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# Reading 'Here' from 'There': Meditations on the Study of Post-Colonial Literatures

## **Comments**

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**READING 'HERE' FROM 'THERE':  
MEDITATIONS ON THE STUDY OF  
POST-COLONIAL LITERATURES**

Victoria Carchidi

This book embodies an effort to construct feminist forms of knowing across the fields into which knowledge is categorised in academia. This chapter responds to the editors' challenge that contributors be self-reflexive, and move beyond simple description to thoughtful engagement with what we do. Here, students' comments and concerns through a semester-long course shape my reflections on how the study of post-colonial literatures can uncover structures inimical to feminist thinking, and empower women and men to use such knowledges to reshape our worlds.

The first day

*'I know nothing about this.'* *'I want to learn about other cultures.'* These statements in the first class address some of the important issues in post-colonial literatures: how informational and educational structures limit us to hegemonic arenas, and make us always already aware of how much we do not know. These comments also celebrate the spirit of curiosity, willing to explore beyond its current horizons of here, to learn from and by the there: an effort benign, connective, and holistic in theory, but in practice often shaped into appropriation—either military, economic, or cultural.

*'I don't know what post-colonial literature is.'* This student's comment immediately confronts academia's collusion in constructing exclusive fields of knowledge. The here from which we read is not Aotearoa-New Zealand;<sup>1</sup> that national identity is too large to locate the smaller context in which we act. The university, rather, provides a framing component of 'here': it translates governmental decisions into policy, legitimates course offerings, determines when courses start and end, decides what credits one gets for taking them, and provides the structure, both bureaucratic and physical.

The university, however, is problematic as a location for exploring other voices: the ivory tower is traditionally univocal, a place where, as Millsom Henry writes, 'prestigious groups of wise, usually white men pontificated about society away from

the pressures and harsh realities of life' (Henry, 1995, p. 42). And, Henry adds, 'racist, sexist and elitist ideologies in society *continue* to be reflected and reinforced in the higher education system' (my emphasis, p. 45). The university still creates 'chilly' classrooms for female students, and congregates female staff in lower paid positions with less prestige. The position of Māori women and men is even worse, for the atmosphere is hostile to Māori cultural practices, despite a bicultural mandate. Such élitism translates into our ways of knowing: although the post-colonial syllabus includes works by some of the best-known writers such as Soyinka, Achebe, and Naipaul, these names are usually unfamiliar. In addition, those authors are all men. Colonialism carried its neglect for intellectual and creative work by women into cultures now called post-colonial.

*I thought we would be studying Māori literature in this class.*' The reasonable expectation that a university course on post-colonial literature will include Aotearoa-New Zealand exposes the ways faculties and departments within the institution carve up ideas into separate disciplines. Battles over limited resources, although ostensibly unrelated to ideology, also shape policy, as financial pressures lead department heads to prefer large lecture classes with fewer contact hours. These concerns reflect and reinforce a silencing of a plurality of voices, and a valorising of centralised authority.

*I wanted to see what writing is like that isn't from England.*' To read outside canonical literature is to encounter the unknown, and only by venturing into that territory can we discover where we are—and move to a better place. Only by finding one's way through different beliefs, cultural practices, and behaviours can one learn to break down stereotypes, those buttresses against perception. Such negotiation leads to a reconsideration of the ways people are categorised as Other; to a re-evaluation of unexamined beliefs; and, finally, to a stronger morality that emerges from such testing against depths we do not want to plumb and dizzying heights to which we aspire. Reading here from there requires demystifying both poles, to refloat discursive meaning between them.

But the 'there' cannot be Africa or the Caribbean, with their enormous historical and cultural and national variety. The 'there' is limited to aspects of the few texts we can read in the single semester given to post-colonial literatures—viewed through the prism of 'here'.<sup>2</sup> As Roger Straughan (1992, pp. 223–5) urges, I encourage students to explore the effects and motivations for the selections, and to supplement the set texts with their own readings.<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks into the course, our first novel:  
Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

*A student laughs at a character's behaviour, and says, 'It isn't very African, is it?' Several others sing out, 'But what is typically African?' 'Aren't Africans extra good mothers?' 'Don't they nurse their children and sleep with them for a really long time? I read about it in another book.'*

These reactions show students working to assimilate cultures that they expect to be different from their own. We discuss why we assume contemporary people living in another part of the world will be more alien than Shakespeare, who lived hundreds of years ago in Europe. We also discuss the codification of a uniform African difference that can be found not only in texts from the first half of the twentieth century, but in current publications.

*Looking at a map of Africa, a student asks, 'Is Mandela president of all of Africa?'* We look at gaps in information, both to fill them, and to explore what those gaps reveal about the way here constructs there. It is incorrect to say Mandela is president of Africa; but that construction reflects an accurate summary of Euro-American homogenising of Africa's pluralities. South Africa's gold and diamonds, and its lengthy participation in white supremacy, give it status as a quasi-Euro-American country. In much media, South Africa is Africa, until other countries provide suitably sensational famines or warfare as colourful contrast.

*'Why does Achebe use all these foreign words, when he's writing in English?'* A more embedded fear can be that post-colonial writers will 'write back' to Europe,<sup>4</sup> castigating its colonisers for all problems. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* usefully assuages this fear of censure: very few European characters figure in this novel, set just before colonisation. Rather, it depicts the internal tensions of an Igbo community that shaped reactions to European arrivals. Achebe has famously said that his novel is meant to show Africans their own civilised past (Achebe, 1989, p. 7). This relegates readers from here to reading over the shoulders of Achebe's intended African, Nigerian, and Igbo audiences. Such freedom from centrality can be painful, as well as liberating, as it forces us to recognise the stereotypical assumptions we make. Yet discovering these blind spots can simply help us further 'unlearn our privilege' (Spivak, 1988, p. 299).

*'These names are too hard to pronounce, and you can't tell if the people are male or female. I'll just call them John and Mary.'* In discussing Achebe's use of Igbo words, we consider the function of language itself, and read Ngugi wa Thiong'o's argument that language carries culture; we discuss how different registers, from slang to formal writing, reflect different communities of speakers, and how the imposition of a dominant language forecloses more than just fluency. In turn, we then look at our own use of language: when a student substitutes a more familiar name for an African character's name, or asserts that it is impossible to tell male from female, we discuss conventions: the Laurens and Marions and Robins not clearly gender-marked in English, and there is the colonial practice of subsuming African and other names into a familiar lexicon. This leads to the importance of names as markers of subjectivity.

*'Is this writer black or white?'* Other conventions underlie questions about 'race': no person is 'black' or 'white'. What, then, do these shorthand terms actually represent, or even mask? We look at whether we are using these terms to signal 'authentic' or 'racist.' If a student declares, 'I'll never ask that question again!', the challenge of careful thinking misfires: we work to become aware of the questions

we ask, not to shut them off. Any question can tell us something more than we began by asking. The difficulty of language use reflects the power of language to shape and structure the world. We are not reading 'there' as a mirror of ourselves, but to help us uncover how competing narratives and constructions clamour for value and our belief in them.

### In the heart of the semester: drawing judgments

*A student exclaims, 'I wanted to throw Achebe's book across the room when I saw the way the main character beat his wives!' Another student responds, 'How do we have the right to judge them from our own expectations and standards? Women may expect it there.'*

As we move into the semester, students struggle to balance their own reactions to the works with their desire to show tolerance and respect for other cultural practices. That tension can sometimes lead to students silencing themselves, believing both that they do not know enough about the culture and that their cultural background does not allow them to comment on different people.

*Looking at the way a character expects her children to work with her, one student states: 'That's child abuse, it really is.' Another quietly says, 'My brothers and sisters and I did a lot more work than that when I was growing up. And I don't think we were abused.'* One way we work through this barrier is to deconstruct the idea of homogeneous cultures in opposition to each other in different countries. For instance, the 'here' that shapes this course includes me, although I am from 'there,' the USA, not Aotearoa-New Zealand. The students themselves talk about their backgrounds, and recognise that that shared difference empowers them to comment on Auckland or Eketahuna cultures, even when they come from elsewhere in the country. This crucial moment explodes difference as something located there, across the world, and acknowledges it here, in a range of forms. This recognition celebrates Aotearoa-New Zealand's rural culture, subjected to the same dichotomies used to discuss African communities, which unthinkingly privilege and equate the modern, technological, progressive, and Western, over environmentally sensitive, communal, and cyclical qualities of agriculture.

*Writing an essay, a student observes: 'There is almost no feminist criticism on Achebe's novels, and there's a lot that says Emecheta's book is bad.'* Paired with Achebe is Buchi Emecheta's *Joy of Motherhood*. A Nigerian woman living in England and concerned with women's issues, Emecheta uses untranslated words such as 'chi', familiar to students from Achebe's work, but the writers' different foci prevent a simplistic vision of Nigerian writing. These two works have received different critical valuations. Achebe's novel has been praised, Emecheta's attacked for its simplicity and critique of post-colonial Nigeria. Students therefore perceive that critical evaluations are not authoritative, and that value is constructed to support dominant interests.

*'I have an unfair advantage over the other students, because I'm Māori!'* The

anxiety articulated here makes immediate the resonance people can feel from cultural constructions. We look at denigrations of the elderly, as reflected in such dismissals of the past as 'that's history', or the use of a phrase such as 'it gets really old' as a synonym for irrelevant or boring. Celebration of the young parallels an embrace of technology over the contemplation of consequences. Then a student describes not knowing how to make bread crumbs when the shop had none and having to ask her grandmother. Such personal experience leads us to look at how women fare in cultural constructions—why might we decide that a woman 'expects' to be beaten in another culture? Are we invoking a sense of Africans as savage, or reflecting our knowledge of women's abuse in Aotearoa-New Zealand? These questions help us to define our approaches, valid not as descriptions of the cultures portrayed in the works, but of our reactions to them.

*'Aren't we just exploiting these writers ourselves?'* A crucial component of the 'there' is to show students that, just as post-colonial writers see problems and address them in their work, so, too, can they. This is a challenge many students seize, as they begin to use the 'here' and 'there' of the post-colonial literatures class to reshape their visions of the world. Peter McLaren (1995, p. 175) warns educators against appropriating other cultures simply to learn about ourselves, rather than to enlarge our perspectives to see others. Such a warning is important; to use universities to further governmental aims of internationalising—to make future participants in the Aotearoa-New Zealand economy aware of broader markets and give them access to cultural attributes that can be exploited by appropriate advertising—is a cynical use of tertiary education, opening lecturers up to well-grounded accusations of complicity in a hegemonic capitalism that threatens to erase cultural diversity around the world.

A perfect instance of the way students can transform the 'here' of the university and the 'there' of the subject matter in the post-colonial literatures class occurred the first year I taught this course. The student union women representatives honoured the course for its contribution to women. This recognition made me very happy; although the course was not explicitly feminist, the students themselves had applied the issues we discussed to their own concerns as young women in Aotearoa-New Zealand. They had constructed, for and by themselves, a commonality between post-colonial literatures and women's studies.

#### At the end

*'What's the point of studying post-colonial literature when rain forests are wiped out every day?'* Recently universities in Aotearoa-New Zealand have told staff that they are mandated to pursue the study of and promote biculturalism. That task is complex enough. What, then, can justify the study of writing about places far away, which most students will probably never visit? The cry from students for relevance in their studies must be heeded, especially as students shoulder greater proportions of the fees for higher education. Educators must clarify for their students the ways

in which the subject matter is important to those students. That pressure accounts for a desire to find the true and the real. In post-colonial literature, we examine constructions of agency, both personal and national: how agents in societies shaped by dominant forces can nonetheless seize some margin of control over their worlds. Ideally, it empowers students to go out and remake those painful realities.

*'I'd like to know how much of what we've been reading is really true.'* Knowledge is always constructed within a context. Aotearoa-New Zealand cannot be studied in isolation, for it does not exist as an object of study independent of its global partners in economics, environment, and cultures. Rather than being petrified and pickled in formaldehyde, pinned down as the subject of ethnographic study, cultures are constantly in flux. Students in Aotearoa-New Zealand can best perceive, and help to shape, their cultures by drawing from a range of cultural models throughout the world. Post-colonial literatures offer perspectives other than the almost hegemonic Euro-American models.

The study of post-colonial culture also encourages a holistic vision of the world made inescapably desirable by dwindling resources and mushrooming global environmental effects. Edith King writes, 'A world perspective leads us to examine perceptions, ideas, concepts, information in new ways that our growing interdependence now dictates' (King, 1992, p. 229). Studying post-colonial literatures can help students in Aotearoa-New Zealand to explore connections and differences between their own lives and those of people outside the British-American-Australian cultures that sweep the airwaves of Aotearoa-New Zealand. Looking at 'here' by studying 'there' can help students to make future realities more humane.



- 12 Internal memo for the Minister of Internal Affairs, 22 June, 1950, IA/116/7, 83/B, National Archives, Wellington.
- 13 By the 1987 Immigration Act New Zealand finally abandoned its favour towards British nationals. See Trlin and Spoonley (1992, pp. 1–28).

### Chapter 8

- 1 They mean by scattered hegemonies 'the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject' (Grewel and Kaplan, 1994, p. 7).
- 2 The complexity of what it means to be a Jewish woman in New Zealand is explored in *Interactive Identities* (Dunmore Press, 1997).
- 3 Donna Matahaere deals with these issues for Māori women (Matahaere, 1995).

### Chapter 9

- 1 Personal communication with a student (1996).
- 2 See statement by Bobbi Sykes, 'have they gone? ...', cited in Alice (1993).
- 3 See Spivak (1988, pp. 271–313). As a 'recovered', representative voice the subaltern would no longer be subaltern, but a relief for mainstream anxieties concerned with legitimating the status quo.
- 4 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, cited in Te Awekōtuku (1992, p. 54).  
For a critique of Pākehā feminists, see also Awatere (1984) and Smith and Taki (1995, pp. 17–18).
- 5 There has been over the years some debate about what constitutes 'Pākehā'. Hege- monically and for the purpose of Treaty language, Pākehā usually connotes those peoples of British origin, i.e. 'New Zealanders'. As such, it has always appeared to me to be a much more exclusionary term than Māori which, under more utopian political structures, would indeed be more inclusive.
- 6 The basis for these new tribes is the fact that, because of colonisation and the resultant urban drift, many Māori do not know their iwi or, because of distance, either feel unable to benefit from current government compensations to iwi authorities or are being penalised because they do not live in their tribal areas. See also Maaka (1994). While Maaka is sympathetic to iwi outside tribal boundaries and the necessity for organisation based on a shared identity, he is quick to point out the problems in relation to certain protocols that need to be established between the tribe back home and the host tribe.
- 7 Resistance by many women in the south to participation in tribal ritual is often discussed when I am at home. This resistance is always misinterpreted to mean that southern women are somehow more colonised than other Māori woman. O'Regan (1995) has opened up discussion about the politics of representation in a Ngāi Tahu context, hinting that, for southern Māori, the coloniser should not always be presumed as White.

### Chapter 11

- 1 I use the hyphen to signal a bicultural society. Aotearoa/New Zealand implies an opposition between the two names that is at odds with my intent.
- 2 For the sake of brevity, I limit my discussion here to a few African writers. Anyone interested in the full syllabus or just more information on post-colonial literature should feel free to contact me at the English Department, Massey University.
- 3 As a feminist and researcher into post-colonial cultures—that is, cultures which my Euro-American academic training has tended to ignore, exclude, or downvalue—I have

good reason to counter the authoritarian university structure, following values close to Penny Welch's three points of feminist pedagogy: egalitarian relationships, valuing students, and drawing from experience as a learning resource (Welch, 1995, p. 156). I try to transform my institutional authority into what Paulo Freire and Ira Shor call a pedagogy for liberation: not denying that inequity, but using it to transform the students' experience (Freire and Shor, 1987, pp. 90–1), using it to show them the systems of power that encode and enforce oppressive hegemonies. My goal is not to build a simple picture of what all post-colonial writers do, and how it fits neatly into the literary canon; McLaren identifies this trap as simply inscribing a dominant notion of how other cultural literatures function (McLaren, 1995, p. 223), a point Chandra Mohanty applies much more trenchantly to White feminists representing 'third-world' cultural practices (Mohanty, 1991, p. 55). Ideally, this reflexivity reveals the unstated assumptions underlying seemingly objective aesthetic expectations.

- 4 This term, popularised in Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), implies that the subject of post-colonial work is always the coloniser.

### Chapter 13

- 1 Literally translated as 'My dream cannot be taken by you'.
- 2 An earlier version of this chapter was published under the same title in *Hecate*, Special Aotearoa/New Zealand Issue, vol. 20, no. 2, 1994, pp. 162–74.
- 3 Ngā Tamatoa, which literally means 'young warriors', was taken as a name for a group of young Māori activists in 1971. For background on the context read Walker (1990).
- 4 I choose a South American writer not because Māori writers have not written about these things, but because they are not generally known outside New Zealand. I also choose Isabelle Allende rather than other post-colonial writers because, from the moment I read her work I recognised that someone else, somewhere else, knew what we also take for granted, and because I expect that you as a reader may also recognise what I am trying to signal here.
- 5 There are several examples of colonial reconstructions of Māori stories which have since been debunked but nevertheless continue to be fed to New Zealand children. One example is the story of the Moriori who, the story goes, were a gentle people conquered by the stronger, more war-like Māori race. This was used to justify the later 'conquest' by the British, in that the process of conquest is natural and part of a nation's development. Another example is one concerning how Māori people came to be in New Zealand. This is the story of the seven major canoes that supposedly brought our original ancestors to this land in a great migration around AD 1300. Neither Māori oral histories nor academic research support this event, but it is entrenched in popular consciousness and recorded in Māori songs.
- 6 Graham Hingāngaroa Smith (1991) has argued that Kura Kaupapa Māori have the potential to mediate the socio-economic circumstances of families through such cultural practices as manaakitanga or the sharing, that is, redistribution of food. I would argue that this potential becomes vulnerable once the state, through regulation and commonsense approaches to school organisation, becomes involved in the funding of alternative schools such as Kura Kaupapa Māori.

### Chapter 14

- 1 See Harding (1987, p. 203) for a discussion of the differences between method and methodology and the relationship between ontologies and epistemologies.