Encountering “Third World Women”: Rac(e)ing the Global in a U.S. Classroom

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Embodiments
I am actually projecting my own body forward through my words. I am in/scribing rather than erasing it. First, I must draw attention to it, focus this gaze, let it develop me into a construct. Then I take this construct, this “South Asian woman,” and break it up piece by piece. In every sense, they are learning on my body. I am the teacher, my body is offered up to them to learn from, the room is an arena, a stage, an amphitheatre. I am an actor in a theatre of cruelty.
—Himani Bannerji (1995: 102)

In January 1995 I presented my first lecture in cultural anthropology at the University of California, Riverside, a midsize campus in the state university system. Of the 170 students who were shopping around for their quarter courses, I knew that most would use this freshman-level class as a general-education requirement for their bachelor’s degrees. I began my lecture by emphasizing that the anthropology to which they would be introduced would not encourage cheerful consumption of colorful difference elsewhere: National Geographic–style exposure to the titillating delights of exotic veils and exposed eyes; naked breasts; or unnatural, elongated, braceleted necks. I noted immediately that these gendered bodies were implicated in the historicized frames of “our” gaze.
I introduced my approach to anthropology by presenting my background as an Indian woman who had spent an early childhood in Nigeria and teenage years in northern India before coming to the United States. So my approach to anthropology was mediated by an education afforded by a tricontinental diaspora and its post/colonial histories. Thus the course material would explore the histories of imperialism, colonialism, and power as it examined cultural and social practices both within and outside the United States. I also emphasized that the syllabus made clear what kinds of material we were reading and, now that they had heard my own stance toward the class, that they should be well informed about what the rest of the quarter would entail. I also assured them that the class would be taught every quarter by other colleagues in case they did not want to learn from my set of narratives. Satisfied that my introductory lecture had been well presented and organized, I ended the class and began to meet with individual students. Before I left the lecture hall, I saw a small piece of paper folded on the lectern. In neat block letters, it said: “Dear Professor: There are ten of us in this class who hate you. We are not interested in anything you say. You are racist and you should realize that. Change the way you teach or you will have no one left in your class. We are telling you this for your own good as a teacher.” The note was unsigned.

The shock to my earlier complacency about my lecture performance was sudden. Being called a racist, criticized for the way I teach, and threatened offered me an important object lesson about how quickly some student perceptions of professorial subject positioning, and the kind of material to be taught—transnational and cross-cultural issues within a critical, anti-imperial frame—would construct the pedagogical arena as a minefield. I was aware also that naming my own subject position, to the extent that I did, was enough to elicit a sense of defensiveness.

Though I had not clearly articulated to myself what teaching philosophy to follow, I understood immediately that what, how, and who we are as instructors and students deeply inflects the apprehension and comprehension of our engagement with difference. That engagement contains, by the very nature of the pedagogical critique, conflict and resistance in ways that can be profoundly problematic not only for students but also for teachers whose speaking authority may be mediated by race, ethnicity, national origin, class, and sexual orientation.

This episode also taught me that as a post/colonial immigrant woman whose teaching style was radical and passionate, I would have to remain con-
tinuously alert to the discursive and bodied effects of “teaching the global.” Still, I recognized that such a pedagogy would not necessarily result in a safe, benevolent, and enriching experience for me or for all of my students.

I would also have to tackle the why of my own pedagogical project: Why was it important that I teach passionately in the face of student indifference and resistance? Did it matter for anything larger than my own advancement? My own alienness, to some students in the “Inland Empire” provinces of southern California, and my own alienation vis-à-vis the national and regional landscape of my adoption were structurally tangled. I hoped, however, that some of these entanglements would demonstrate what was at stake in our encounters with otherness.

Let me pose some general questions about pedagogies of the “global” as a way to mark the stakes. These questions work through two linked registers. First, what are the purposes and effects of teaching “other” cultures in this era of globalization? To what end do we teach global and transnational literacy to U.S. students? Do these literacies enable or disable the logic of unifocal capitalist expansion for the global North? Second, how can transnational and cross-cultural literacies affect fault lines of power and difference at the center of empire, here in the United States? How are internal conflicts concerning diversity and representation to be addressed through teaching the global? What is the significance of “locality” and local politics within the often overwhelming effects of globalization?

Debates about “internationalizing” curricular practices, about the effects of globalization on the university, and about the impact of debates concerning multiculturalism encompass a vast literature. Numerous scholars have written about how the “diversity” issue has challenged and reconstituted the mission of “liberal education” (see Giroux and McLaren 1994; Mohanty 1994; Roman and Eyre 1997). These debates have ranged around the “canon” (Arthur and Shapiro 1995); representations of race, class, or gender material (McCarthy and Crichlow 1993; James 1998); the relationship of education to democracy (Roman and Eyre 1997); and, more broadly, the university’s relationship to an increasingly globalized, diverse civil society. Political and theoretical investigations of nation (Bannerji 1997), citizenship, immigration, language, sexuality, race, class, and gender are all implicated.

My essay seeks to ground these general questions by looking at the daily, ordinary aspects of cultural life in one women’s-studies classroom where gender, globality, and difference were engaged. It does so by following the basic charge of my disciplinary training in anthropology: that nuanced, careful, and detailed examinations of specific cultural practices may bring
insights into these more universal—dare I say, global—questions. It also attends to issues of agency and strategy that are often lost in abstract discussions within critical pedagogy and cultural theory (Gore 1993: 34). I attempt to combine an ethnographic analysis of classroom instruction (the purview of scholars writing feminist pedagogy from women’s studies) with the bigger theoretical questions (of critical pedagogy and cultural studies) that I have already posed. However, I treat the latter by viewing them through the interpretive lens of contradictory social practices. Thus I hope to create a dialectical engagement between the micropolitics of one classroom and the larger debates about diversity and “teaching culture” in U.S. educational institutions.

In brief, this is an essay about a comparative women’s-studies class on international and U.S. women’s politics that engages student and professorial reflections on course material, classroom dialogue, and broad issues of institutional authority. Yet, as the epigraph and my own anecdote suggest, it also employs what Mary E. John (1996: 18), for other purposes, calls “an anthropology in reverse.” I, too, seek an anthropological stance of reversal: to write as a privileged “native woman” about the political landscapes of my journeys “West,” into the very core of the spaces where hegemonic knowledges about “others” are created, sustained, and celebrated.

The Institutional Site

The University of California, Riverside (UCR), is one of the newer members of the UC system, founded in the 1950s. It is an hour and a half east of Los Angeles. Demographic growth and changes, debates about affirmative action, and the official rescinding of affirmative action within UC policy in the mid-1990s resulted in an administrative imperative: courses on “diversity” had to be encouraged, partly because many entering UCR students hailed from underrepresented minority and immigrant communities. When I began teaching there in 1995, the climate for teaching “multicultural” courses was, and it remains, encouraging.

However, I was going to teach these courses within women’s studies, which had been newly constituted as a department and, like many programs of its kind on the institutional margins, was struggling for intellectual legitimacy. Yet it was heartening that faculty committed to feminist studies in the university had struggled for and won departmental status. Department administrators, hopeful of growth in the future, set their own curricular agendas, and as a result I was encouraged to design courses focusing on international and U.S. minority-based women’s politics. Since 1995 the department has
grown in strength, and the faculty is developing a coherent international and comparative women’s-studies curriculum. When I taught the course from which I cull the analysis here, however, I was institutionally isolated, though never censored with regard to course design or delivery. I recognized that if I were to remain an educator in this research institution, I had to make some meaning of my teaching “work” by using the cultural and political contradictions of the classroom to find a language of accountability for myself and my students.

I was also grateful to begin teaching at a time when the third wave of the U.S. women’s movement had demonstrated the importance of teaching women’s issues through critical cross-cultural and antiracist perspectives. These critiques have influenced curricular practice significantly. Only recently have readings on international women’s issues been linked comparatively and critically to these U.S.-centric critiques of gender and difference. Because of both kinds of critique, as well as the more basic administrative fiat concerning diversity, I was confident in offering a comparative international women’s-studies course.

I taught the course, “Women, Politics, and Social Movements in Global Perspectives,” in the fall of 1999. It was cross-listed in women’s studies and anthropology, and the syllabus focused on women’s politics and social movements in South and East Asia, the Middle East, and the United States. Thirty students took the course. Significantly, the two men who remained enrolled had registered through the anthropology department and not women’s studies. Like most small UCR classes, this one was diverse except for African American and Native American representation. One African American woman took the course, and the rest of the class was divided evenly among Chicana/Latina, Asian, and white students.

Conventional lectures were interspersed with films, and on some days the class broke into five groups. General topics and questions were written and discussed within the groups, and these “collective” notes were handed in. Sometimes I typed them out into a “scroll” that I handed back to the class. It became the basis of classroom discussions the following day. Besides taking midterm and final examinations, the students were required to write several free-form “think pieces” about material covered in class. I did not give specific questions but encouraged the students to reflect on class material and connect it to their own experiences.
Thrown into Reverse: Toward a Critical Autoethnography

My “anthropology in reverse” employs the basic tools of fieldwork to study the reception and analysis of course material in oral and written forms. The classroom is an ethnographic site in which “coming to voice” is a complicated task of translation about cultural difference. Students and professor traverse the maps of power through moments of silence, orality, and text. These “voicings,” and their translations into the immediate public sphere of the classroom, are the stuff of cultural and historical process. They are translations of power through which difference is “actualized” by student and professor. They suggest that classroom dialogue and debate are not static reproductions of cultural politics “out there.” Rather, they enact a micropolitics that is historically immanent and dialectical. Tense outbursts, silence, and careful discussions codify the terms of difference as actual social practice. Couched in terms of institutional power, these conversations do not merely refract cultural theories; they are constitutive of “culture” and social practice in themselves.

I deploy a critical ethnographic method in two substantive ways. However, both are subsumed in what is commonly understood in anthropology as an interpretive, hermeneutic approach to cultural analysis. Such an interpretive, Geertzian, “thick description” approach is made “critical” by the close attention I pay to power and process in the narratives that follow.

This essay is “autoethnographic” as much as it is a framing of the wider politics of teaching gender, difference, and globality. From the beginning I train a reflexive lens on my practice as both teacher and author of these representations (Hesford 1999: xxxiii). I am an “insider” in the culture of the academy: a member of an occupational caste, the professoriate, that is institutionally authorized to transmit a certain expertise and knowledge. My relationship to students, and vice versa, encompasses multiple reflexive postures that recognize an “ethics of enunciation . . . the social relations of discourse . . . and the places of authority constructed for ourselves and students” (Grossberg 1994: 17). In my case, such questions of power and authority also become vexed when my own difference is read as threatening, inferior, or colonized. Authority is turned into paradox. For the moment, however, my premise is that educational practices are ethically constituted within power relations, and a closer look at teaching philosophy and strategy, as well as at the limits of reflexivity, is called for.

Before embarking on a discussion of the “ethics of enunciation,” it is important that I assert that my professorial self-positioning, and my authorial voice, seeks to move beyond its autobiographical indulgences. I make an
attempt to carve a conceptual and practical space through which the internal questions of ethics and power are connected to the implications of collective social practice well beyond the classroom walls. In making visible the politics of my location, I search for the relationship of experience, reflection, judgment, and action to my acts of knowing and to the paradigms of knowledge they entail (see James 1998: 77).

In terms of my teaching selfhood, my power to represent seems self-evident. By asserting such a location, however, I do not seek to blur the lines of power that define professor-student relationships and the privilege of textual authorship or to blunt the important comparative histories in which women’s politics is embedded. I highlight this autopolitics of location in the classroom as one pathway through which students can reflect on their own stances about global and international women’s politics. I recognize that coming to the general through particular, semi-autobiographical reflections is compelling and effective. It may also “legitimize the risks that students are asked to take in the course” (Romney, Tatum, and Jones 1992: 101). These strategies build on personal experience as a starting point. Yet such an autobiographical impulse also “points one beyond oneself: [it] requires making explicit the formative relations one has had with the outer world” (Kass 1995: 93). That oscillation between selfhood and the world that has shaped it is central to my teaching ontology.

But such a strategic opening of teaching selfhood has significant limits. While my intention (through examples) is to seek reflections about social and collective history through a sense of being-in-the-world, it is a strategy that may encourage a rhetoric of confession that fragments into disconnected analysis, unanchored to broader theoretical and historical discussions. Such a rhetoric can prevent a conversation about collective experience linked to the larger themes. Political experience is then understood, or misunderstood, as “fundamentally individual and atomistic” (Mohanty 1994: 156; see also Beck 1983).

Teaching selfhood, and encouraging student reflections on the “politics of location,” is then a tricky proposition, especially when my central aim is to explore women’s collective histories. While such individual, autobiographical reflections might cultivate a certain thoughtfulness, an “ability and disposition to think for oneself and especially about one’s self” (Kass 1995: 93), it can be reified into a “sentimental” and liberal pedagogy that does not see past its own atomized stances. If, however, the reflexive self serves as a lens through which wider connections can be glimpsed, then the risk is worth taking. In this essay classroom reflections on the connections, and contradic-
tions, of self-to-experience offer a pedagogy in which knowing may result in an actualized, dialogical act.

Furthermore, this is a critical ethnographic exercise inextricably connected to the larger political and historical issues addressed directly in the course material. What is difference, and what are its codifications in cultural practice? How do specific historical processes illuminate the vectors of power through which gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality travel? What does this mean to those of us engaged in these discussions in this geopolitical space? How are our discussions implicated in the politics of national borders, on this side of imperial power?

To engage what the global might mean critically in the U.S. classroom, I argue, is no mere ethnographic indulgence in the microrhetorics of a small public university classroom: these discussions grasp toward another kind of relationality, perhaps even a rethinking of citizenship or power—even of ethical responsibility—in a world rife with inequities offered for our leisurely meditations.

Wor(l)d(ing) the Course Analysis

Two moments of analysis frame the central themes of the course. The central objective of the course is to introduce Third World women’s issues by placing national and regional specificities in colonial and post/colonial frames. I use the term *Third World women* (in the title of this essay, in the essay itself, and in the classroom) to underscore my own stance to the material I present. I am aware that terms such as *Third World women* and *women of color* might be viewed as anachronistic reinscriptions of a homogenizing, even a colonizing, dichotomy. For this reason, my course title avoids the former term, though the course’s themes focus on the politics of subordinated women in the countries of the global South and in the United States.

However, I continue to use the term to pay tribute to the important antiracist, class-based critiques of the U.S. women’s movement, which began in the 1980s. During this time such terms were seized by various constituencies of minority women and used to construct a powerful language opposed to the hegemonic, exclusive politics of the mainstream women’s movement. The third wave emerged from the politics of the street, which also evolved on the terrain of academic knowledge production.

The oppositional stances of feminist theorizing and practice altered their direction in the United States. This epistemological and political challenge also created divisions in which a comparative and internationalist women’s studies could be envisioned in the U.S. university.

Furthermore, the
Third World continues to be a powerful referent for numerous heterogeneous international women’s groups. In the debates about North/South relations, Third World organizing remains a prominent category, reappropriated as a signal of decolonization in the dynamics of globalization. Despite its limits as a category, I find its historical and political referent significant for my pedagogical strategy as a woman who also comes from the global South.

Comparative framings are also underscored in the course. Links between various histories are emphasized through discussions of common themes: race, nation, sexuality, ethnicity, and class. Women’s histories in India and China introduce these themes within specific national matrices. By the third week these themes move inward, as it were, and the course begins to focus on parallel issues in U.S. women’s politics. National (U.S.) and international histories are thus juxtaposed. Interrogations of empire, colony, and nation are viewed through discourses of home, citizenship, and immigration in the U.S. context.

However, these interrogations are not placed side by side in binary comparisons. Rather, a historical and cartographic relationship between multiple sites is maintained in discussions. The course material insists on an epistemological shift in the way “other” women are perceived and known from a North American vantage by complicating the binary of First World/Third World. Instead of fixing discussions of women in distant cultural areas, and thereby mapping an episteme of incommensurability, I emphasize causal and transnational connections.

The Third World within the United States is only one instance of such epistemic and cartographic shifts. Such dialectical interrogations “take on a certain urgency in a world where the fate of first world citizens is inextricably tied to the fate of refugees, exiles, migrants, immigrants in the first world, and of similar constituencies in the rest of the world” (Mohanty 1997: xvi). Teaching and encountering Third World women demands a pedagogical strategy that emphasizes the politics of coimplication (Mohanty 1994: 154) between transnational and post/colonial women’s politics. Such an emphasis begs the scrutiny of a second analytic moment: that is, how the objective of unsettling the cartographies of knowing “other” women is translated into the oral and textual practices in the class.
Cartographies and Coimplications
The central issue, then, is not one of merely acknowledging difference; rather, the more difficult question concerns the kinds of difference that are acknowledged and engaged. Difference seen as a benign variation, for instance, rather than as conflict, struggle, or the threat of disruption, bypasses power as well as to suggest a harmonious, empty pluralism.
—Mohanty (1994: 146)

Naming
In the introductory days of the course I name the “problem” of teaching Third World women from within the United States: that the complexity of the historical and cultural material is often overshadowed by stereotypes about the victimization and passivity of women in other parts of the world. Naming the epistemological problem at the outset alerts students not only to my approach to the material but to our national location in terms of the ways “others” are classified. This is a strategic declaration, because I want it to be clear that my agenda is multipronged: to do justice to historical specificities and to draw out themes of comparison as well as to think about self and institutional location within the class itself—and about the class’s own locations of power vis-à-vis the study of “other” women.

Beginning with the institutional setting of the classroom itself, I suggest that questions of power and subordination (of speech and silence) are relevant not only to an analysis of international women’s politics but to the cultural and historical practices of university classrooms. Pedagogy is a practice that can bridge these two seemingly different arenas of engagement.

I demonstrate the instability of categories like “the Third World” first by asserting my subject position and drawing out some of its investments: I am an immigrant South Asian woman whose journey into the U.S. academy has been mediated by the politics of nation and citizenship, the privileges of class, and post/colonial histories that have informed my education and its stances. I use the metaphor of travel advisedly in this oral presentation by contrasting the ways power and inequity mark the variousness of immigrant journeys to the United States. This, too, is a strategic move, because I am aware that many students wrestle with questions of place in their own immigrant experiences. My commentary about the privileges of bourgeois post/colonial travel gestures to both connection and disjunction with those experiences.

Through this commentary I emphasize a larger point: that categories such as “the Third World” are products of history as much as we are subjects
of it, whether or not we have immigrated from elsewhere and whether or not we seek to disavow, or to connect to, our roots, particularly if they spring from a third, implicitly lesser place. Locating the Third World within linguistic and historical frames is an urgent task, and it is purposefully unsettling. Thus I again underscore the problems of studying Third World women’s politics because of its emergence from the nineteenth-century social-evolutionary paradigms of progress and development that constructed the theoretical and pragmatic terrains of imperial rule. I emphasize that commonsensical agreement with this telos of Western progress is emphasized in the media and thus that it is difficult to push past the homogenizing effects of binary linearity on the study of women in other parts of the world. Any complication of women’s politics has to contend with the historical mappings of otherness.

My tone is both declarative and reflexive. This is risky. I know how quickly students’ minds can shut down. But I want the students to understand clearly what kind of material they will encounter and the professorial investments that will mediate its translation in the classroom. A declarative tone is risky also because it foregrounds a sense of the political through a subjective lens and so is open to a range of criticisms. However, I want my students to be aware that the material and its presentation will be provocative, unsettling, even contentious.

I emphasize that, like any narrative, a course offers a partial, situated story. As one of its primary authors, I have a telling power. I hope that my students, as consumers of the stories presented, will recraft the scripts through dialogue and dissent. Yet as consumers, they need to make informed choices about whether they are prepared for such an expectation. If they stay in the course, I hope that they will be challenged to reflect on their own stances toward the politics of gender and difference that they will encounter.

Watching Women Out There

By the end of the first week, essays by bell hooks have introduced the basic connections among culture, gender, and pedagogy. We discuss how power animates these links. In the second and third weeks, material on Indian and Chinese women’s histories are presented. Articles and films are juxtaposed to underscore common themes: class inequities, rural and urban divides, regional stratifications, and the gendering of state policy and practice. An essay summarizing the history of pre- and postrevolutionary Chinese women’s movements (Xu 1995) is placed alongside the film Half the Sky: The Women of the Jiang Family (1995). The film offers a rich visual tapestry about three gen-
erations of Chinese women. Village scenes of a grandmother’s rituals are interwoven with her daughter’s struggle with separation from her husband and her growing involvement with women’s issues. Both women’s experiences are then juxtaposed to the third-generation worlds of granddaughters who talk fashion and negotiate extramarital affairs. Cleverly mixing images of foot-binding and cell phones, black-and-white photographs from the Cultural Revolution and vivid scenes of discotheques, the film locates Chinese women as historical agents in the vast, turbulent politics of twentieth-century China.

The film’s narrative mode is autobiographical and personal. The wider history is fleshed out through stories that are subjective and immediate. In one instance, a second-generation aunt/daughter speaks briefly about her marital separation and places it against the background of postrevolutionary China’s policy concerning marriage and divorce, rural labor, and the Cultural Revolution. This account is juxtaposed to her current involvement with women’s rights. We see her lecturing to a class of girls about the impact of consumerism (fashion, makeup) on self-esteem. In another ambiguous moment she works a family-crisis hotline and advises one woman to stay with her philandering husband so as not to rock the boat of family stability. The film’s narrative style not only animates a complex contemporary history of gender politics but prompts students to write about their own surprise at being able to connect with, and even relate to, the women of the Jiang family.

Pedagogies of Consciousness
Reflecting on how she has been challenged and surprised by the film, Sally Moore begins her think piece by suggesting that stereotypes are sedimented in one’s consciousness from very early on:11

I’ve never thought of myself as a racist or prejudiced person. But I guess everyone is just a little bit. I say this because I think that stereotyping is a type of prejudice. . . . For example, if I had a bad experience with a black woman, I would be overly cautious when dealing with another black woman. The same goes with people based on age and gender and combinations of the three. What I find most disturbing is that I don’t expect it of my own race. I find that I am a little shocked when I encounter a hostile white woman. When I think about it like this, I know that all people are human and that some are nice, some are mean, and some are in between. But when I am in a new situation, these thoughts that are embedded in my brain come out and I stereotype a person based on these thoughts.

I found myself doing this when . . . watching the film, “Half the Sky.” I was surprised to see so many similarities between our two cultures. The grandmother is set in her old traditional ways. The mother is in between the traditional and modern ways,
and the daughter is totally modern, dating both a married man and another boy. . . .
All of these things I could see in my own family. Perhaps not to as great a degree as this family but they are there. I think my main problem is not that I thought that this culture was still in the stone ages, but that I really didn’t think about it at all. And even still, I was not expecting to see what I did in that film. . . . My problem is that I am not familiar with other cultures. I know only what they show in television and in movies, and half the time, those portrayals are inaccurate—exaggerated for drama to make it more entertaining. I’ve always kind of known this about myself. The question now is will I try to change that?

Most telling and interesting is Moore’s assertion that the problem for her is not that she had any preconceived notions but that Chinese culture was simply not relevant to her worldview: “I really didn’t think about it at all.” But though the culture may not exist in her imagination of the actual, a significant binary is at play: the tension between “tradition” and “modernity.” Moore, however, unsettles the usual positioning of a traditional them and a modern us by asserting a subjective connection: “All of these things I could see in my own family.” What is most impressive is how she uses these broader reflections to question one influence on her perceptions about other cultures: a medium invested in portrayals that are “more entertaining.”

While Moore edges toward recognition of coimplication by mapping the stereotypes of her own perspectives about other cultures, Jill Wallach uses the Chinese example to question cultural relativism and the ethnocentrisms embedded in “our” views of “them.”

Aren’t we still often comparing their struggles to ours? Who doesn’t cringe when the Chinese woman says, “Stay with your husband.” We don’t want to say these things. We don’t even want to think them. We try to knock the ideas out of our heads, because we don’t want to be guilty of ethnocentrisms. We know that the Western solution to gender inequality is not the only solution, it is not necessarily the best solution. (And yet, the fact that I cannot even write that sentence without inserting the word “necessarily” illustrates how ethnocentric we still are.) At the same time, we measure their “progress” by our own standards, even if unconsciously, and by our “standards” the women in all these countries are still woefully oppressed and still have so much farther to go. “Why don’t they do something radical?” we think. Radical meaning making their culture more like ours, abiding by our particular idea of gender inequality.

Where does that leave us? We study women’s studies precisely because we do hold this particular cultural value of what gender equality is. However tolerant and antiracist we try to be, how do we ever get rid of the thought process that claims our definitions of gender equality as the “most correct”? How do we balance our desire for
women’s equality with sensitivity and respect for others’ cultural values that women themselves hold? Is it right to impose our concept of what it means to be equal onto other cultures? And if not, what does this say about our own values? Certainly not that they are “universal truths” of the way things ought to be. And if that is the case what are the implications for our own terms of feminism?

Wallach’s succinct interrogation about the “Western” solution or terms of “gender inequality” (and the feminist practices they entail) offers the primary problematic of Western feminisms and its international encounters. She argues that notions of “gender equality” do not travel easily because they remain embedded in assumptions of cultural superiority that imbue “our” definitions of what constitutes “radical” feminist practice. She gestures fleetingly toward deeper conceptual underpinnings within which “progress” laces Western perspectives on women’s views about family (the advice to stay with a philandering husband) and women’s subordination in other parts of the world. Wallach’s astute commentary offers reflexivity in the act of writing itself when she questions the choice of the word necessarily. This immediate attention to the vocabulary of her own argument is a keenly insightful example of how the positioned perspective can be examined.

For both Moore and Wallach, reflections on self-location move through the internal parameters of their own thought processes. When Moore examines the congealment of the thought patterns that create her stereotypes, she imagines an internal landscape that changes her perceptions of a “black woman” or a culture “out there.” When Wallach reflects on the assumptions that render “our” definitions of gender equality the “most correct,” she questions the very vocabulary through which “we” map “our” consciousness of difference—and its politics—in the lives of women far removed from us. This dialectical reflection between internal patterning and external apprehension is critical for a productive understanding of how “pedagogies of difference” are understood, translated, and articulated by students.

Moore’s and Wallach’s commentaries suggest the importance of recognizing the psychic pathways through which consciousness grasps unfamiliar worlds and codes this unfamiliarity into a negative sign of difference. Moore, for example, offers a reflection on the encounters with “black women” that sediment into blueprints for future stereotypes.

In their thickly textured commentaries both students demonstrate what Paulo Freire (1993) calls “conscientization,” or critical consciousness. For Freire, effective—and liberatory—pedagogy engages the development of reflexive consciousness (a consciousness-on-consciousness), or what criti-
cally questions the relationship of selfhood, being, and practice in the world. Critical consciousness, in this well-known formulation, is immanent and dialectical. In this conventional classroom, however, the end point of his radical pedagogy, conscientization for social liberation, is not directly tackled.

Yet in these two commentaries a specific geography of difference is engaged: that of Chinese women’s cultures removed from the immediacy of these North American students’ life experiences. Neither writer is Chinese American. But what happens to the syntax of “critical consciousness” when the politics of difference is only too familiar, not removed by the cartographies of distance? How does the move within more familiar territories, on “home” grounds, mediate the pedagogical terrain? Might these shifts map another epistemological politics of difference?

Pedagogies of Articulation and Risk
This is an affective pedagogy, a pedagogy of possibilities (but every possibility has to risk failure) and of agency. . . . It is a pedagogy which demands of students, not that they conform to some image of positional liberation nor even that they resist, but simply that they gain some understanding of their own involvement in the world, and in the making of their own future. Consequently, it neither starts with nor works within a set of texts, but, rather, deals with the formation of the popular, the cartographies of taste, stability, and mobility within which students are located.
—Lawrence Grossberg (1994: 18)

Rac(e)ing Tensions
After examining Indian and Chinese women’s politics, I present readings on Asian American women’s immigration and labor history as well as their experiences of exclusion from the mainstream women’s movement in the United States. I notice a slight tension in the classroom when Mitsuye Yamada’s (1983) autobiographical essay on Japanese American women’s experiences during the internment camp years is discussed. Because the politics of state rule (and its excesses and failures) has been discussed in the Chinese and Indian contexts, I make connections to overarching themes: nationhood, citizenship, and the state apparatus.

Yet Yamada’s explicit analysis of racialized exclusion from the mainstream U.S. women’s movement is met with dis-ease. Barely perceptible, it registers as a public silence when I begin to pose questions on the readings. By contrast, the students engaged with the Chinese and Indian material easily. Thus, despite flagging the homogenizing problem of the binary (First/Third World) in the latter material, I speculate that the knowledge maps of
China and India are distant enough that some sophisticated reflections can occur. Perhaps this epistemic distance, historically and territorially marked, constitutes a safe zone of knowing and understanding.

The fissure, somewhat visible when we discussed Asian American critiques of race and exclusion, cracks wide open when I move into close readings of African American women and the civil rights movement. Talking race within the too familiar binary of black/white history shifts our discussion into a space of discomfort, fear, unease. It is an unease that I share with students.\(^\text{12}\)

It is a pedagogy that works through several registers of text: the oral and visual, the written, and silence.

I introduce the topical shift by reiterating what I have noted in the discussion of Asian American women’s politics: that the politics and related discussions of race in this country are a minefield. I am aware, I tell them, from past experiences in the classroom, that invoking these issues (even naming the word *race*, for example) in the public domain of the classroom elicits a certain dis-ease that is difficult to pin down. This oral articulation is risky, but I follow Beverley Daniel Tatum’s (1992: 3) suggestion that by “calling” the collective unease, I can perhaps create a space for students to feel comfortable about voicing their own stances. I name this unease by placing myself squarely in it and asserting that the politics of identity is situated, not fixed, and that my own understanding of what it entails in the United States is learned, as an insider/outside. By emphasizing the in/out stance of binational and immigrant movements, I suggest that the students think of their own identity as something learned, situated, and relational. I assert that I will not assume students’ racial identity politics and that our conversations about race must remain both open and respectful.

(i have not written these points as lecture notes — i speak into the wide-open spaces, aware that this verbalization, this concoction of spoken words, is risky. i am vulnerable to the shuttered eyes, the indifferent eyes, the contemptuous eyes, and then, like magic, to the conviction and affirming surprise in some. . . . i am aware of only a heightened alertness when i speak, and a certain easing of breath. i am aware that these words have effects, ineffable certainly, but they have effects. i can only be hopeful. i want the words to come alive through dialogue and wonder if this will happen. But I am also aware that my need for “dialogue” might be problematic. What kind of dialogue do I seek? Will it paper over conflicts that need to be aired?)

Silence

The students are assigned the classic Combahee River Collective (1983 [1977]) essay on black women and feminism before I show the film *A Place of
Rage (1991). Angela Davis, June Jordan, and Alice Walker are featured prominently in this powerful documentary about African American women’s pivotal role in the survival of their communities. Poetry and testimonials concerning the civil rights movement and current predicaments (the politics of incarceration, drug abuse, police violence, and poverty) mesh to create an affecting documentary about the lineage of women who have struggled toward social justice. Jordan reads from several poems. In one, she remembers a young boy from her neighborhood, Bedford-Stuyvesant, who was chased to a rooftop and beaten by the police. She remembers this incident in her office and shortly afterward seizes on it by reading from a poem about police violence. In one line, repeated like a chorus, she asks, “What if for every black man they kill, we kill a cop?”

(i am sitting next to a woman who in earlier discussions has identified herself as from the “South.” She has talked about cultural stereotypes of southern white femininity. i assume she is white. Her leg shakes. She is clearly agitated and leaves the room. i tense. Will she come back? She does, but her face is ashen. Should i say anything to her?)

The film ends. I ask the students what they think. They are silent. There are only a few minutes left in the class period. I suggest that we need to think again about this silence, but to fill in the void I lecture on some of the themes and issues brought out in the film. The class ends. I am both troubled and energized by the silence because it is eloquent in its refusal: Of what? Indifference? Resistance? Fear? Validation? Somehow the visual and poetic voices of the film have constructed a silence pregnant with both taboo and possibility. When the class reconvenes, I push into the question of silence. I tell the students that I experience the atmosphere in the room as if I were swimming through molasses and we need to reflect on why this is so. I think out loud: Is this resistance? Is this fear? What is going on? No one answers, but I don’t speak further. I let the silence rise to a pitch. The weight of it, I am sure, will force out voicings. (Here I am aware of an ethical risk, noting again Hogue, Parker, and Miller’s [1998: 96] caveat about an instructor’s responsibility during discussions and silence concerning race.)

Talk

The woman who left the room during the film raises her hand. She appears nervous but remarks strongly that she was offended by Jordan’s poem that indicts police violence and by the line that talks about “killing a cop.” She notes that the “other side” of the story was not offered either in Jordan’s mem-
ory of the incident or in her poem. What is most objectionable to her is what she interprets as the poet’s call to violence. She considers it “inappropriate.”

Some students fidget. A woman a few seats behind her raises her hand. She disagrees with equal force, arguing that police injustice against her community is well documented. She does not understand why it is difficult to see that such incidents do happen. She talks about all the times her brothers have been pulled over by the police in the middle-class suburb in which her family lives. A bipolar debate is set in motion. The first student defends her position. I do not interject, because neither student “personalizes” the disagreement. The tension in the room is high.

Other students, from various ethnic and racial positions, break into the debate. One astutely suggests that we should ask whether Jordan meant her words literally. Was her poem rhetorical? Another student criticizes the first student for her assertion about the inappropriateness of the poem. When, indeed, is a poem “inappropriate”? On what terms does a reader judge this? What is a poet’s responsibility? How are standards of appropriate language created? Are we skating close to censorship?

I join the debate, moving it into a more general conversation about politics and art. The tension between the two students dissipates, though the other students who have spoken appear to side with the second student. I suggest that this poem has sparked the debate because it hits too close to home: the Rodney King case; the Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart Division scandal; and the Tyisha Miller case, in which a young black woman was killed by the Riverside Police Department in 1999, are perhaps immediate reminders of racial tensions between the police and African American communities in the area. The Miller case sparked community protests and the establishment of a citizenship review board on police action and accountability. Thus public debates about police action, in which analogous issues of race and class are raised, mediate our positions on one poem. The class period ends with my suggestion that the students continue to reflect on what has happened in the class as well as on the broader themes and issues that have been raised. I also thank them for their participation and courage in disagreeing with each other. The student who started the discussion rushes out.

Compiling a Palimpsest
The next set of think pieces trickles in. Many of them address the class discussion that followed our viewing of A Place of Rage and the larger debates about race, violence, and the politics of art that ensued. It is significant, though perhaps not surprising, that as a medium of relative anonymity, the
written word is the most popular mode of expression. Yet what is striking about these essays is that one specific commentary has triggered responses that connect it to other experiences of discrimination. Some of the essays are passionate and disturbing. They situate the oral conflict in several levels of inquiry: Can Jordan’s poem be taken literally, as a manifesto for violence? Can her indictment of police action be applied to race politics more broadly? Is all life equal in media portrayals of violence?

I present the essays as I would relatively unedited field notes from more traditional ethnographic contexts. In eastern India, where I conduct such fieldwork, transcripts of oral interviews are sometimes (though rarely) juxtaposed to the actual field journals. In the classroom my subjects offer a script whose discussion I do not explicitly ask for. The assignments are free-form, and the students choose what they write about. The important editorial decisions entail selecting a representative sample of commentaries about this discussion and headlining some of the basic positions staked out in it. I do not interpret these writings until the end of the class because I want them to be read as narratives, relatively and powerfully in situ.

**Taking It Literally: Objections**

*John Sandoval:* I happen to agree with my classmate that alleged this. She alleged that it was very inappropriate for Jordan to express this feeling. I think that she said this without thinking that people of all types were going to see this video, educated and non-educated. So the non-educated are going to take it literally and are going to be encouraged to do what she expressed in her poem. If she truly did not mean what she said literally, then she should have at least hinted perhaps not to take it literally. I, for one, hope that she did not mean it literally. Anyways, two wrong’s [sic] won’t make a right.

*Sally Forman:* Since our discussion in class concerning June Jordan’s poem, comments made in class have been bothering me. Pertaining to what she says, “if they kill a black boy, we kill a cop,” and someone agreed with that. She is black, and I understand that black people have been put through hell in this country and still are to some point. I just don’t understand how, every time a black person is killed by a cop, [killing] a cop . . . would solve anything. Maybe when June Jordan wrote the poem, it made more sense because racial hatred was more prevalent. But to say that things are the same today, I would have to disagree. Now, I know that there is definitely more racial hatred and prejudice going on than people would like to admit or even realize, but I don’t think it is the same as it was thirty or forty years ago. The subject of race has
been a big issue in the news recently also since the Tyisha Miller killing. It was automatically assumed that racial hatred was the motive, because she was black and the officers were all white. I have to wonder, though, if the same would be thought if she was white and the officers were black. Not a lot of cases are noticed if it is a black officer involved in a white person’s death. It is always a huge event, though, when it is white officers involved in a black person’s death. Do people really believe that black people are not prejudiced against white people? Maybe not at the grand scale of prejudice against blacks, but it is still there. I know I don’t have the history and experience that a black person does. But I don’t see how in today’s society . . . killing a cop every time a black boy is killed will do any good. Especially with crime so high these days, and every black death is not always an innocent one, since criminals come in all colors and most criminals are dangerous.

Gloria Valdez: I feel that June expressed the statement about killing a cop for every black boy killed, food for thought. She probably wanted to grab the attention of her audience and wanted them to chew and mull [over] her words instead of just swallowing [them]. When I first heard her words, I cheered for her. I felt justice from the words she had spoken. Although, once I stopped to think about what she actually said, I felt she needed to also take some responsibility for what she had said. Her phrase might sound good when someone hears it, but it can have side effects as well. An irresponsible person can take the phrase for [sic] face value and take justice into their own hands, which could defeat the purpose. From the reaction of some students in our class, this was her intended effect and she accomplished it with amazing results.

. . . but it created a dilemma between my morals and what I felt deep down inside to be justice. My morals were telling me that two wrongs don’t make a right. The people had dug a deep hole for themselves when they attacked an innocent person, but revenge isn’t the answer. Rising above what the police have done could be a possible answer. The situation brings up a question: what kind of procedure is implemented when choosing who can qualify to become an officer? If there was a course dealing with racial tensions between the officers and the public, there might be less violence when dealing with racial differences. People in general are afraid of what they don’t understand; if there were such a course implemented, they might understand and possibly eradicate the reason why they resort to violence.
So What Is Appropriate?

Heather Dunn: A couple of weeks ago, our class had a very heated discussion about the film, *A Place of Rage*. I must admit that I was very disturbed by a particular student’s comment about the poem by June Jordan. What right does this student have to say that her comment was inappropriate? Jordan has every right to say what she feels and she [can] say it any way she wants, whether or not she offends an individual. With Jordan’s life experiences as well the experiences of her predecessors, nobody has the right to say any comment of hers is inappropriate.

People want to erase racism and they promote the slogan that there is only one race, the human race; I wish that this was true but with the violent history with the blacks and whites (and other races as well) this could never be true. If one could be white for one day and then be black for a day, one would find the experiences as different as night and day. I am an African American woman and I am very bitter towards policemen. . . . I know there are good ones and there are ones who are very crooked. I feel somewhat protected by policemen but I do not feel that the men in my life, like my father, brothers and boyfriend, are protected. I do believe that the police are their enemies. After the discussion, a student approached me and said she did not realize this. . . . She stated that she went home and did research to enlighten her view of the subject of police brutality. She feels that she somewhat understands the animosity blacks have toward the police force. I am very glad that she was trying to learn more about a subject she was not aware of. In my opinion, white people live in a carefree world and think everything is fine and dandy. They have no struggles. Everything is mapped out for them. With blacks, it is the total opposite. It is a constant struggle for us because we have so many strikes against us. So when we achieve high success, which many of us do, it should be rewarded and greatly commended.

Maria Sinclair: All [my life] I have been aware of the hatred many Americans have towards African Americans and Latinos. When I was a child, someone mistook my mother for the maid and would not let her order water for the house. She has also been mistaken for the nanny, and when my brother was born, it took almost a year for the government to believe that my parents did not smuggle him across the border. It is these personal experiences that make me more aware of prejudices that occur today.

I held back the other day when someone in the class thought June Jordan’s thoughts about killing police officers were uncalled for. I was shocked to hear that she did not believe that police actually killed people because they
were African American. I was angry at what she said, because I judged her as someone who had no idea what it was like to be called racial slurs, who has never been questioned by the police and who in fact has no idea what it is like to be a minority.

People . . . find it hard to believe something that they themselves have never experienced. For example, I cannot relate to someone whose parents are divorced, because my parents are still married. That is not to say that I do not sympathize, I simply do not understand the position that they are coming from.

. . . There are people who believe that racism ended with the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments. But the truth is, racism is very much alive and seeping into the souls of many people. When I was living in the dorms at UC-Davis, we got messages on our answering machines telling us to go back to where we came from. This was the first time I had ever heard these words aimed at myself. I have always been able to hide my ethnic identity with the color of my skin, but our machine was in Spanish and these people did not know what I looked like. I have never felt like less of a human being [than I did] that day, and I finally know what it was mi gente hated about white people.

Mily Lopez: In my hometown of Visalia, there is a particular part of the city where Mexican and Asian gangs are known to create trouble, to the point where it is fatal. This part of Visalia is known as the Northside. It is not unusual for there to be a death once a month, due to the rivalry between gangs. None of these deaths are ever printed in the newspaper or shown on television. Many people are oblivious about the murders and deaths that occur in that part of town, because of the lack of concern for the victims. The only witnesses to those crimes are the people in that neighborhood. If it weren’t for knowing people in the area, I wouldn’t have known about the deaths either.

One day when I was watching the television, there was a news brief about a cop killed by a stray bullet. This had occurred in the north side of Visalia. The local newspaper had a cover story about the incident every day for about a week. The local news was also saturated with information about the fatal incident. The policeman’s funeral procession was broadcast on the local television newscast. To me, there seems to be an unbalanced justice. Is it morally correct to ignore the death of a person of color while acknowledging to the fullest the death of a policeman? Who is to say that the life of one person is more important than the life of another person? Does it have to meet a certain criteria [sic], perhaps if the victim had influential friends, earned more money, had a bigger house, probably owned more than one home, or
had their own business. If a person fulfilled these requirements, then that meant that their life was of more value than that of someone who only owned one home? And where would the line be drawn between the material worth of a person and their self-worth?

*Rita Jayawardena:* . . . I realized that, in truth, no one can really ignore their past, for it haunts their every action. Just as the African American student spoke of the police that continually plague her brothers and boyfriend, the student from the South may have been thinking that the police have another side to the story, and that it was wrong to judge them before hearing the whole tale from both sides. I believe that if this took place in the South, there would have been a very different reaction. However, since this is Riverside, the site at which recently Tyisha Miller was killed by a cop, the county that neighbors Los Angeles County, where numerous acts of police brutality have been reported, and the county whose police department has been under investigation because it is believed that they are not just in the violence they dole out to certain citizens, the reaction we had was appropriate. Also, if this discussion had taken place at a different time, I am certain the class wouldn’t have spoken mainly on the side of the African American student. What is surprising to me is that at this time, as we reach the turn of the century, more “minorities” are speaking out, but in fact, these “minorities” are rapidly becoming the “majority.” At another time, more of the sentiment of the class would have been tipping the scales in the direction of the Southern student. However, it is at this time that the sentiment—the outspoken sentiment, that is—is toward the African American student.

**The Palimpsest and Its Effects**

I present the text of the students’ comments as a scroll, as a palimpsest, without the inscription of my own analysis. I deploy the word *palimpsest* in two defining senses.\(^1^4\) In the first sense, as a written scroll, taken together as one text, these comments are analogous to an “object, place, or area which reflects its history” (*American Heritage Dictionary* 1997: 983). As a collection, they stand as a powerful commentary on the social history of our times. They speak, like all human practice, to daily incidents of dissonance, contradiction, rage, and hope. In the second sense, a palimpsest is a manuscript “written on more than once with the writing incompletely erased and often legible” (983). In this formulation, the students’ think pieces are texts underwritten by the scripts of orality and silence. They are doubly inflected: silence and the spoken bleed into the written word.
Indeed, the resonating power of these scripts, and the critically constitutive effect of writing, allows one student to state: “I can admit now that what the person in class said offended me, and I wanted to scream at her because I perceived her as being ignorant when it came to issues of racism and discrimination. It took me a few days to accept that she may not know as much as others regarding [the] police.”

This student sat silently in the class during the discussion. She wrote passionately about discrimination, but in this one brief comment she offers a narrative about her silence, her rage, and her willingness to step back and reflect on her reaction, to exercise restraint. She chooses writing as the appropriate mode of expressing these contradictions.

To consider this collection as a palimpsest is, ultimately, to assert that the classroom is always imbricated by its own culture and history. Even when the class journeys into the imagined and real elsewhere, it can be pulled back into the sharp edge of its own cultural spaces. The challenging and creative task for a teacher is to pose these travels into the too familiar as a politics that is about historical process as much as it is about passion and vulnerability—and about the acts of silence, speech, and writing through which these travels are realized. When the focus moves to African American women’s political experience, the classroom forcefully embraces Grossberg’s pedagogy of articulation and risk.

As a teacher whose field of scholarship, and whose social identity, is not easily described by the history of U.S. cultural nationalisms, I recognize that discussions about U.S. women and the politics of identity in which they are embedded require careful positioning. I do not claim any special authenticity and make this point explicit, particularly in reference to Asian American women’s cultural histories. When the teacher herself is from the Third World, her comments might be perceived as some authentic representation of the cultural specificities introduced. The “specific ‘difference’ (of personality, posture, behaviour) of one woman of color stands in for the difference of the whole collective, and a collective voice is assumed in place of an individual voice” (Mohanty 1994: 153). Risk involves, then, speaking about the partial, situated nature of cultural and political experience. By emphasizing my own insider/outsider status as a binational immigrant, I assert that my own teaching about these issues is also a constant “learning” of U.S. cultural and national politics. Past experience in the classroom has taught me that whenever we begin discussing racialization in black/white paradigms, articulation is a matter of both taboo and turgidity.

A triple helix of articulation—within the threads of silence, orality,
and text—suggests that “naming” through the unease is crucial for a project of knowledge production that asserts that culture is inextricably linked to pedagogy. When knowledge production in the classroom winds through a collective and dialogical helix, its articulation is the very stuff of social practice, of “culture.”

 Silence, as one moment of “enunciation,” is by nature enigmatic. Yet its mystery begs an engagement precisely because “most of us continue to privilege the spoken and/or written word as the only significant marker of thought and reflection” (Srivastava 1997: 118). If discussion about race and politics within the dominant black/white binary elicits silence, then it begs scrutiny and recognition of the “real material and social conditions that have disenabled people from speaking at particular places, in particular ways, at particular moments” (Grossberg 1994: 16).

 Such a sentiment is echoed by a student who notes: “I could feel the tension in the room. The tension had been fostered because of the various politics and social upbringings of the students in the class. Although many were silent, I don’t believe inside everyone was fostering silent thoughts. Each and every one of us at that time were [sic] thinking different ‘somethings,’ and those ‘somethings’ were quite loud! These thoughts, however, were muffled by our own insecurities, our own tendencies to remain silent in the outside world.”

 For a professor, however, the risk of silencing always remains; perhaps it even becomes unavoidable because of structural power. When the student who criticized Jordan leaves the room during the film, comes back, speaks her mind, and then rushes out—perhaps experiencing the weight of her peers’ spoken disagreement with her—I am aware of a certain kinetic politics. I publicly acknowledge that it takes courage to disagree with each other but insist that we can still imagine the class as a place in which it is relatively safe to express dissent. I meet this student later to tell her that, while I (and some of her peers) disagree with her position, I respect her willingness to voice her stance. This conversation happens outside the class. Talk, like silence, is thus situated in the politics of the public and the relatively private. The dialogical is always partial and open to ethical failure.

 **Speaking, Bodies, Places**

 It is interesting, in this regard, that multiculturalism is so often viewed as located in the students. Our discussions seem to center around the problem of respecting and creating a safe space for students more than they do around acknowledging our own complicated positions. In this way the other remains the other, no matter how we may
seek to accommodate her. It is here that the nature of pedagogy itself becomes problematic. The position of the instructor is too easily erased in the traditional classroom. It is the very thing which is not in question and by which all other questions and answers are defined. The equation of objectivity with knowledge leaves the feminist educator without a way to situate herself—without a subjectivity.

—Hogue, Parker, and Miller (1998: 96)

When I first began teaching international and Third World women’s issues, I was troubled not only by the resistance of some students to the material but by a certain indifference to it among others. While it can be explained in part by class sizes, general-education requirements, and so on, I was cognizant of deeper ideological and structural issues. I perceived that what I was doing was hugely irrelevant to the daily experiences and perceptions of my students. Yet the indifference/irrelevance equation rested in its own paradox, because the rhetoric of the global was being engaged in the most polarizing debates at the university. In the most basic way I have sought in this essay to work through this puzzle. Following Mohanty’s assertion that teaching strategies that emphasize coimplication unsettle the categories of distance, I argue that such strategies can also bring us closer to a pedagogy of relevance.

What, for instance, might the extended set of student commentaries suggest about the effects of international, global, and Third World women’s studies on North American undergraduates? As I reflected on the class responses to Jordan’s poem and to *A Place of Rage*, I recognized how we, as teachers of difference and as different teachers, cannot escape the entanglement of local ruptures through a global worldview. In addition, the immediacy of local politics and culture must be kept in dialectical tension with the politics “out there.” If that tension can elicit a carefully marked sense of connection or, better yet, of thematic coalitions, then the teaching strategy of coimplication is doing its work.

I began this essay, however, with a set of jarring narratives: Bannerji’s deconstruction of her own teaching difference and my own encounter with scripted resistance. Why did I begin an essay on feminist pedagogy with such gestures of disavowal? Following Jennifer M. Gore’s (1993) detailed tracing of pedagogy studies, I remain uneasy with an understanding of pedagogy as a process that is innately celebratory, empathetic, and benevolent. Indeed, when its field of engagement contains the contemporary fault lines of power, then Third World women, as interlocuters, authors, and objects of study, are caught in a paradoxical vise. The journeys of many women from the global
South, and from subordinated communities in the United States, into the U.S. academy embody that paradox. They have had to walk through the minefields of pedagogy. As Bannerji suggests, we too become the body of knowledge, to be constructed, defined, classified, naturalized.

Though fully aware of my institutionally sanctioned authority and the ethical imperatives contained therein, I also know that my post/colonial, immigrant, South Asian, bourgeois, female body can elicit a certain unease, fear, and perhaps even rage when I first walk into the class amphitheater and begin speaking. I may be an anthropologist in the authoring of this essay, in my analytic gaze. But in the oral and public space of the classroom, I am suddenly native again. The scripts of history—global, local, neocolonial, imperial—begin to write their tales. Taking a deep breath, I/we begin the job of dismantling—again, and again.

Notes
1. I use the virgule between post and colonial to symbolize the unfinished business of colonialism in shaping our immigrant identities in the United States and within the terms of globalization that shape our destinies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1997: 472), for example, notes that “to imply that postcoloniality is a step beyond colonialism is the new immigrant’s reactive and unexamined disavowal of the move (however justified) away from the postcolonial scene to embrace the American Dream—the civilizing mission of the new colonizing mission.”

2. See Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson’s (1997) introduction to the collection Radical In<ter>ventions: Identity, Politics, and Difference/s in Educational Praxis. This important book “testifies to the pervasive and prevalent discursive violence in so-called dialogical interactions, explaining how and why Bakhtinian ‘heteroglossia’ in the classroom is not now and cannot under foreseeable conditions become a safe place for speakers of the multitudes of languages of difference” (3). See also Weir 1991; Bannerji 1995; Hoodfar 1997; and Srivastava 1997.

3. Here I borrow from Spivak’s (1997) more extended meditation on transnational literacies.

4. For a powerful discussion of the significance of “locality” in the local/global cultural politics of the United Kingdom, see Hall 1997.

5. John (1996: 18) asks what it might mean, in terms of an epistemological politics, to turn the anthropological paradigm on its head and ask, “What sort of experience, what sort of ‘fieldnotes,’ would I wish to see carried back to a third-world nation such as India?” I turn her notion of “an anthropology in reverse” in a different direction to ask, “What might it mean for ‘native women’ (particularly noncitizens) in the United States to teach U.S. students, to compile field notes of their paradoxical and complicated locations as teachers—to be placed in authority and yet to be ‘native’ under the classical anthropological gaze that might be shared by her students?”

6. But I remain cautious in my optimism that my courses were not considered threatening at
this institution. Was it because they were, after all, situated in the still nonlegitimized, or perhaps awkwardly legitimized, scholarly zone of women's studies? We have to remember that, when it comes to women's studies, “more than a struggle over intellectual constructs, there are political resources with real material consequences . . . who gets published, read, how resources are distributed and how power relations are reproduced and challenged within the university” (McDermott 1998: 92).

7. Linda Weir (1991: 24) writes that “undergraduate students have a persistent tendency to reduce all social relations to the intent of individual agents, and to give a pat moral condemnation of social processes they disapprove of, rather than understanding these processes systematically.” See also Gissendanner 1998.

8. For the most comprehensive genealogical discussion of these terms see Mohanty, Russo, and Torres 1991. For debates about these terms see Butler 1991; John 1996; Hoodfar 1997; Guy-Sheftall 1998; and Dasgupta 1999.

9. See Dutt 1996 for an important discussion of North/South differences.

10. I am indebted to Ali Behdad for his examination of the privileged trope of travel that has underwritten important post/colonial work on hybridity and transnationalism. After carefully delineating the connections between travel as trope and as actual experience of privileged nomadism, Behdad (1993: 46) cautions us to “remain attentive to the fact that such a decentering process has nonetheless maintained crucial material and symbolic differences between . . . Indian intellectuals in American universities and Mexican farmworkers in Texas.” See also John 1996 for a brilliant, succinct examination of how gender and post/coloniality create the politics of departure, arrival, and wor(l)ding in transnational feminist practices.

11. All student names are pseudonyms.

12. See Hogue, Parker, and Miller 1998 for a detailed discussion of how teachers and students might work through, even articulate, this unease.

13. In an important parallel discussion of students’ responses to an article by bell hooks about an incident of racism, Terri A. Hasseler (1999: 214) notes that her class viewed hooks’s articulation of rage very negatively: “Her linguistic use of rage, her written desire to violently act out her rage, may well have been an act of murder for the students.”

14. I would like to thank my colleague Ethan Nasreddin-Longo for a fruitful discussion of how to deploy the term *palimpsest* creatively to include the three registers of text in pedagogy: silence, orality, and text itself.

**Works Cited**


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