responsibly. In
2000, I had the opportunity to develop a course in an area that I had always
been deeply interested in but in which I had not received any formal training.
The course I developed was called Post-Apartheid South Africa: Narratives
of Truth and Justice. In the weeks before the start of the semester in which
I was to teach the course, I was reprimanded soundly by a Zimbabwean
playwright for presuming to teach about a country that I had never visited,
let alone lived in. My initial response was to concede his point and chastise
myself for the “arrogance” of my desire. But after some reflection I realized
that I could use my own distance from the on-the-ground realities of South
Africa as a compelling illustration to students of how one goes about respon-
sibly acquiring knowledge of places, peoples, and histories that one is not
likely to experience in depth and firsthand. By subjecting my syllabus to
critical analysis in class and explaining to students the reasons for my inter-
est in South Africa, I provided them the opportunity to assess the process by
which I had constructed the syllabus. I informed them that I had begun with
a personal interest in the nation. As a person of Indian origin, South Africa
held significance to me as the place where Gandhi first deployed his strategy
of nonviolent resistance that would later become an important component of
India’s challenge to and overthrow of colonial British rule. From our collective perspective as residents of the United States, I informed them that South Africa’s years of apartheid rule were not dissimilar to the United States’ years of de jure and de facto segregation and that therefore a knowledge of South Africa would provide a comparative framework to understand the civil rights movement. I had at hand some publicly known “facts” about South Africa: Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Clerk’s having shared the 1993 Nobel Prize for Peace; the relatively peaceful end of a viciously oppressive regime; a minority population’s subjugation of a majority people in their own land; the Truth and Reconciliation Commission; the status of Nadine Gordimer’s and J. M. Coetzee’s writings in the literary world.

Our joint interrogation of the syllabus, even before we launched into a study of the items included in it, gave students a model for self-interrogation and critique of expertise. I wanted them to realize the importance not only of what I had included but also of what I had chosen to leave out of the syllabus, and why I had done so. It was my hope that by so doing I would equip them with the tools to enable them both to hunt with the hounds and to run with the hare.

Notes
1. Although the course syllabus included “Across the Jordan” (1997) and Jhumpa Lahiri’s short story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine” (from the collection Interpreter of Maladies, published in 1999), the experience of students’ grappling with Lahiri’s story of a young Indian American girl’s celebration of Halloween in New England at the same moment of her exposure through television images to the violent birth, in 1971, of the nation of Bangladesh, nearly 10,000 miles away, suggested to me that Sidhwa’s novel Cracking India might have proved a more effective text to engage the complications of teaching unfamiliar histories and political landscapes.
2. South Asia is the geopolitical term used to designate the region of Asia comprising the seven nations of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.
3. One female student read sexism in Lahiri’s protagonist Mr. Pirzada’s confusion regarding his daughters’ names. (He has seven daughters between the ages of six and thirteen, all of whose names start with the letter A — Ayesha, Amira, Amina, Aziza. He cannot, he tells the ten-year-old narrator and protagonist, keep their names in order.) The student insisted that in his inability to match correctly his daughters’ names to their persons, he exhibits devaluation of females, and that had he had sons he would certainly have known which son was called what. One could dismiss this reading as a misinformed response that is not attentive to the text itself (Mr. Pirzada cares deeply
for his daughters and is intensely worried for their safety during the Civil War in Pakistan, which he watches helplessly on television from the New England home of his friends). But to dismiss or belittle the student’s reading is not entirely warranted, given that readers make texts their own, infusing them with their own preoccupations and prejudices. How then to create within this reader (and potential teacher) both the space to entertain her supposition of Mr. Pirzada’s sexism and the possibility that in so doing she might be guilty of precisely the kind of “obtrusive interiority” of which Trinh Minh-ha speaks? How to create in this student — and, through her, the students in the future whom she will instruct — a capacity for self-interrogation? In other words, it is important to acknowledge that one cannot repress the intensely personal reactions one has to certain facets of texts, but it is also incumbent upon one, then, to subject these responses to rigorous analysis.

4. In 1947, the end of British rule in the Indian subcontinent was accompanied by a brutal and violent rending of the region into the two nations of India and Pakistan. This dismemberment, known as the Partition, was marked by “the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of innocent Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs as millions stumbled fearfully across the ‘shadow lines’ separating two post-colonial nation-states” (Bose and Jalal 1998: 188). The death toll of Partition has been estimated to be approximately 500,000. (Sidhwa’s novel Cracking India has been made into the film Earth, directed by Deepa Mehta.)

5. A familiarity with critical discourse analysis prepares students to examine discourse structurally — both at the micro level, in terms of syntax, active and passive voice, and parts of speech, and at the macro or contextual level, in which discourse is analyzed as occurring within and informed by social structures of gender, race, and class and the power that inheres to certain groups within these structural frameworks. In this regard, the collection Discourse as Social Interaction (1997), edited by Teun A. Van Dijk, is a useful place to begin. In addition, visual images can be subjected to the same critical analysis as verbal discourse. Farzaneh Asari (1989: 11) reminds us, for example, that when we see a televised image of a screen full of Iranian students chanting anti-American slogans, we might wish to ask whether the image represents a crowd of thousands or whether the camera’s tight framing makes a crowd of hundreds fill the screen and so appear to be a crowd of thousands.

Works Cited

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