Cross-Talk, Postcolonial Pedagogy, and Transnational Literacy

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My title, “cross-talk,” evokes the ambivalence of the conflictual classroom where dialogue is engaged about issues that matter enough to get people angry. Postcolonial questions in Canadian contexts can function like lightning rods for channelling complex and inarticulate anxieties about the changing shape of the nation. This paper was first inspired by my surprise at the anger Dionne Brand’s perspective on the Writing Thru Race conference, held in 1994 after significant media controversy, can still inspire, several years after its enactment. It arises from my attempts in the classroom, together with my students, to work through that anger to create a more productive dialogue around how to situate Writing Thru Race, what it signified, and how it continues to signify today.¹ More recently, I have been again surprised by continuing hostility toward casting Canadian literature in postcolonial contexts and dismissals, both passive and active, of anything postcolonial, either literature or theory. The ability to arouse emotional as well as intellectual reactions may be one of literary study’s greatest strengths, but how to negotiate strong opposing emotions is not easily managed. To bring postcolonialism into the Canadian literature classroom is to ignite controversies seldom generated by a focus on generic conventions or prosody. Cross-talk may arise, then, from unacknowledged emotional investments in certain contexts but it may also come from contrasting assumptions, expectations, and understandings of the terms of classroom
engagement, the object of study and the function of education within the nation. How may these crosscurrents be negotiated so that genuine learning can occur?

I cannot provide pedagogical solutions in this paper because there is no quick fix, and if there were, a postcolonial approach, by definition, would be suspicious of it. If you find my evasiveness here frustrating, then you understand how many students who are seeking answers feel when they are confronted instead with the proliferating questions that come with any postcolonial approach to learning. There is no mastery here. Because postcolonial pedagogy must question so much of what is taken for granted within and beyond the classroom, its practice can be profoundly destabilizing for all concerned.

An elaboration of the goals of such work can help to reorient the discussion. I take as axiomatic three starting points elaborated by Kathleen McCormick in The Culture of Reading and the Teaching of English: “First, students must become able to analyse how they themselves are culturally constructed as subjects-in-history… Second, they must learn to analyse how texts are likewise culturally constructed, how they are produced in particular sets of social circumstances and reproduced differently in different circumstances. Third, they can then use such cultural and historical analysis to develop and defend critical positions of their own” (9). This is a mandate attentive to what Homi K. Bhabha terms “the politics of location.” If Canadian students (and I include teachers within this category) are to undertake such a program, then we will need to come to terms with Canada’s history of colonialism and its current position within the global order as it has affected our lives and shaped our thinking, recognizing, of course, that our individual experiences of this process will not be homogeneous. Many will find it an uncomfortable process, invoking different kinds of unease, but it may also prove energizing. McCormack concludes: “What we need to learn is that theorizing, not just theory, is what our curricula need” (191). And I would add, more specifically, that postcolonial theorizing is what Canadian literature in the classroom needs if Canadian students are to understand why Himani Bannerji describes Canada as “a liberal democracy with a colonial heart” (75).

In beginning such theorizing, I find it useful to hold to Enrique Dussel’s distinction, quoted approvingly by Walter Mignolo, between the postmodernist and the postcolonial approach to such questions. Dussel argues that while “postmodernists criticize modern reason as a reason of terror, we criticize modern reason because of the irrational myth that it conceals.” In other words, the task is not to abandon reason but rather to
realize its full potential. That irrational myth, “a justification for genocidal violence” (Mignolo 170), which Eurocentric reason both upholds and conceals, continues to operate today, constituting the “sanctioned ignorance” of the privileged deplored by Gayatri Chakroverty Spivak, an ignorance that continues to allow the West to forget its scientific debts to Islamic, Indian and Chinese cultures (as analysed by Ziauddin Sardar); historical alternatives to contemporary world systems such as that of the thirteenth-century (as analysed by Janet Abu-Lughod); and the inequities it has built into current systems ranging from higher education to world trade. Two of the chapters in Sherene Razack’s anthology, *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, describe dynamics within university classrooms that show how the ivory tower “is kept as a place where the rational subject is the subject who does not speak of racism; it is thus kept as a place where bodies of colour do not belong” (18).² “Sanctioned ignorance” may be too mild a term to describe the scope of this terrain. When such analysis is still so rare, and then so threatening to so many ingrained beliefs about entitlement, history, and individual identity, it seems that ‘mandated ignorance’ may well prove the more appropriate term.

I cannot provide answers about how best to negotiate this situation but I can provide a preliminary charting of the issues at stake when postcolonial analysis meets Canadian literature in the classroom. The unspoken mediating term in this encounter is multiculturalism, which complicates understandings of Canada and the postcolonial in very different ways. I avoid this term here because it invokes a different agenda and its employment carries a host of new problems in its wake. I deplore the conflation of multiculturalism and postcolonialism that is currently taking place in predominantly U.S. contexts. It is important to distinguish those U.S. usages of the term from the Canadian debates, but even in the Canadian context many analyses of multiculturalism tend to assume as starting points many of the things that postcolonial thinking questions: the nature and function of citizenship, community, ethnicity, historicism, and home, for example. Canadian discussions of multiculturalism usually situate their discussions within national historical contexts, paying little attention to the legacies of imperialism. While sophisticated work is being done on multiculturalism in dialogue with postcolonial theories, I must bracket those discussions today.³

Monika Kin Gagnon’s definition of multiculturalism in her “Primer for Xenophilic Beginners” provides a succinct definition of a key point of tension built into the term: “Canadian policy supporting cultural diversity, passed as an official act in 1988. So Canada’s got culture and multicultural”
It is that double standard that postcolonial theorizing can both expose and move beyond, while also recognizing the equal sting in Gagnon’s even pithier definition of “post-colonial” as “deeply offensive to First Peoples” (86). This second definition, which assume that “post” simply means “after,” points to the fact that postcolonialism means many different things to different people. If, as Sneja Gunew notes, multiculturalism “is a term with global resonances but very different national inflections”(46), then postcolonial theorizing, in its many current manifestations, is an even more complex matter. Postcolonial theorizing in the Canadian literature classroom must attend to these histories of contestation, to the various disciplinary, national and global configurations of its usage, while also recognizing that these various national inflections are themselves never singular but also multiply constituted. What matters most, finally, is how work identifying itself as postcolonial is employed and the results that it achieves. As Roy Miki notes, “Unreflective liberal gestures toward ‘cultural’ and ‘post-colonial’ studies... can all too easily become a vehicle for disciplinary management…”(174). Graham Huggan’s The Post-Colonial Exotic provides several revealing examples of the rerouting and defusing processes that can divert a postcolonial agenda into just another curricular choice within an unchanged disciplinary structure. In other words, the same dangers that attend the practice of postcolonial theory can also threaten the effectiveness of postcolonial pedagogy.

To understand current contexts for introducing postcolonial pedagogies into the Canadian literature classroom, it is useful to review their intertwined histories in Canadian university contexts, where postcolonial studies derive largely from earlier work within Commonwealth literary studies. Often, many of the same people involved in introducing Canadian literature into the classroom were also involved in the early stages of developing Commonwealth literature as a recognized field of study: people such as John Matthews, John Moss, Bill New, Bob Robertson, Clara Thomas, and many others. Under the editorship of Bill New (1977-1995), the journal Canadian Literature regularly situated its vision of Canada within larger Commonwealth contexts, while also recognizing Canada’s bilingual status within that primarily Anglophone disciplinary configuration. Canadian and Commonwealth literatures began to infiltrate English departments in Canada during roughly the same period and were often seen as complementary enterprises. But there is an implicit tension between the transnationalism of contemporary postcolonial studies and the nationalism that has traditionally attended the study of a national literature, whether that be in a relatively disguised form, as with English literature, or
more openly, as with American and Canadian literatures. By bringing postcolonial theories and Canadian literature into the same classroom, we can usefully test the assumptions of each.

I realize that the term “transnational” is controversial and may set certain alarm bells ringing within nationalist circles. I use it here to indicate my desire to forge international connections beyond those associated with older notions of “universalism” and newer notions of “globalization.” If we accept Zygmunt Bauman’s definition of globalization as not about what “we wish or hope to do” but rather “about what is happening to us all”; that is, as referring “primarily to the global effects, notoriously unintended and unanticipated, rather than to global initiatives and undertakings” (60), then we need some way to signify the reclamation of agency, a reclamation that can no longer be claimed at the national level alone. We cannot ignore globalization but we can ask how to restore the agency once exercised through the state under changing global conditions. This is especially important now when to adhere to old ideas of nationalism may act to reinforce, rather than challenge, globalizing tendencies. As Bauman points out, “there is neither logical nor pragmatic contradiction between the extraterritoriality of capital” and “the renewed emphasis on the ‘territorial principle’” amongst proliferating feeble sovereign states (67). Under these changed conditions, holding too closely to older notions of national identity may not prove the most effective way to preserve the ability of Canadians to shape the decisions that affect their daily lives, which I take to be the ultimate goal of pedagogy and decolonization alike.

Like Smaro Kamboureli in *Scandalous Bodies*, I employ pedagogy to indicate not only teaching and learning practices within the classroom but also the ways in which those practices are themselves constrained within a national pedagogy, which Kamboureli describes as “the subtle and not so subtle ways in which the desire-machine of the state socializes us” (3). Eva Mackey, in *The House of Difference*, provides illuminating analysis of certain “pedagogies of patriotism” in official Canadian narrations of the nation, which have their subtler counterparts within Canadian literary criticism and history. Contemporary dialogues about theory, literature and pedagogy address this double context. They have a history roughly contemporaneous with the rise of postcolonial and feminist liberation movements mid-century. Robert Con Davis argues that the “impetus for an oppositional pedagogy comes from two sources – third world attempts to reject foreign domination in education and radical attempts to rethink the nature of social change in France after the May 1968 student/worker uprisings” (250). I would add feminism to this list. Since then, canon wars,
culture wars, and controversies over political correctness have come and
gone. Arguments have been advanced promoting a “cultural literacy” that
polices entrance into the status quo. The founding of the Dominion Institute
in 1997 with the aim of enabling Canadians to “rediscover the links that
exist between our history, civic traditions and common identity” (Gray R3)
is a Canadian offshoot of this cultural literacy movement and a conscious
effort to intervene within a national (and nationalist) pedagogy. These
initiatives have in turn been countered by calls for a “critical literacy,”
dedicated to the analysis of the connections between “knowledge and
power” (Con Davis 254). Postcolonial pedagogy derives from oppositional
pedagogy’s belief that teaching is “a social practice and a cultural construct,
a dynamic and unfinished (hence ‘impossible’ to fix) activity” (264). It
aligns itself with oppositional pedagogies and the promotion of critical
literacy yet it also seeks to go beyond these movements in significant ways.

Gayatri Spivak, in her “charting of a practitioner’s progress from
colonial discourse studies to transnational cultural studies” (Critique ix-x)
suggests the need to develop a “transnational literacy.” Transnational
literacy expands critical literacy into a more empathetic mode of reading that
Spivak calls “critical intimacy,” which must then be directed to the task of
understanding new modes of globalizing power and the ways in which they
have easily co-opted certain forms of now-established postcolonialism,
including celebrations of hybridity and resistance, to their agenda. I would
like to experiment in developing such a mode of reading within my
classrooms. Spivak’s focus on “a productive acknowledgement of
complicity” within metropolitan postcolonialism (xii) and her strategy of
attempting “to persuade through the discontinuity of odd connections or
reconstellation” (65), strike me as particularly appropriate for resituating
Canadian texts beyond the confines of an outmoded nationalist discourse
without giving up on the nation entirely. This latter point is crucial, as
Donna Pennee and others stressed throughout this conference. Canada is
reinvented through its literature and through its encounters with
postcolonialism in the classroom, but a postcolonial future does not
necessarily imply a postnational state of affairs.

While the old academic ideals of disinterested inquiry seem more and
more remote from actuality, the new ideals of democratizing the classroom
and opening it out into the world are difficult to implement. It is impossible
to think about decolonizing the classroom without attending to the larger
institutional structures that shape and contain our classes: the discipline, the
university and the nation are enmeshed in world systems that we need to
understand if we are to change them. Gerald Graff explains: “A university is
a curious accretion of historical conflicts that it has systematically forgotten” (257). We could say the same of a nation. I am moved by John Willinsky’s statement, in *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End*: “This book has been written against the learned forgetfulness and complacency displayed in the face of history. How far we can go in seeing the world other than as we have inherited it, I do not yet know. The educational project always lies ahead” (263). Postcolonial pedagogy looks ahead through looking critically and intimately at the learned forgetfulness and complacency built into the educational project as we know it and its complicities with both imperialist and nationalist projects. Therefore, looking ahead must always involve looking back, to reevaluate where we have come from. How we identify those historical beginnings will in turn affect how we see the present and the potential for the future.

“The best of postcolonialism,” according to Spivak, “is autocritical” (“Foreword” xv). The goal of autocritique is to create new forms of agency but also, I think, to aspire toward that old ideal of Truth even as we remain aware of the interferences that will always arise from personal investments brought to the classroom by students and teacher alike, each with their own truths that require respect. Like feminism, postcolonialism has always had an activist agenda: to decolonize the mind, as Ngugi memorably put it, but also to create a more equitable world than imperialism offered. Now that neo-liberal globalization appears to have replaced both colonialism and neocolonialism with its own particular versions of inequity, the goal remains the same although the methods may differ. According to Spivak: “The necessary collective efforts are to change laws, relations of production, systems of education, and health care” (Critique 383). In Canada, but not everywhere, most of these remain matters largely within the control of the nation although that autonomy is eroding in each domain.

Spivak is careful not to label this the “real” work, as if the work in the classroom were secondary. These collective efforts may be necessary to create the goal of a just society, but the work of teaching can both seek to perform that goal and create the conditions to make it happen within the world outside the classroom. Spivak continues: “But without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact, nothing will stick” (383). Such a statement needs careful elaboration. Postcolonial pedagogy does aim to change minds and change the world, yet it cannot fall into the pedagogical assumptions that once made conversion such a potent ally of imperialism. Gauri Viswanathan’s insistence on “the need to historicize conversion not only as a spiritual but also a political activity” has helped me to see the sources of my unease with this term in its dual historical role of embodying
“assimilation and dissent” (xvii) as well as in “modernity’s invention of religious fundamentalism as its necessary antithesis,” a subject little addressed in antiorientalist and postcolonial critiques (xiv). I am persuaded by Viswanathan’s argument that we currently lack “an adequate vocabulary” to deal with the worldliness of conversion as a border-crossing process, despite the “many instances of conversion movements accompanying the fight against racism, sexism, and colonialism” (xvi). Education is about responsible mind-changing, yet is often so imbricated in pedagogies of coercion and irresponsible persuasion that it is still difficult to write about how the process envisioned by Spivak might proceed.

Through postcolonial pedagogy, the teacher will be changed along with her students, and the commitment to changing cannot end with the end of the school year. Ultimately, postcolonial pedagogy aims to encourage citizens desirous and capable of creating a better world, one founded on a respect for all humanity and for the natural world we inhabit. But the ultimate effect of the “one-on-one responsible contact” that Spivak calls for, and that can take place in the literature classroom, between teacher and student, between student and student, and between text and student, cannot be predicted or controlled. Postcolonial pedagogy should not be in the business of producing converts to a cause, however worthy, because all causes can be perverted. The goal of postcolonial work can never be allowed to congeal into a fixed program because there is an inherent tendency in any form of fixity to become oppressive, and because all movements toward liberation can be co-opted. A department with too coherent a vision of its mission, however progressive that vision may be, can therefore feel constraining in a way that a department riven by genuine disagreements will not, as long as there is respect and students are not enlisted to take sides.

This is why Spivak insists that the mind-changing must happen on both sides, and remain a constant process with no clear end in sight other than that “impossible, undivided world of which one must dream, in view of the impossibility of which one must work, obsessively” (Critique 382). Her analogy here is to Jacques Derrida’s definition of Ethics as “the experience of the impossible” (427) and his insistence that “Justice cannot pass in a direct line to law; that line is a non-passage, an aporia. Yet justice is disclosed in law, even as its own effacement” (427). Spivak’s book is itself a teacherly demonstration of how such a “concept-metaphor of the ‘experience of the impossible’” (426) works. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* seeks to effect that “one-on-one mind-changing” through calling into being a new kind of reader, one who reads with “critical intimacy” to develop “transnational literacy.”
Mieke Bal argues that “reading is what the book is about, what it does, and what it teaches.” It “teaches how to read, otherwise.” This ‘otherwise’ is a “form of readerliness based on multiplicity” (2) that “deployes aesthetics to fight aesthetics” and to oppose “the rift between aesthetic and political literary work” (11). I see critical intimacy as consonant with the goals that John Mowitt sets for teaching literature: “to make people better able to comprehend the conditions and limits of their lives, and better able to translate this comprehension into the practical structuring of daily life at both the local and global levels” (Mowitt 55). It is a mode of reading that rejects “the tendency to equate thinking with problem solving, where reflection is subordinated to the requirements of efficacy” (Adorno & Horkheimer, cited in Mowitt 56). Therefore, as Ian Baucom notes, Spivak enacts “obliquity (the indirect route) as a form of reason” (419). Mark Sanders provides a more extended description of this process: “If putting oneself in the place of another is indispensible to ethics, it is inevitable for a reader; if there is an opening for the ethical in reading, and for the ethical to open from reading, it is this. Spivak’s point of intervention is to teach the reader to experience that place as (im)possible… and in so doing, to acknowledge complicity in actuating the texts and systemic geopolitical textuality that make it so” (7).

How does such a mode of reading serve the development of transnational literacy? Spivak claims: “It is my belief that a training in a literary habit of reading the world can attempt to put a curb on … superpower triumphalism only if does not perceive acknowledgement of complicity as an inconvenience” (Critique xii). Transnational literacy means more than reading widely and doing one’s homework, and it is not consonant with older notions of world literature or with surveying the territory through imperial eyes. Once again, I find John Mowitt suggestive here. He urges: “Let us drop the traditional obsession with being ‘well-rounded,’ and replace it with the aim of being ‘well-grounded.’”(63). Our conference logo, the plunging moose, may appear to have failed this test. But sometimes leaps into the unknown must precede grounding and the panoptical view must be abandoned to read with critical intimacy. To be grounded in the critically intimate recognition of the complicities of the local may be a student’s best defence from the “postcolonial exotic” so ably analyzed by Graham Huggan, if the trap of misperceiving “postcolonial teaching as an autoethnographic exercise in cultural translation” can be avoided (247).

Yet groundedness, and its defences against exotification are themselves threatened. Bauman believes that “localities are losing their
meaning-generating and meaning-negotiating capacity and are increasingly dependent on sense-giving and interpreting actions which they do not control” (2-3). This is why groundedness now must imply not only embeddedness in a specific locality but also an awareness of how that embeddedness is itself embedded within transnational structures. Huggan argues in *The Post-Colonial Exotic* that “postcolonial studies is situated within the context of a utopian pedagogic imaginary that simultaneously recognizes that the institutional constraints placed upon its political effectiveness may in fact form part of the field’s attractiveness—and its wider commercial appeal” (261). To get out of this double bind, the teacher will need to develop what Mark Sanders terms “an itinerary of agency in complicity” (1).

My own teaching has been influenced by pedagogical developments of the last two decades in which Gerald Graff’s notions of “teaching the conflicts” and metaphors of the conversation have assumed greater prominence but my understanding of postcolonial theory insists that such innovations in themselves are insufficient. Classroom work must be more than a conversation; it must become collaborative work dedicated to concentrated learning and unlearning, and to engagement with the issues of the times as they present themselves. My ideal classroom would provide a space where learning and unlearning could happen through dialogue based on mutual respect. (This paper addresses the reality of the classrooms I know and what happens within them, but questions around access remain crucial for postcolonial pedagogy. Who populates these classrooms and who is excluded from them? How can transnationally literate work move beyond the classroom walls? Now that I have written this paper, these other questions strike me as possibly more urgent.)

The majority of students I teach are self-selecting; they are looking for ways to challenge the constructions of their own privilege and the institutional structures that both benefit and thwart them but they also need to practice negotiating challenge and working with uncertainties. Such questioning can begin to form a common ground for postcolonial inquiry but that ground needs to be established by each new group in its own way. It is hard to write about teaching. Each classroom dynamic is different; each class creates its own community. What works with one group fails with another. What works one day may fail another. The teacher must always be prepared to shift strategies, reconsider goals, adapt to the demands of an ever-changing present. Yet while the particular mix of classroom dynamics, expectations, and privileges to be unlearned (for teacher and for student) may differ from group to group, some generalizations may be ventured
about the contexts in which we teach. These include contexts of privilege, the forms of sanctioned ignorance that official cultural literacy and the discipline promote, and the classroom as a workplace, in which teachers and students “are always gendered, raced, and classed workers” (Briskin & Coulter 254).

My provisional title for this paper named “(mis) understandings in the classroom” as its focus because I wanted to destabilize accepted binaries between understanding and misunderstanding, learning and unlearning, what is taken and what is mis-taken, not just to underline the ways in which uses of theory may be creatively deployed in what Spivak terms “reconstellative or scrupulously mistaken” (Critique 128) ways, but also to highlight the productive potential within those very moments we are taught to fear and to avoid: moments when we might be caught out not knowing; asking a stupid question; making a mistake. In the postcolonial classroom these can be the sources of productive play that might eventually lead to decolonizing the classroom. I encourage what might seem to be obvious or redundant questions in the classroom because I believe that there is no such thing as an unproductive question. If one student is uncertain or confused, then that feeling is likely to be shared. The questions that surprise us, give us pause, momentarily silence us as we wonder where to begin in trying to formulate an answer, are exactly the kind of questions that we need, as we recraft our beginnings to match where our students begin. Working against the self-censorship that silences what might be construed as the stupid question is not an easy task, as the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes reminds us. Progressive pedagogies have encouraged us to work with what each student brings to the classroom setting, but they tend to stress the positive value of what students already know, but do not realize they know. While that is important, what they really do not know is also a crucial starting point for discussion. We need to find ways of eliciting and sharing ignorances that remedy that failing without stigmatizing the person who dares to ask what might appear to be a stupid question. We need to be able to turn such questions toward examination of how ignorance is itself actively produced and how certain forms of ignorance actually receive social sanction and reward. Increasingly, more and more areas of ignorance losing their stigma as anti-intellectualism receives official sanction from many sources of traditional authority, such as the presidency of the United States. I have become intrigued by the forms of “sanctioned ignorance” that we bring to the classroom, those forms of ignorance that we feel no need to remedy, and indeed, may wish to protect.
I speculate that much of the cross-talk in my classrooms come from such sources. I find great value in Spivak’s notion of “unlearning our privilege as our loss.” But that privilege feeds on forms of sanctioned ignorance that are so close to our sense of who we are that they are very hard to address through logical analysis alone. In such situations, trying to read through “critical intimacy” may help break blockages. Some forms of sanctioned ignorance are tied up with our national identity as Canadians; the interplay of pride in multiculturalism and denial of structural racism, analyzed so well by Smaro Kamboureli, Roy Miki, and Sherene Razack, is a particularly sensitive area, as are the issues of indigenous land claims, rights and creativity. In a tangential comment, Spivak suggests that “those who have stayed in place for more than thirty thousand years” present a “radical limit” that is “the name of the other of the question of diaspora” (402). Similarly, Arif Dirlik suggests that “indigenism may be of paradigmatic significance in contemporary politics globally” (237). Such comments set an agenda still to be worked through, one that will be particularly important for expanding Canadian postcolonial dialogues in future.

Working through the cross-talk, those moments when the normal circuits of give and take discussion get broken, is part of the task of postcolonial pedagogy as I understand it. But prompting that cross-talk in the first place, so that it can be worked through, is essential. Too often misguided notions of politeness prevent these debates from emerging. We must constantly seek strategies to bring such muted disagreements to the fore and in ways that allow them to do their productive work. One tactic that has worked for me is the assignment of short response pieces or position papers that students may choose to deliver on the first day a new set of readings are assigned. Several of these replace the traditional seminar presentation. By having a group of students present their responses in sequence before opening discussion to the class, it is possible to stage contradictory readings in such a way as to open further discussion rather than forcing the premature taking of sides. With four radically different readings of a single text unfolding in sequence, it becomes easier for the presenters and their listeners to entertain alternative possibilities to their own earlier certainties without getting caught up in the kind of competitive rivalries that a formal debate or paired seminar and previously assigned seminar response encourage.

George Elliott Clarke’s play, Whylah Falls (an adaptation of his award-winning long poem) proved a lightning rod for hotly contested ideological differences among my students that might have led to a hardening of positions without the blessing of this strategy. Instead, our
understanding of the play and of the disagreements that separated us became enriched by this exercise in collaborative listening and the discussion to which it eventually gave rise. The play’s positioning between black Atlantic and black Canadian discourses further enabled our discussions of what was at stake in this staging of multiple forms of belonging, and to move beyond the binary of racist/anti-racist that had sometimes stymied earlier class discussions.

This working-through is what distinguishes postcolonial pedagogy from nationalist pedagogy. A nationalist pedagogy does not work through the cross-talk. A nationalist pedagogy smooths it over, silences it, or stereotypes it, and refuses it the patient attention it deserves. The hostility within some segments of the Canadian literature establishment to postcolonial theory suggests that investigating the cross-talk between the mandates of Canadian literature and those of postcolonial pedagogy might generate some useful insights into both.

Our responses to “Whylah Falls” coalesced in an astonishing range of differences that together enriched our appreciation of Clarke’s achievement, of the text’s dialogues with intersecting local and global discourses, and of our combined strength as a collaborative group. I am experiencing similar moments of wonder, illumination, and excitement as the interdisciplinary Major Collaborative Research Group with which I am currently working on globalization and autonomy, continues to identify and negotiate our genuine differences in approach. For its full development, “transnational literacy” will require such cross- and inter-disciplinary collaboration. In the meantime, as Spivak, suggests, the individual teacher “can break rules” (xiii). What does she mean by this? I think that she is warning against the arrogant notion that any single person may practice interdisciplinarity on her own with the erudition that it demands while also insisting that it is still possible to question the unspoken division of labour that accompanies disciplinary expertise by breaking the rules that divide disciplines, obscuring our ability to draw connections across them. For Spivak, however, it is important to earn the right to break rules by first doing one’s homework, without ever assuming that such homework will be sufficient. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason enacts this kind of rule-breaking cross-talk, thinking through and across the disciplines of Philosophy, Literature, History, and Cultural Studies.

Many of the formal pedagogical strategies entrenched within the university, and the student expectations that they create about what learning entails, discourage this kind of rule-breaking and the questions that it raises. Richard Cavell has written compellingly about his own postcolonial
pedagogical strategies in working against the “queen for a day” model for organizing the graduate seminar, a model in which each student takes a turn to be authority on a topic, without fundamentally challenging the authoritarian structure of the arrangement. If teachers seeking to introduce postcolonial pedagogies into the classroom think that this model does not go far enough in democratizing the classroom, some students are now asking for even this seminar model to be replaced by graduate lecture courses. Such requests are fuelled by the belief that education can be comprehensive, that students have gaps to fill, and lectures are the quickest way to fill them. They also assume that mastery of a topic is still possible. The coverage model, the canon, and even notions of opening up the canon have each worked against the teaching of postcolonial literatures in an equitable fashion within the English department. Such models also work against integrating postcolonial pedagogies across the curriculum.

In insisting that learning involves unlearning, a process that is slow, unending, and dependent on the give and take of a classroom where questions are encouraged, postcolonial pedagogies swim against the currents of the times. If traditional teaching addresses forms of ignorance deemed unacceptable, then postcolonial pedagogy addresses those forms of “sanctioned ignorance” that are often rewarded and may exist everywhere, including among “the theoretical elite” (Spivak 1999: x).

What are the particular forms of sanctioned ignorance encouraged by Canadian literature and postcolonial study in the classroom? Sherene Razack has identified an agenda for critique in three “organizing constructs that most often enabled students to deny that oppression existed: rights thinking, essential woman, and the culturalization of differences” (17). Each of these may be confused with postcolonial agendas, which are also generating their own forms of sanctioned ignorance. We must continue asking Spivak’s question: “in what interest are differences defined?” (357). And Razack’s question: “Where am I in this picture” (170). Transnational literacy involves thinking against the grain of what we think we know and don’t know; it demands alertness to the changing function of what it means to take certain positions within local and global contexts. Spivak’s book enacts the difficulty of negotiating this changing terrain and unhinging “the clashing machinery” (397) of the ideological interferences that distort understanding of it, and hence our access to agency within it. For Spivak, transnational literacy means rethinking “globality away from the U.S. melting pot” (402). Part of the task before those of us engaged in bringing postcolonial pedagogies into Canadian literature classrooms will be to specify what transnational literacy might mean for Canadians. How can we begin to
rethink globality away from our own forms of sanctioned ignorance and reground it through postcolonial pedagogies that address our here and now? As I have suggested in this paper, comparative postcolonial contexts as well as pedagogical strategies may be employed to begin engaging in such work, but the task of elaborating the many dimensions of this challenge remain before us.

Works Cited


Sardar, Ziauddin. “Above, Beyond, and at the Center of the Science Wars: A

Endnotes

1 I am grateful to all the students in this class, who generously shared the explorations on which this paper is based with me, and to the three groups of students in classes in postcolonial theory who helped me to grapple with the complexities of Spivak’s text. Much of the following discussion is based on their insights. Conversations with Jessica Schagerl and Heike Harting, postdoctoral fellow at Western, have been particularly illuminating. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who funded “Postcolonialism: the Critical Heritage,” from which much of this work initially derived, and who more recently have funded “The Ends of Postcolonialism” and “Globalization and Autonomy,” which are enabling me to develop this work further with a dedicated group of graduate and undergraduate students. The Brand essay we discussed was “Notes for Writing Thru Race.” “Writing Thru Race”, a writers’ conference limiting enrollment to “First Nations Writers and Writers of Colour,” attracted the attention of the media February to May 1994, focussing debates on competing understandings of Canadian national identity, multiculturalism, and race. For a fuller analysis, see Roy Miki, pp.144-159, Monika Kin Gagnon, pp.66-71, Chelva Kanaganayakam. Also, for a brief contextualization of this issue within larger debates, see Daniel Coleman and Donald Goellnicht, pp.1-29.

2 See especially Chapter Three, endnotes 21 and 22 and Chapter Four.

3 See Enoch Padolsky for a useful account of multiculturalism and its current debates, which is attentive to postcolonial questions. For more extended analysis, see Bannerji and Mackey. Walter Mignolo is very helpful in situating contemporary multicultural discussions historically.
4 For more of this history, see *A Shaping of Connections: Commonwealth Literature Studies—Then and Now*, Hena Maes-Jelinek, Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford (eds.). Sydney: Dangaroo, 1989.

5 This paper is written from within my own placement within a university English department, where the question of Quebec is acknowledged but often bracketed. Quebec has its own history of engagements with postcolonial theory and Quebec literature has its own history of development within university French departments that I cannot elaborate here. Nonetheless, engagement with the issues raised by Quebec remain important, although they are configured quite differently, within Canadian and postcolonial studies. Given institutional constraints, however, these questions seldom arise in significant ways within the pedagogical practices I am considering here. Perhaps they should. Reconfiguring issues and reconstellating fields is part of what I take these conference proceedings to be about. I am grateful to colleagues at Guelph and Western for guidance in thinking through issues of curricular as well as pedagogical reform.

6 It could be useful to explore the synergies between this notion of ‘transnational literacy’ as advocated by Spivak, and how it might correspond to Walter Mignolo’s development of the concept of “critical cosmopolitanism,” on the one hand, and Arif Dirlik’s notion of “critical localism,” on the other.

7 Jennifer Wenzel writes about trying to apply these principles, as articulated earlier in Spivak’s *Imaginary Maps*, to her reading of this text.