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REPOSITIONING OURSELVES IN THE CONTACT ZONE

Phyllis van Slyck

What is the place of unsolicited oppositional discourse, parody, resistance, critique in the imagined classroom community? Are teachers supposed to feel that their teaching has been most successful when they have eliminated such things and unified the social world, probably in their own image? Who wins when we do that? Who loses?

Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone" (39)

we . . . need to gather more oppositional and alternative accounts from a new generation of students, those who can speak about the successes and challenges of classrooms which recognize the positive uses of conflict and struggle and which teach the process of repositioning.

Min-Zhan Lu, "Conflict and Struggle: The Enemies
or Preconditions of Basic Writing?" (910)

I

In one of my basic writing classes about two years ago, we were discussing an Algerian text, Ali Ghalem's *A Wife for my Son*, a novel which describes an arranged marriage in a Muslim community between a man in his thirties and a young woman still in her teens, neither of whom truly wants the marriage to take place. The two meet for the first time on their wedding night, and, in accordance with tradition, the man takes the young woman by force, while family members stand outside the door, cheering. In responding to this scene, students suddenly

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found themselves divided, and the discussion exploded in a moment of in-class cultural conflict. Several students sympathetic to the plight of the young woman were enraged at the man's apparent insensitivity and cruelty. This prompted a supporter of traditional Muslim values, who saw that the young man was only playing by the rules of his culture, to defend him: "He is behaving like a good son and a good husband," she announced defiantly. Stunned at this comment, one of the students who had expressed outrage responded, "How would you like to be raped on your wedding night?" Another attempted to shift the focus of the discussion, bringing in her own culture for contrast: "We are more advanced than they are," she explained, comparing arranged marriages in China to the Muslim marriage in the Algerian novel. "Why?" the class demanded. "Because in China we let the two people *see* each other before the marriage," she replied, impervious to the moans of her classmates. When I intervened to suggest that we refrain from such statements as "We are more advanced than they are," I felt a wave of relief spread through the classroom. "That's right," one student earnestly volunteered, "because everyone thinks their own culture is superior." Several others nodded in agreement, and I realized that this simple remark had helped the class become more self-critical.

Yet the discussion haunted me. Given the tension in the classroom, I had not had the courage to ask the provocative question that would have returned us to the central issue: was this in fact a rape? The narrator describes the event as a "deflowering ritual" and records the feelings of the man as well as the young woman. Hocine experiences almost as much conflict as Fatiha: "He was intimidated by this very young girl; she did not appeal to him; her body was not open to love, but he had to make a woman of her and quickly, since they were waiting outside" (Ghalem 33). Fatiha allows Hocine to undress her (repeating her mother's words silently to herself—"you must obey your husband . . . do everything he wishes"), but when she feels his body against her she revolts: "Fatiha tried again to escape from this man's heavy body, from this man's hard sex already penetrating her, tearing her. She screamed and moaned under the assault. A sharp pain within and the horrible sensation of powerlessness" (34). When we reviewed these passages in class the next day, I found myself struggling to formulate the "right" questions, questions that would enable us to examine a cultural practice in a way that would enlarge our understanding, rather than cut us off from the culture in question. I asked students to think about why the narrator presents the "deflowering ritual" in such matter-of-fact terms and then focuses so intensely on the man's confusion, the young woman's pain. "The author wants us to see that this is horrible. No one should have to suffer like this," one student argued. "And is the author condemning only the 'deflowering ritual' or arranged marriages as well?" I asked. Opinion was divided.

Students agreed to keep a journal as they continued reading the novel, making notes on the different points of view represented. They discovered that Ghalem

explores both perspectives: compassion for the young woman is balanced by sympathy for the parents who desperately attempt to hold onto traditional values of family and community which they believe are being threatened. "A marriage is like planting a tree," the father tells the son, Hocine, "you have to know how to protect it! . . . you don't choose your country, you don't choose your mother, they are given to you; you don't choose your century, it's given to you. . . . And if we don't like what life has offered us then we risk losing ourselves, we risk passing life by, we risk passing God by. Isn't that right my son?" (98). Hocine listens and is moved, but his father's "calm assurance" is something he does not share.

Although Ghalem offers support for those who support arranged marriages as well as for those who wish to challenge them, students persist in looking at the situation in either-or terms: who is right—the parents or Fatiha and Hocine? Should the individual submit to the values of the community or rebel against them? Students want to know whose side I am on. If I take a side, I will alienate the other half or third of the class. If I pretend to be neutral, I will encourage students whose institutions support the oppressive treatment of women to believe such treatment is justified. How can I allow students their cultural differences without abandoning all discussion of values? I sensed that I needed to formulate better questions, questions that did not force us to choose a side, at least not at the outset. And I needed to help students avoid reductive or polarizing ones. What does Ghalem suggest is valuable about tradition? What is being lost, according to Hocine's parents? What is the responsibility of the individual to the community? In looking at any cultural practice, what is worth holding onto? What, ethically, should be questioned, challenged, rejected? Such moments of "cultural crisis," in both writing and literature classes, have made me see that we have work to do in understanding how our students position *themselves*, that is, how they recognize, define, and respond to cultural conflicts; and we also need to reflect on how we are positioning *ourselves*. I would like to suggest that we undertake a close reading of our classroom dialogue, examining both positive and negative experiences, so that we can begin to define and share appropriate curricular and pedagogical models for this discourse.

In choosing to teach a variety of postcolonial, nonwestern, and other so-called minority texts, in conjunction with western texts, I am asking students to deal directly with issues of cultural difference in an artificial space—the classroom—which does not appear to them to be safe or neutral. How much have I reflected on the cultural space which I occupy with my students? Do I understand the implications of what I frequently ask them to do—to suspend or hold in abeyance cultural values they have been raised to believe in and to be receptive to alternative values which might challenge or even contradict their beliefs? Most important, how should I respond when a member of the class criticizes another's culture or values? I want to offer students modes of resistance to their own and their peers' cultural chauvinism, yet I do not want members of the class to divide into separate

and hostile camps. How can I demonstrate “that it is possible to live openly with difference in a dialogic community” (Stimpson 54)?

I believe students can explore cultural issues and values that literary texts both embody and critique, that they can engage in cultural analysis and ethical negotiations, without necessarily coming to consensus, and that, through these negotiations, they can move to a position where they understand how their values are socially and culturally constructed. What follows is a brief discussion of one curricular approach which encourages such a dialogue (a model in place at LaGuardia) and an extended analysis of my own experiences structuring discussion around cultural conflicts. I offer these experiences, not as a radically new pedagogical theory, but as an attempt to think through the difficult problem of how to position oneself as moderator and guide and an attempt to define some strategies for effective dialogue. Discussions and writing assignments can, I believe, be shaped to open new perspectives so that students can experience the “conflicts and struggles” of those who occupy subject positions quite different from their own and can gradually recognize that “individual consciousness” (their own as well as that of others) “is necessarily heterogenous, contradictory and in process” (Lu 889). Questions can be constructed which bring students to a clearer recognition of the cultural contexts of others’ practices and beliefs—and of their own. In guiding students to formulate effective questions, we also have an obligation to help them establish grounds for defining and taking a moral position when necessary; I do not wish to advocate complete cultural and moral relativism. At the same time, however, the questions we construct should lead to a decentering of rigid views and an enlargement of student awareness, not only of difference, but of the complexity of cultures and subjectivities.

Gregory Jay maintains that it is possible to construct a “multicultural pedagogy [which] initiates a cultural revision, so that everyone involved comes not only to understand another person’s point of view, but to see her or his own culture from the outsider’s perspective . . . to stop thinking of ourselves as subjects of only one position or culture” (“The End of ‘American’ Literature” 274). I would like to concretize this notion by discussing how our curriculum and pedagogy can facilitate such decentering. Mary Louise Pratt’s now widely discussed notion of the “contact zone,” a social space “where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other” (34), offers one curricular model of a more pluralistic and interactive approach to literatures and cultures represented in emerging student populations. However, we need not only to select and juxtapose texts that will be received in “radically heterogeneous ways” but also to think critically about the way we position ourselves in the classroom, especially if we are to begin to answer the questions Pratt poses in my first epigraph. Richard Miller suggests that “there is still a great deal of work to be done in constructing the ‘pedagogical arts of the contact zone’ ” and that one of the most important steps is to reconfigure power relations in the classroom (399).

I want students to acquire the analytic skills that will bring about a reflective, dialogic approach to any given text and to the cultural issues it raises, and I want them to feel that we (all of the members of the class, including the instructor) have shared in the construction and execution of this dialogue. This can be achieved only if I identify myself, like everyone else, as an individual speaking from a specific subject position and as someone who does not have all the answers. The repositioning suggested by this model requires a constant vigilance about one's own belief systems; that is, we all need to become decentered subjects, to recognize that the illusion of a "core" self is at the heart of essentialist positions which privilege one culture over another. Thus, even if the classroom itself is an irreducibly western construct, in the dialogue we construct within that space we may begin to model challenges to the culturally coded positions which constitute our viewpoints.

II

Much of the discussion of cultural identity that has been used to define both students and texts has been shaped by persistent binaries (academy/subculture, margin/center, native/arrival) and by curricular models which continue to reinforce "boundaries" (however they are "redrawn") and therefore to marginalize particular groups. Patricia Bizzell notes, for example, that in Greenblatt and Gunn's *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies* "traditional boundaries appear to be reasserted rather than redrawn" (164). In other words, as Betsey Erkkila observes in her challenge to the traditional notion of American culture, "By continuing to pose American and race, American and ethnic, American and women, and American and gay as oppositional categories, even sympathetic critics end by reproducing women, gays, blacks and other minorities as outside of and marginal to some uncontested always and already in place idea of America" (588). In a similar vein, Salman Rushdie attacks George Steiner for the inadvertent colonialism implicit in his claim that "today the great novels are coming from the far rim, from India, from the Caribbean, from Latin America." Rushdie responds: "I take issue with this vision of an exhausted center and a vital periphery. Yet I do so, in part, because this is such a very Eurocentric lament" (49). Who is the "native" and who the "arrival"; who is at the "periphery" and who at the "center" depends, obviously, on your perspective. Clearly, we need to dispense with this vocabulary, literally, to *decenter* our own unconsciously imperialist thinking.

While a thorough discussion of curricular revision is beyond the scope of this article, I believe it is urgently necessary to rethink the questions we are asking about the "boundaries" of English and American studies and to move towards redefining the study of literature more broadly, to begin, for example, to teach a greater diversity of world literatures (rejecting, as Rushdie suggests, all references to "center" and "periphery"). Bizzell's vision of numerous "historically defined contact zones,

moments when different groups within the society contend for . . . power" (167), recognizes the need to compare how different groups have struggled for power and represented themselves. Yet student diversity transcends images reflected historically in British and American studies (even in the inclusive versions of American studies currently in place in many institutions): our curriculum and pedagogy must acknowledge that in American colleges today we are educating students who have come from *many* different cultures, whose experiences and identities define them as potential citizens of the world. Contact zones must therefore be defined more broadly as spaces where diverse *world* literatures, and the cultures they represent and critique, may be taught in thematically organized contexts.

Postcolonial, nonwestern, and other so-called minority literatures are an especially valuable resource because they model a decentering process which students can participate in; that is, such literatures frequently challenge outmoded essentialist and homogeneous definitions of culture and subjectivity. (I will be foregrounding primarily nonwestern texts here because I believe they need to be brought into the contact zone I am defining; however, this does not mean I am suggesting we abandon western texts; rather we need to juxtapose western and nonwestern texts in order to begin an effective comparative dialogue.) Important questions about values and subject positions emerge as students respond to postcolonial and other so-called minority texts, questions which may enable them to examine the place from which they speak and to recognize that one's subject position is derived from social and cultural constructs which are always already in place.

With each step we take to redefine curriculum, we also need to examine and redefine our pedagogy. Jay advocates "courses in which the materials are chosen for the ways in which they *actively interfere* with each other's experiences, languages, and values and for their power to expand the horizon of the student's cultural literacy to encompass peoples he or she has scarcely acknowledged as real" ("The End of 'American' Literature" 274). However, we also need to prepare ourselves for classroom discussions in which this "active interference" has emotional consequences. Gerald Graff offers innovative suggestions for a more interactive student-centered pedagogy which follows learning community models. The Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education describes key characteristics of learning communities as follows: "purposeful re-structuring of the curriculum; a central theme or question around which a program is focused; students are enrolled in classes together; courses are team-designed and frequently team taught; there is an emphasis on student involvement and active learning; students are asked to build explicit connections between disciplines and ideas." In contrast to the pedagogical conditions defined by learning community models, Graff argues that in traditional college curricula, "avoidance of conflict is built into the very organization of courses" (57), a situation in which contradictions fester because courses "coexist in separation" (58). As a remedy, Graff calls for "structured

exchanges" (ideally through team teaching) on the model of academic conferences, through which courses may be put into dialogue with one another to create a sense of "continuing community" (62).

At LaGuardia, learning communities define an active, student-centered pedagogy and an interdisciplinary approach to curriculum at all levels, from basic skills courses to electives. Introductory composition courses for liberal arts majors, for example, are taught in a coordinated program: English, humanities and social science courses are configured in thematic clusters involving at least three disciplines, including English, Philosophy, Sociology, Theater, Economics, Art History, Music, and Oral Communication. (A similar model exists in reading, writing, and speech clusters at the basic skills level and in "paired" courses across disciplines at the elective level.) Assignments and readings in these disciplines are linked: instructors frequently share common texts, thus facilitating "different ways of reading and contextualizing" as well as fostering the "clarifying cross-discussion" Graff recommends (63). More direct and in-depth cross-discussion takes place during a separate "linked" hour each week which is co-taught by two or even three instructors. This collaborative model also relieves the burden otherwise imposed on a single instructor to be an "expert" in discussing a complex issue some of whose parameters fall outside his or her discipline. Thematically organized cluster courses create a new kind of contact zone, one in which students can examine texts which foreground and critique different cultural groups' attitudes towards a common issue—the roles of women, for example. These texts may never have been juxtaposed before, but they effectively mirror the experiences of students whose cultures arbitrarily confront each other in today's college classes.

My proposal for an English department contact zone course is one in which a variety of world literatures, and the cultures they reflect, are discussed, critiqued, and written about in a thematically coherent context. This does not mean that we are required to become immediate "experts" on the cultures in question, nor does it mean that we should teach irresponsibly without researching a particular area; rather, it means that we should begin to define our pedagogy around a more democratic and multicultural model of collaborative research, reflection, discovery, and decentering. The texts discussed below were presented in the context of two thematic clusters, one entitled "Gender Issues," the other "Cultures and Communication." A variety of texts and films were co-selected by English, Philosophy, Theatre, and Oral Communications instructors. What follows is a description of a contact zone in which students engage with specific texts and an analysis of dialogue within that space enabling an exploration of difference without assigning cultural "boundaries" or "hierarchies" and without demanding accommodation to any single or unified social vision.

In this dialogue, students are encouraged not only to express their views but to construct questions which will enable them to negotiate issues and begin to

define ethical positions for themselves, for, as Satya Mohanty notes, “the version of multiculturalism that demands that we suspend judgment . . . offers at best a weak pluralist scenario of non-interference . . . based on the abstract notion that everything about other cultures is equally valuable” (113). Yet how to lead students to define ethical positions remains a complex and difficult question. If we can agree that it is wrong to shut the door on a discussion because we do not approve of a practice or viewpoint, we are faced with the task of examining values. Part of our responsibility, it seems to me, is to help students see that unreflective group consensus does not constitute an ethical position and that sometimes becoming an individual means standing apart from one’s community and questioning its practices and values.

III

In the last two years, I have kept an informal journal in which I have recorded student responses to different novels and plays, especially when those responses have brought us to a moment of crisis. Texts as culturally diverse as *I . . . Rigoberta Menchu* (Rigoberta Menchu), *Spring Snow* (Yukio Mishima), *Season of Migration to the North* (Tayeb Salih), *Pigs in Heaven* (Barbara Kingsolver), and *M. Butterfly* (David Henry Hwang) have provoked heated discussions in my classes and exposed students’ conflicting values, sometimes in the form of difficult confrontations. These confrontations have led me to examine the kinds of questions I pose and the way I position myself as moderator; they have also helped me to develop strategies for cultural analysis which, while they do not necessarily enable us to avoid or overcome conflict, promote more reflective cultural and ethical negotiations. The Guatemalan text *I . . . Rigoberta Menchu* arouses a variety of different, sometimes conflicting, student responses. Throughout this moving autobiographical account, Menchu describes the valiant efforts of the Quiche people to defend themselves against violent abuse by the military establishment. In responding to a scene in which Menchu’s brother is mutilated, tortured, and then brought before the community, doused with petrol, and set on fire, some students are enraged while others express a kind of frustration: “Why don’t these people fight back?” a student asked. “I can’t read about people who can’t do anything to defend themselves.” In fact, Menchu’s people do defend themselves—with great courage and sacrifice and against impossible odds; however, they suffer greatly and are not even marginally successful in altering their social condition. In the end, their primary victory is spiritual: they recognize the inhumanity of their oppressors. “I believe that happiness belongs to everyone but that happiness has been stolen by the few” (141), Menchu comments poignantly. Some students, who perhaps see themselves as having altered their own social circumstances more effectively, feel threatened by the overwhelming hopelessness of Menchu’s (and her family’s and community’s) situation.

A more subtle problem, however, is the fact that the values the Quiche people embrace—and which Rigoberta Menchu speaks of so eloquently—are antithetical to the ideology of western individualism. Even if students have not been raised according to this ideology, their presence in my class (as well as their hostile response to Menchu) is a sign that many of them have bought into it. Menchu's ideology is not only communal; it is explicitly critical of individual acquisitiveness. In describing the rituals surrounding the birth of a child, for example, Menchu explains that the tying of the infant's hands and feet for several days symbolizes "that no one should accumulate things the rest of the community does not have . . . the child must know how to share, to have open hands" (15). Several parents of small children were more concerned with the literal than symbolic implications of this practice and found it upsetting. Instead of trying to get them to grasp the strength of Menchu's arguments about community values (if her powerful writing has not achieved this, I am not likely to succeed), I asked students to find examples of cultural and religious traditions which reflect commitment and responsibility to a particular culture (birth, death, and other rite of passage ceremonies in both western and nonwestern cultures share this commitment) and to compare them to practices in Menchu's culture. What are the purposes of these traditions? What values do they teach? Why is it important to teach respect for community? What would we lose if we gave this up? Can cultures accommodate both individual and communal values? These questions open a door through which students can examine ways both community values and individual values function in a given culture. And even if students do not always share or fully comprehend the practices of another community, a dialogue has begun to take place in which difference is explored. Students may still ultimately reject a particular practice, but they have learned the difference between an *informed* rejection and a naïve or unreflective one. In addition, those students who are defensive about a particular custom are often less so when the beliefs surrounding it have been acknowledged and understood and when they see that similar practices in other cultures may also be challenged.

A culturally hostile response has also arisen as students react to a Japanese text, Yukio Mishima's *Spring Snow*, a novel in which a young woman withdraws from the world (entering a Zen monastery) and her young lover dies, in part because of a strict social code that prohibits their union. "I would hate to live in such a narrow, constricted culture," one student commented, oblivious to the presence of two Japanese students in the class who remained silent. As in our discussion of Ghalem and Menchu, the apparent assault on the individual's freedom, in this case the freedom to "choose" one's partner, makes some students deeply uncomfortable. I could simply open the comment to the whole class and ask if others find the culture repressive, but this would be equally destructive. How can I diffuse, critique, decenter one student's comment without putting unfair pressure on a particular cultural group to defend itself? I opt for comparison: what are the actual codes Mishima is

describing and how do other cultures construct such codes? Students brainstorm for a while and discover a variety of codes in many cultures on the subject of marriage: essentialist racial, cultural, and even class matching is the most universally acknowledged rule or pattern. This is not very far from what happens in Mishima's novel.

Instead of asking students how they feel about this almost universal cultural pattern, I ask them to reflect on its origin. "Your parents want you to marry someone from the same background so that you won't have problems, so you'll agree on things, like religion," one student volunteers. "It's also so that your children will know who they are, so they'll have an identity," another adds. "But it isn't realistic today to keep fighting for . . . you know . . . cultural isolation," someone counters. "Why?" I ask. "Well . . . look at this classroom. There are at least twenty-seven cultures represented here, more when we count the mixed marriages of some of our parents." (This student remembers an early discussion we had about our diverse backgrounds.) "Would you enter into a relationship with someone from a different culture?" I ask. Most, but not all, say they would consider it; some say they already have. "What's most important," one student concludes emphatically, "is that you love the person. If you have that, you can work out your differences." "It's not that easy," a dissenter mumbles from the back of the room. I wonder whether to allow the discussion to go further or to suspend it and think about an effective writing assignment that might help students probe the issues more carefully and allow them to come to individual conclusions. (The assignment I later gave them was to construct a fictional narrative about the problems that could occur in an intercultural or interracial relationship and the strengths that would be necessary to deal with these problems. Students were asked to write a "sequel" to the film *Mississippi Masala*, that is, to explore the relationship between the Indian woman and the African-American man after their marriage.)

Meanwhile, the emphatic comment about the power of love allows me to return to Mishima, for I have been thinking about how to introduce a more subtle question *Spring Snow* raises. I ask students to think (and write) about how the characters in this novel would define both freedom and love. They discover that the two characters' love for each other is, in fact, *generated* by the social prohibitions that deny them access to each other—the young man desires the young woman only when it is clear to him that he cannot have her: when she becomes engaged to a member of the imperial family. Until this moment he has been deeply ambivalent about the relationship. "The calm clear mirror of his soul had now been shattered. There was a turmoil in his heart that churned with the force of a tropical storm. He was now shaken by a violent passion. . . . If one were to ask what was its cause, the only possible answer would be that it sprang from an impossibility" (177). Students then write about situations in which *they* have felt a greater desire for what is forbidden. This assignment asks them to confront and explore the naïve illusion

that an individual is wholly free in his or her choices and commitments. If students can recognize that something as subtle as desire is in part, or perhaps wholly, a social construction, they can move more easily to a broader discussion (and to writing assignments) about the social construction of many other values.

Some of the most highly charged issues related to the social construction of values are those involving women's rights. African texts such as Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (Ghana), Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (Nigeria), and Flora Nwapa's *Once Is Enough* (Nigeria) describe experiences of women who suffer physical and emotional abuse but who find ways to challenge their situation. The characters in these novels show enormous emotional courage and successfully overcome major obstacles, redefining themselves in opposition to the social order that has worked to suppress them. (Other novels by these writers, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and Nwapa's *Efuru*, offer a more tragic vision of women's plight in Nigerian culture.) In responding to these texts, students unanimously condemn polygamy, physically and emotionally abusive husbands, and women in the social system (parents and friends of female protagonists) who support the repression of these "rebellious" women. Asking students to recognize that American cultures also participate in the repression and abuse of women is somewhat more difficult and sometimes requires examples and writing assignments that probe the comparisons. Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* offer effective grounds for comparison, and in one writing assignment I ask students to construct a dialogue between an African-American female subject and one of her African "sisters." Students also compare the treatment of women in the United States to that in African novels after analyzing films such as *The Burning Bed* and *The Accused*, which articulate ways the American social and legal system participates in the oppression of women, or at least fails to support them. The purpose of such comparisons (I sometimes need to remind students) is not to determine which culture abuses women the *most* but rather to recognize that the consequences of male dominance are far-reaching and profoundly difficult to eradicate. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* provides a powerful yet accessible introduction to the concept of patriarchy and is the most effective tool I have found for an analysis of a wide range of gender issues that have been debated in my classroom, from spousal abuse to female genital mutilation and dowry deaths.

But not all postcolonial texts explore attitudes toward women in a straightforward manner. Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (Sudan) offers a complex response to the postcolonial condition, raising questions about subjectivity which are profoundly decentering. In this novel, Mustafa Sa'eed, a highly intelligent Sudanese, pursues a successful academic career in the Sudan, Egypt, and England. However, his personal life reflects an intolerable isolation and unacknowledged pain. Describing himself as a tragic figure whose evil destiny awaits him because of his own emotional lack, he seduces a series of vulnerable English

women by offering them an orientalist fantasy. Mustafa remains clinically detached from these women, whom he refers to as “prey,” and several of them commit suicide, partially in response to the suffering he has caused them. His final “victim,” Jean Morris, is his emotional match, and the two enter into a life and death struggle for control. In the end, Morris fails to overcome Mustafa and begs him to kill her (which he does). Mustafa is tried and serves a prison term, after which he returns to the Sudan. Students struggle to understand the emotional workings of this man: they recognize his symbolic attempt to enact his own reverse colonialism (“I’ll liberate Africa with my penis” [122]), but the “sharp knife inside [his] skull,” the “hard, cold feeling” (26), and the strange detachment figured in his separation from his mother at about age twelve (“Two human beings had walked along a part of the road together, then each had gone his way” [23]) predate his personal encounter with the West and do not seem wholly attributable to colonialism.

It is the narrator of Mustafa’s story who creates the necessary emotional connection for students. He serves as both an extension of and a foil for Mustafa, for he too is “brilliant” and has studied abroad, but unlike Mustafa he is still rooted in his native community, or so he believes. Mustafa, after serving his prison term, makes his home in the Sudan, and when the narrator returns from his studies abroad he finds Mustafa has become a citizen of his native village. As the narrator gradually uncovers Mustafa’s story, his own subject position (his complacency about his culture) is challenged.

After Mustafa’s apparent death by suicide, the narrator is made guardian of his alter ego’s wife and children. When he is asked by members of the community to encourage Mustafa’s wife to marry an old village landowner, he reacts with revulsion: “I pictured . . . a woman in her thirties, weeping under seventy-year-old Wad Rayyes. Her weeping would be made the subject of one of Wad Rayyes’s famous stories about his many women” (87). The narrator himself is deeply attracted to Hosna but is already married, and because he rejects his culture’s practice of polygamy he refuses the option suggested to him of marrying her instead. Despite his objections, therefore, the villagers force Hosna Bint Mahmoud to marry Wad Rayyes; however, she has her revenge: two weeks after her wedding, with the marriage still unconsummated, she kills her husband and then herself when he attempts to rape her. One of the village women takes her side, but the community as a whole remains baffled at the woman’s refusal to submit. Only the narrator sees that “the world has suddenly turned upside down” (135). This shattering event creates a split in his consciousness, forcing him to acknowledge that he cannot return to a naïve acceptance of his community. As with the other postcolonial novels mentioned above, students are unanimous in expressing their moral outrage at what happens to Hosna Bint Mahmoud. Although her subjectivity is never explored, they feel closer to her than to the Englishwomen who commit suicide. In fact, they are confused by the first half of the novel, since the full context for Mustafa’s tormented

behavior and apparent “soullessness” is initially withheld. It is only later, through the narrator’s struggle to reconcile his love for his native village with his rage at its abuses, that Mustafa’s complexity is indirectly probed. Mustafa comes to recognize that the ideal of coherence, unity, stability which is behind a belief in one’s culture as well as in one’s own individual identity is always a fantasy. It is the shattering of the illusion of coherence which constitutes Mustafa’s tragedy and which informs the narrator’s discovery of his own alienation.

Season of Migration to the North is one of the more difficult novels I have attempted to teach, and I am not yet satisfied that I have discovered the most effective questions with which to undertake a discussion of subjectivity, of the challenge to subjective coherence (of communities, of individuals) which it explores. However, I am convinced that it is one of the most important contemporary novels which deals with this theme, for it offers students an opportunity to examine difficult questions about their own emerging subjectivities. I ask them to write about ways in which *they* can no longer go “home” to their culture of origin, and, whether that culture is here or farther away, many are quick to note that distance is psychological as well as geographical (a point Salih’s novel makes as well). Yet, as in earlier discussions, there are students who fiercely maintain that no separation between their own and their parents’ (or community’s) values has taken place (or ever will take place). Like Salih’s narrator who at the beginning of the novel returns to his village and says, “I feel a sense of stability, I feel that I am important, that I am continuous and integral” (5), they believe in their own subjective coherence and that of their culture.

Yet if one of *Season*’s primary themes is that this coherence cannot be sustained, a door has been opened to a more complex understanding of subjectivity which students may explore. Many students in my classes are ambivalent toward their cultures, and they can begin to write about this ambivalence as a source of strength as well as conflict. Thus understanding the complexity of Mustafa can be a moment of liberation, one which may bring about a recognition that coherence, wholeness is a naïve illusion. Mustafa’s tale illustrates not only his rage at the rape of Africa but his recognition that there is no single cultural “home” for the post-colonial subject, and perhaps this insight has special significance for today’s multicultural students. Mustafa’s life story, which he leaves in a locked room for the narrator to uncover, contains only a one-line dedication: “To those who see with one eye, talk with one tongue, and see things as either black or white, either Eastern or Western” (152). Yet the novel itself, as Saree Makdisi suggests, “is dedicated to readers who do not yet exist: those who can simultaneously see with two eyes, talk with two tongues, and see things in both black *and* white” (820). Part of our task is precisely to lead students to the recognition that we must all learn how “to see with two eyes,” that is, to see that we exist both within and outside our individual cultures.

American texts which openly confront difficult problems surrounding multicultural identity offer an opportunity to examine the question of hybridity directly. Novels (and memoirs) by writers such as Barbara Kingsolver, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Gloria Anzaldua, and Sandra Cisneros expose students to the complexity of postmodern subjectivities. Such texts poignantly describe the feelings of those who belong to more than one culture, who experience not only marginalization but a split identity which makes a single cultural choice impossible. These are native Americans who are truly multicultural and their works reflect a desire to celebrate their subject positions as well as to expose the cultural difficulties they face. Some of the social problems surrounding hybridity are explored by Barbara Kingsolver in two novels, *Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*. Kingsolver's narratives describe the experience of a white middle-class woman who finds an abandoned and abused Cherokee child in her car and later adopts her illegally. Initially, students' sympathies are entirely on the side of Taylor, the woman who embraces this child, and they are hostile to her antagonist, a lawyer and activist who wants the child returned to the Cherokee nation. After all, Taylor has nurtured and loved the child to a condition of emotional health—the child acquires the name “Turtle” because she clings fiercely to her adoptive mother's arm—and it was the Cherokees (at least one of them) who abandoned and abused the child. Midway through the second novel, a letter written by Annawake Fourkiller to Taylor radically undermines readers' loyalty to Taylor and challenges their conviction that Turtle should remain with her. The letter reads in part: “I wonder what you are giving Turtle now that she can keep. Soon she's going to hear from someone that she isn't white. . . . On the night of the junior prom, Turtle will need to understand why no white boy's parents are happy to take her picture on their son's arm. What does she have that will see her through this into a peaceful womanhood? As a citizen of Turtle's nation . . . I want you to understand why she can't belong to you” (149–50).

Fourkiller's letter poses a set of questions students have difficulty resolving, yet which mirror important concerns of their own. Some students maintain that no matter how successful they are, they live in a nation where their culture of origin will never be accepted. They offer numerous examples of mistreatment and prejudice (on the subway, on the job, in school). African-American, Latino, and Chinese-American students make the point that this *is* their culture of origin, and yet they are treated as if it is not. One Chinese-American student described to her classmates a scene in which a man on the subway had told her to “go back where she came from.” “But I am from here,” she replied. Although many students in my classes identify with the subject position of the Cherokee child in Kingsolver's novel, some also question Fourkiller's logic, arguing that the hypothetical racism she describes, while powerfully expressed, is still unfair—and her assumptions about whites can be seen as another form of racism. Most students tend to agree,

however, that to ignore the child's complex subject position in this novel, or to believe problems surrounding it can be easily overcome, is naïve.

Kingsolver resolves the conflict in a way which students find "unreal" (Taylor's family becomes close to the Cherokee nation—her mother becomes involved with the Cherokee who is Turtle's legal guardian—and the child remains a member of both communities). Acknowledging their desire for a more authentic ending to this novel, I ask students to compose a letter from the point of view of the Cherokee child, Turtle, exploring her feelings about conflicts she faces in each of the communities to which she belongs. I have tried out this same assignment with films in which characters face cultural or racial conflicts. We use these "letters" to examine difficult questions which confront our own postcolonial nation. Is it true, for example, as Spike Lee suggests in *Jungle Fever*, that people of different races cannot have an authentic love relationship, that cultural and racial prejudice (both within and surrounding the relationship) makes this impossible? What would have to change for individuals to see beyond stereotypes and for these relationships to have a chance? Some feel that this is an impossible question, and perhaps they are right, but, I ask them, what are the alternatives? In grappling with issues of intercultural acceptance in another writing assignment, students write powerful narratives (far less idealized than Kingsolver's) about problems of acceptance within their own families (when their parents refuse to accept their chosen partners because the latter do not come from their culture, for instance), and they discuss cultural conflicts within our college community (where students tend to cluster in specific ethnic groups and identity politics can create mistrust in those who feel excluded).

A final text which prompts an in-depth discussion of culture and identity is David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*. In an ironic exploration of the far-reaching consequences of cultural stereotyping, Hwang's drama offers an excellent opportunity for students to explore the illusions that surround their understandings of others and of themselves, exposing the fact that one often creates what one desires to see and believe in. In introducing Hwang's text, I ask students to examine the story behind the story as Hwang himself identifies it. We read parts of the libretto to *Madama Butterfly* and listen to selections from Puccini's opera ("Dovunque al mondo"; "Un bel di vedremo") in order to understand the highly stereotyped subject positions suggested by the characters Pinkerton and Cio-Cio San. Students quickly recognize the degree to which fantasy informs *both* of the characters' ideas about love and relationships. I contextualize the notion of the orientalist fantasy by offering selections from Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Students identify immediately with Said's analysis: they, too, have been perceived as "irrational, depraved, child-like, 'different'" (Said 40). As one student put it, "I've recently discovered that even my close friends see me first as a Colombian—what I mean is that they have all

these ideas about me (all bad—things they get from the news about drugs for instance) that they see first. They don't see me at all!"

As we move from *Madama Butterfly* to *M. Butterfly*, students carry with them an awareness that no one enters into relationships without stereotypes and illusions. Rather, like Hwang's character René Gallimard (a modern day Pinkerton), we all bring a host of cultural assumptions to the table, and these assumptions often define the nature of our relationships and some of the limitations of those relationships. The "twist" in the story, Gallimard's discovery that his partner is a man, forces students to ask themselves, and each other, fundamental questions about the nature of love which are also questions about the nature of the subject. As one student put it, "If he no longer loves her when he discovers she is a man, what did he love?" Within the play Song Liling answers this question by explaining to a French judge the real reason he was able to fool his lover, Gallimard: "One, because when he finally met his fantasy woman, he wanted more than anything to believe that she was, in fact, a woman. And second, I am an Oriental. And being an Oriental, I could never be completely a man" (83). Song recognizes that Gallimard's essentialist Western fantasy of the "oriental" subject effectively prohibits knowledge of his partner's identity, for "As soon as a Western man comes into contact with the East—he's already confused" (82). He is incapable of seeing an individual, much less a "man."

I have been fascinated by the richness of the discussion which has emerged in my classes on Hwang's text, especially because *M. Butterfly* brings into focus not only questions about cultural identity but also prejudices about sexual orientation. Out of the dialogue which develops in the discussion of *M. Butterfly*, I have constructed a series of questions for decentering student perspectives on their own and each other's subjectivity. I offer the following questions as an alternative to Jay's suggestion that students write an analysis of their own cultural identity ("Taking Multiculturalism Personally" 621). If we are to truly ask students to "try on" or occupy other subject positions, we need to ask them to explore not only how they define themselves, but also how they have learned to construct myths about others. My writing assignment reads as follows: "1. How have you been culturally defined and stereotyped by others? 2. How is your understanding of other cultures also based on myths, stereotypes, prejudices? 3. How (and where) did you learn about these stereotypes? 4. How do you/how can we recognize and overcome these stereotypes?" Students write passionately about ways they have been stereotyped according to gender codes as well as other cultural codes, and I am frequently awed by their insights, particularly their ability to recognize and challenge tendencies to reduce an individual to a gender or cultural stereotype. Here is Karl Schwabauer's response to my first question, showing his awareness of ways a stereotype has defined him incorrectly:

To some people, "the straight white male" is considered the root of all evil. They are responsible for all the unfairness of the world. They oppress women and other cultures. Are all heterosexual Caucasian men like this? Of course not. In fact, many

straight white men are also oppressed. They are expected to live up to this powerful image of strength. They must be successful and above everyone else. I have also been judged for being a white male. People assume that because I am white everything in life comes easily. I myself have not felt this power. Some people tell me that I'm lucky to be gay; otherwise I would be known as "the straight white male." They say me being gay makes me more sympathetic to others. This may be true to a certain extent. A gay person is considered part of an oppressed group. Therefore s/he can sympathize with other oppressed groups.

Karl's awareness of the misperception surrounding his own identity ("I myself have not felt this power") is powerfully reconfigured and undercut in an ironic recognition that it is an advantage for him to be a "minority." For students in a writing class, "texts" like Karl's can perform a decentering function, helping them to recognize the layers of misrepresentation which stereotypes create. Here is how another student, AnaMaria deMedinaceli, responds to my third question, offering an angry critique of Hollywood's depiction of her culture:

I saw the movie, *Romancing the Stone*, when I was about eleven or twelve. This is a perfect example of how Hollywood perpetuates negative stereotypes. It is the typical Hollywood version of a South American country, complete with maniacal military dictator and rich drug lord. According to this movie, Colombia has one airport and no paved highways. The movie heroine is forced to take the bus from the airport to Cartagena. Of course, all Colombians ride buses carrying live chickens with them; I know I do. She takes the wrong bus and ends up in the jungle. Once she finds her way back to Cartagena, she has to wrestle crocodiles on the beach. Hello! There are no crocodiles on the beaches of Cartagena. Hollywood's Colombia is a small impoverished third world country. The richness and beauty of my country and my culture are lost.

AnaMaria's response brought home to me, and to our class, the kind of painful awareness described by W. E. B. DuBois: "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (364). Asking students to discuss solutions to cultural stereotyping moves the dialogue to a new space in which they begin to take responsibility for themselves. In response to my last question, AnaMaria writes, "My experience has taught me that people are prejudiced. This belief, however, is prejudice on my own part. I give people a chance to prove me wrong. The way I get past stereotypes is by talking to people. I find out about their backgrounds. The more you talk to people, the more you see what you have in common." And Karl writes, "I feel the best way to get beyond these stereotypes is through education. This cluster is a good way of doing that. I think it has helped the students look at gender roles and sexual orientation in ways they may never have thought of. Educating people about different cultural and gender differences should start earlier. It should begin in elementary school, when children are most impressionable. It is time for children to learn that a person should be looked at as an individual."

IV

A thematically organized course (or cluster of courses) in which postcolonial as well as western texts are presented in a sequence which allows for cultural, chronological, and thematic comparison can engender powerful, if sometimes uneven (what Jonathan Collett refers to as “emotionally messy” [183]), classroom discussions. With a colleague in the Humanities department, I recently designed a cluster (Introduction to Theater, Oral Communication, English Composition and the Research Paper) organized around the theme of “Culture, Gender and Communication” which included the following texts: Sophocles *Antigone*, Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*, August Wilson’s *Fences*, Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, Terence McNally’s *André’s Mother*, and films exploring gender and culture ranging from *Mississippi Masala* and *Jungle Fever* to *Paris is Burning* and *The Celluloid Closet*. Since heterosexual challenges to conventional gender roles are less emotionally charged than homosexual challenges to these roles, our syllabus moves from texts which explore challenges to traditionally defined gender roles (Antigone’s challenge to Creon in Sophocles’s play, Rose’s challenge to Troy in Wilson’s play) to texts which explore roles which are less understood or accepted (the relationship between Song Liling and René Gallimard in Hwang’s play; the “relationship” between the mother and the lover of the young man who has died of AIDS in McNally’s play). And since challenges to cultural oppression and racism are generally more accessible to a majority of students, we use films which confront prejudice about cultural difference for counterpoint and comparison, and sometimes to alleviate “pressure” which arises when students become rigid about a gender issue. Repeatedly, we have discovered that it is important to get students to explore the parallels between issues involving cultural prejudices they are familiar with and ones they are less accustomed to discussing, such as those involving gender and sexual orientation. My colleague, who is gay and who “comes out” early in each semester to our class, reminds students that homosexuals are the one remaining group in almost every culture whom it is still “safe” to be prejudiced against. At some point in each semester we have taught this cluster, more than one student has approached us with a comment such as “I cannot believe how much my ideas have changed.” Students who are already open about an issue such as sexual orientation gain a kind of strength or security that it is acceptable to express their views; students who are not as open may begin to question some of their assumptions.

Many of the texts and films which initiate moments of crisis in my classes pose a similar question: how does the individual reconcile his or her responsibility to a community or culture with his or her own subjectivity? This question has evolved substantially since the Enlightenment and its answer is infinitely more complex in a cultural context which is pluralistic and divided. Characters in individual texts

who speak from a single point of view sometimes lead students to believe that the argument cannot be resolved or that one must always choose one side—subordinating oneself to the community or rebelling and giving up the community in order to *be* an individual. But what is our work about if not precisely to deconstruct this opposition and explore the process by which both individual and community values can be acknowledged, understood, and critiqued? We live and work increasingly in a multicultural society which is frequently torn by identity politics and a cynical belief that the best we can do is defend our own cultural territory. In *Jungle Fever*, when Spike Lee's character, Flipper, says to Angela, "I don't love you, and I doubt seriously if you've ever loved me. . . . You got with me to spite your family 'cause you were curious about black . . . and I was curious about white," he is making the claim that crossing borders is something we cannot (and should not) do. While students understand his pain in the light of the virulent racism he has experienced, they also question the stance which protects him from that pain, conveniently depersonalizes (excuses) his adultery, and returns him to a comparatively "safe" monocultural world. In our discussion of Kingsolver's novel, one student, arguing for a similar kind of isolation, supported the Cherokee nation by invoking what she referred to as Louis Farrakhan's argument that separate nations should be created—she named them by color: white, black, red, yellow. Later in the discussion, when that student's views had been challenged, she admitted that her "divisions" posed a problem for her own multicultural family ("Everyone in my family is a mixture!"), thus proving to the class that it is not possible to sustain this illusion of a single cultural identity. Our challenge is to chart and explore the very difficult territory of our cultures and differences and to help students develop cognitive skills that will enable them to understand difference better and begin to define what they as individuals *and* as members of communities need to do to cross borders, to connect.

In all of these discussions, students come to see that the literary text (and subsequently the writing assignment) is a site where an important kind of cultural debate and dialogue can take place, that it is a space in which complex feelings and attitudes on different sides of a question are dramatized. Often, contradictory positions create a contact zone within the same text, and the fact that some or all of these positions are scrutinized and critiqued suggests that positions taken by students within the classroom may also be questioned. Students come to recognize that any discussion of cultural values is clarified by an awareness that there are many different sides to an issue, that a text often questions and subverts the values its characters present, and that the premises behind a particular custom are often more universal than they may appear to be at first glance. Finally, the questions these texts raise about culture, gender, and sexual orientation help expose the fact that all values are socially constructed, thus undermining essentialist and monocultural notions of "truth."

We can create a better basis for dialogue if we share with students the recognition that neutrality is an illusion, that we all occupy positions, inscribed by cultural codes, but that these positions can be explored and challenged. As Erkkila suggests, "we need to rethink the notion of American culture, not as a single, unified, and already constituted culture that 'expands' to include and incorporate sexual and racial others but as a site of cultural conflict, struggle, and exchange across borders that are themselves historically constituted, permeable, contested, and in flux" (588). Literary texts which speak directly to issues of cultural struggle and change, which illustrate stereotypes and misperceptions and which explore complex hybrid definitions of culture and identity, offer a valuable context in which to conduct this dialogue. Carefully framed questions and writing assignments which lead students to examine the premises of a cultural practice as well as the premises behind their own (often unexamined) beliefs can provide a basis for effective ethical inquiry.

Finally, confronting conflicting responses to cultural issues can be an opportunity for all of us to explore *our* increasing cultural hybridity. Respect for this hybridity can lead to a process best described by Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of "ideological becoming": that is, we must all begin to engage in the process of "*selectively* assimilating the words of others" (341; emphasis added). While often misrepresented as a pedagogy, multiculturalism, according to Bizzell, "is a name for our recognition of this condition of living on contested cultural ground, and our desire to represent some of this complexity in our study of literature and literacy" (166). The learning community models and values I use offer one way to redefine curriculum and pedagogy and to shape a multicultural vision, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., defines it, for they promote an understanding that "identities are always in dialogue, that they exist only in relation to one another and that they are, like everything else, sites of contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning" (11). As our college communities truly become multicultural, faculty and students must reposition themselves to negotiate more effectively the many sites of conflict which are defined by cultural difference. Our students' experiences of conflict offer them (and us) an opportunity to challenge and decenter notions of cultural essentialism, hierarchy, and chauvinism. Through this process we may all begin to reposition ourselves in the contact zone.

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