

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Cisneros in India: *Post(?)*colonial Parables

by Linda Dittmar



LINDA DITTMAR WITH HER STUDENTS COURTESY OF LINDA DITTMAR

Setting: As Fulbright grants put it, I was a “cultural ambassador” to India twice, 1994-95 and 2009-10, but what exactly does being a “cultural ambassador” mean?

Scene I: 1994

The air is crisp as I walk to the English Department at the Central University of Hyderabad on the first day of class. Ahead of me are three sari-clad figures—pink, yellow, and cornflower blue—their long braids swaying as they walk. When they hear my footsteps, they turn and smile at this foreigner, me.

--- *“Oh, you are our new English teacher! We are so excited to have you be our teacher,” they say, smiling warmly.*

--- *“Yes, I’m excited too,” I smile in return. “I’m Linda. What are your names?”*

--- *“I am Malini, and she is....”*

When I enter the classroom the students stand up. One gangly young man just finished scrawling “WELCOME, PROFESSOR DITTMAR!” on the blackboard and dashes back to stand with the others. We are off to a friendly start. I introduce myself, review their names, comment on the syllabus (modern American literature) and I tell them about my meeting their three classmates a few minutes earlier.

--- *“Shalini, Malini, and Rajya are probably not the only ones excited about this class,” I say, misplacing the accent on their names though nobody tells me at the time. “But why should you be excited?”*

--- *“Because you’ll teach us about America,” they say eagerly.*

We talk about what they anticipate from me, a “real” American—access to a United States they mainly know through popular music, movies, and TV. They don’t know yet that I’m Israeli-American, not a “real” one. I note the difference between “America” and the “U.S.” We formulate preliminary questions about the “America” they imagine and the United States portrayed in our literature. I assign a short “getting to know you” paper—me them and them me—via a close reading.

That first paper turns out to be a mess: no focus, no topic, no development. It’s more like free-writing, whatever happened to come to mind. “Well,” I say on the following day, “you thought I’ll teach you about America but actually we’ll work on your writing!” We laugh. They know their writing was careless. They also know that I mean business. They don’t yet know that the “America” we’ll be discussing—with its issues of race, and gender, and social class—shares something with their own India, after all.

Scene II: 1994

Still new to India, I am invited to a three-day conference on American literature hosted by the United States Information Services at a luxury Himalayan resort north of Kolkata. The attendees are Indian scholars, handpicked, many of them established, some “promising.” The two or three most senior Indians, the American USIS sponsors, and three American guest presenters (two white scholars and one black poet/novelist) are distinctly privileged. We get spacious individual suites while most of the Indians share ordinary double rooms. At meals the Americans sit apart, though I break ranks with my compatriots and join this or that “Indian” table. They have their own insider conversations. Once in a while I chip in, noting a point of contact—a difficulty we, Americans, also face, issues of race and class for example, or gender. But my presence is not entirely welcome; they don’t trust me.

At some point somebody suggests in undertones that USIS is an arm of the CIA. “What are we to make of her?” I imagine them thinking, especially the young leftists. They are all from Kolkata, a communist stronghold where the street fronting the American Consulate has been renamed for Ho Chi Minh! Still, by the time we leave, three days later, I seem to have gained provisional acceptance: friendlier eye-contact, easier chat . . . But when I head for the bus assigned to my new Indian friends I am recalled back to the American van.

Scene III: 1995:

--- *“Let’s go haggle for Saris,” my student, Arunadha, says to me, adjusting her shiny black braid over the beautiful palu (the ornate edge) of her own emerald sari as she looks disapprovingly at my beige American skirt and pale blue blouse. At this point I’ve been on campus for some five weeks, still in western attire.*

--- *“Me... errr... Sari?” I mumble in panic at the colonial specter of me masquerading in local “folk” attire.*

--- *“Yes. You really need to wear something nice,” Arunadha insists. “We can go on Friday. That way we won’t miss class. And haggling is fun,” she adds, her black eyes twinkling into mine.*

Arundaha is right. All the adult women on campus wear colorful saris, even the sweepers. My American clothes are dull, though I do worry about the colonial implications of her proposed sartorial East/West venture. I remember with horror a joke my father liked telling:

--- *Eleanor Roosevelt at the UN, complimenting a sari-clad Indian lady: “How lovely you look in your native costume.”*

--- *Indian lady to the grey-suited Eleanor: “And how lovely you look in yours.”*

Still, our day at the market was fun and come Monday morning I appear in class draped in the more sedate of my two new saris. The students cheer and rush me out for photographs. Nobody but I worries about the East/West distinction between “costume” and “clothes.” As they see it, I am honoring their culture. Over time, it stops being an “honoring.” It’s just clothes, like everybody else.

Scene III: 1995 and 2010

I am to read poetry at Hyderabad’s Poetry Society, but what should I read for this group of mostly aging, solidly middle class, cultured non-academics brought up on a British curriculum? The usual fare of Keats and Shelley? I assemble a mini-anthology of poetry about African-American women: Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Nikki Giovanni, and Kate Rushin, concluding with the “laying on of hands” ending of Ntozake Shange’s, *For Colored Girls . . .* “That was very different,” they tell me later over tea and dainty pastries.

Years later, when I return to Hyderabad, I read poetry by two American war veterans: Bruce Weigle’s *Song of*

subject matter? Shouldn’t one of you be standing at this podium? Is it simply because I’m an American? A white American?”

Everybody laughs, especially the younger faculty and graduate students. The cards are finally on the table, which is a good thing as the conference is in Bengal, known for its leftist politics on the ground and postcolonial theorizing in the stratosphere. It’s the question I raised obliquely on that first day of class in 1995, the reason I headed for the “Indian bus” in that Himalayan resort, my hesitation to wear a sari, and the purpose behind my choices of poetry for Hyderabad’s Poetry Society.

Taken together, these incidents and quite a few others speak to the contradictions inherent in my position in India. They speak to the warm welcome I received but also a certain spuriousness that runs through it. They speak to the distrust as well as deference accorded me and perhaps, sometimes, also to envy and competitiveness: why should *she* get this special treatment?



Napalm (Vietnam) and Brian Turner’s *Here, Bullet* (Iraq). That, too is “very different.”

Is “different” a compliment, I wonder, or a sign of discomfort? Is my bringing to this complacent gathering the dissenting voices of black and warrior poets something they wish did not happen? And did my being a white American in some way cushion this transgression?

Scene IV: 2010

I turn down an invitation to be Keynote speaker at a conference on Asian literature in English. “I know next to nothing about this body of literature,” I find myself repeating in several emails as I ward off the insistent invitation. (As Fulbright’s Distinguished Chair that year I am expected to lecture widely.) We settle on my giving the closing “valedictorian” talk, which I start by reviewing the back and forth around the Keynote invitation: “Why was I invited to be your Valedictorian speaker,” I ask, “let alone a Keynote presenter, when I know so little about your

Cross-cultural teaching is always a minefield of potential mistakes, misunderstandings, intended and unintended insults, and more. We encounter versions of that inside the United States as well, but each context is also particular. What I felt most acutely in India was the surplus of power assigned to me in my role as a “cultural ambassador.” As such, it was assumed that I am a white, American, Christian woman—none of which categories is quite accurate. In actuality I am a secular American-Israeli Jew who even speaks with a slight foreign accent.

This surplus of power was, for me, the most troubling aspect of those two “tours of duty,” as I’m tempted to call my Fulbright assignments. I was keenly aware, repeatedly, of the chasm between the high regard I was assigned in India and the much more modest realities of my usual work at an urban, commuting university in the United States. The high regard ascribed me in India was, I felt, derived from the Fulbright label. It respected the grant’s

competitive selection process, but also registered the U.S.'s hegemony in its unquestioning trust in my abilities.

Working with my students on their writing was one of my attempts to dislodge the colonizing powers assigned to me. After all, that's what I've been doing in my American classrooms all along. It felt good to posit critical thinking in that Indian classroom, early on, as far more important than the frisson of my provenance. My wearing a sari made explicit the ironies of belonging and otherness (and, additionally, highlighted the ironies of being "woman," easily reducible to "lesser" despite my august status). The poetry I selected for Hyderabad's Poetry Society had the same function as my attempt to join the Indians' bus in that Himalayan resort. Both dislodged the hegemony of what I was made to represent. Finally, my valedictorian speech, which occurred towards the end of my second stint in India, exposed the power relations that underlie the production of knowledge.

Still, invited lectures aside, and there were many, most of my teaching in India was of the familiar lecture/discussion sort, where a teacher's power is built into the teaching situation. Mostly I taught at two different universities, both located in greater Hyderabad: the Central University of Hyderabad (UHyd 1994-95) and Osmania University (OU 2009-10). Though some faculty were keenly aware of my assigned status as a tremor under the surface of good fellowship, it turned out that students were also not unaware of it. It was in the air. As one student told me later, a faculty colleague, who eventually became a dear friend, rightly warned students before my arrival "not to be swayed by a white face."

UHyd is a selective, graduate, national university whose students come from all over India and abroad. Abdu, my one foreign student, was from Jordan and probably Palestinian in origin. He was planning to become a teacher back home. Many other male students were hoping to go on to a Ph.D., and several did, two of them now teaching in the United States. The females, as assertive and confident as the males in this highly selective university, were nonetheless expected to enter into arranged marriages, and several dropped out mid-semester to do so. The one Moslem female among us resisted pressures (by male Moslem students) to wear a hijab and after graduation ran away to marry a Hindu. Her widowed mother, I later heard, supported her choice. These students knew that they were among India's best but were joined in a relaxed, non-competitive companionability. The bemused observation with which they greeted me quickly gave way to trust and readiness to work.

The situation was different at OU, some ten years later. Founded by the wealthy Nizam of Hyderabad (India's last holdout ruler, a Moslem, resisting postcolonial unification), OU is a less selective private university that serves students from Iran and the Arab world as well as locals. My students here included two Iraqis desperate to come to the United States and a few rather self-effacing women, mostly in hijab, who tended to sit on one side of the isle, apart from the males. These students were less well prepared as a group than those at UHyd, and they seemed less sure of themselves or why they were in a literature class in the first place. Getting discussion in this class was harder; getting them to do at-home writing or meet with me out of class was almost impossible.

In both universities I was handed a ready-made syllabus. At UHyd it included a substantive collection of stories by Willa Cather, Hemingway, Faulkner, and other American writers while the OU syllabus was thin—two plays to be taught over twelve weeks: Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Neil Simon's *The Sunshine Boys*. In both instances I had already decided to add to the set syllabus supplementary materials, though at UHyd the addition meant an overload that upped the pressure, while at OU it was more of a filler. At UHyd, where the assigned authors were all white and mostly male, I added James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues," Maxine Hong-Kingston's "The No-name Woman" chapter from *The Woman Warrior*, and Sandra Cisneros' "Woman Howling Creek." At OU I added poetry by



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Langston Hughes as a complement to *A Raisin in the Sun* in order to enrich the context of that play. I had not yet decided what to do about a "filler" to supplement *The Sunshine Boys* when our semester got disrupted by riots. As it turned out, Hansberry's play and Hughes' poems were all we got to study.

Such tweaking of a syllabus may be unremarkable in an American university, but not in India, at least not during my first time there, 1995, when British culture still ruled English Departments. I give great credit to UHyd for having the strength and independence to allow me that leeway. Though an exceptional American Studies Research Center was thriving in Hyderabad at the time, one of only two globally (financed by the U.S. government), American literature, if taught at all, seemed to consist mainly of Hemingway and Bellow, with a buzz about Black women writers just beginning to be heard from the margins. But why only blacks and why only women?

Puzzling this question in 1995, I introduced black poetry where it was least expected—at Hyderabad's very conventional Poetry Society—and added Baldwin, Hong-Kingston and Cisneros to my course's syllabus. In both

instances I wanted this more complex image of “America” to elicit reflection on ways social marginality in the United States is in dialogue with India’s own versions of it. (This was also my theme at the Himalayan conference early on and on many other occasions.) Ethnic, economic, and gendered oppression in the United States, I suggested, has its parallels in India’s “scheduled classes”—its Untouchables, Tribals, and other Dalits who have existed outside the caste system from time immemorial but were now becoming eligible for India’s version of affirmative action. What I did not expect, though, was that even to admit that we may be beset by equivalent problems would feel daring.

I realized this early on in 1995, as people thanked me specifically for the honesty of my not-so-rosy lecture I gave at the then illustrious American Studies Research Center in Hyderabad. (Until the United States defunded it a few years later, ASRC was the foremost American Studies library and conference center outside of Europe.) My lecture was part of a weeklong faculty seminar focused on American multiculturalism. The audience, which included faculty from emergent nations in Africa as well as South and Southeast Asia, did not take to the standard-issue image of the United States as the seat of democratic equity and widespread well-being. Outsiders tend to register the boast undergirding our triumphalist claims of achievements, the condescension and the swagger. In 1994 and still new to India, I meant no more than be truthful. What I learned from the audience’s warm response was the extent to which they needed to see us as partners who understand their struggles because we know and care about our own.

When I returned to India in 2009/ 2010, this time to OU and a much diminished ASRC (now barely supported by the United States and renamed Osmania University Center for International Programs) the traditional British literary curriculum was still in the lead though the interest in black American women’s writing had grown, and with it a budding interest in the literature of other minorities. After all, by then Paul Lauter and other American Studies scholars had done much to challenge the literary canon and put forward an appreciation of the range and depth of inclusiveness, paralleled by emergent minority literatures in the UK and elsewhere. So what was it about specifically black American writers, and especially women, continuing to capture the imagination across India’s many campuses, as Hemingway and Bellow had done previously?

There are many reasons for the emergence of this black and mostly female canon in India, including the originality and vitality of its literary “voice” as it reclaims vernacular energies; its compelling focus on power, rebellion, and self-affirmation; its vividness and depiction of social context; and perhaps traces of reverse exoticism. All this has shaped the American curriculum too, but the opening of India’s curriculum nationally to black and to a lesser degree other minority American literatures has most to do with India’s own internal politics. In this sense American literature becomes a vehicle for reflecting on Indian politics, notably the pressure by disenfranchised Dalits to escape their prescribed misery—a reality that near

seventy years of postcolonial independence has not changed much.

Seen against this background (including rural and urban poverty, vast shanti-towns, government corruption, and glaring economic inequalities), it’s no wonder that some Dalits choose to convert to Christianity or join the military—that great equalizer—while others join the Naxalite and other “terrorist” groups discussed by Arundati Roy and others. Despite differences in class, caste, religion, languages, and ethnicities, the emergence in India of strong feminist voices is informed by an understanding of oppressions as equivalent. Surely the subaltern can speak, Dalit and American alike, as our respective U.S. and Indian curriculums show. Our struggles over what we teach in either country speak to the intersection of these social movements.



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Since this U.S./India parallel is not often voiced, I tried to address it whenever possible, including that time in Chennai (2010) when I was asked to speak at a ceremony honoring the publication of the first Tribal novel in English. As it so happened I was in town to participate in a conference on “The Future of American Studies” sponsored by the U.S. consulate. Since I was in town, organizers of the book launch at a nearby college nabbed me for the book launch, wanting my words as an American to validate the importance of the moment. Still, for me the invitation was unsettling. After all, who am *I* to speak on a local issue about which I know very little, and what am I to say? My solution was to speak of our own “Dalit” writers, including disenfranchised whites, and their substantial contributions to social change through their cultural work. I talked about Frederick Douglass and Richard Wright, Agnes Smedley, Tillie Olsen and others, many of whom the audience never heard of. As we dispersed, a young faculty member approached me: “I want to work on Agnes Smedley. How do I go about it?” I gave him what leads I could and dearly hope he went ahead with this project. While my own emphasis was mainly on ways disenfranchised people claimed their position as thinkers and writers, Smedley’s involvement with the Indian independence movement makes her also an interesting subject for an Indian researcher. But in this instance there was something about this young man’s demeanor, including his eagerness to depart from the literary canon, that made me wonder whether this man, himself, is also a Dalit.

Though my earlier teaching at UHyd, in 1995, rested on close textual analysis, it pried loose related questions: ways different disenfranchisements (aka subaltern positions) divide or unite people; ways an author (Hong-Kingston) orchestrates disparate viewpoints to critique the policing of women's sexuality; ways the thematic thread of music negotiates race, expression, gender, art, social class, and personal responsibility (Baldwin); the politics of pastoral nostalgia (Cather); or the uses of dialect in Faulkner, Spanish by Cisneros, black vernacular in Morrison, Yiddish by Tillie Olsen, etc.. The textured "Americas" that emerged from the close—very close—reading of language as at once brilliantly original and yet also expressive of particular social groups is quite different from my students' much more passive reception of media-derived images. Here was a course that required of students a particular kind of critical thinking—patient, attentive scrutiny of language—as it shapes stories and gives life to characters, but doing so through their own experience in India as a dialogue with mine in the United States.

Sadly, during my second time in Hyderabad, in 2009 and especially 2010, the city was engulfed in riots. There were hunger strikes, suicides, traffic blocked by cars in flames, daily rallies, and demonstrations—an uprising of the impoverished western part of the state (Andhra



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Pradesh) against long standing government neglect. At issue was and still is the wealth generated by the water resources that flow from the state's rocky highlands of the Telengana region in the west and enrich the fertile lowlands to the east. Hyderabad, the capital, is a prosperous and rapidly growing high-tech center that boasts a sumptuous international airport and a new U. S. consulate, with high tech centers and apartments mushrooming in its periphery. Technically, it is in Telengana, except that its investments come from the east and its profits benefit the east disproportionately.

After years of fruitless political lobbying and agitation, the leader of the Telegu people went on hunger strike, and my campus, with its many Telegu students, became a hub of local activism. Rallies were held daily, with amplified speeches wafting into my distant guesthouse windows at all hours. A few students committed suicide; cars and busses were overturned and burnt in the nearby streets; classes were cancelled and students were sent home for weeks at a time; armed guards were posted at the gates, allowing no entry or egress. I found myself bereft of my

students and missing the guesthouse residents who would gather at mealtime. Only a skeletal staff remained, none speaking English.

Yet my own situation was not that bad. I felt safe in the guesthouse and found ways to leave campus through back roads when invited to lecture outside Andhra. My OU class did manage to discuss *A Raisin in the Sun* and Langston Hughes' poems in depth—rich material on race, gender, and class—even if we never got to *The Sunshine Boys*. We could afford the loss of that play, I felt, though not the teaching time this group of students desperately needed. They were so much less privileged than those at UHyd, so much weaker in preparation, and I could do little to help them catch up. There was an urgency to their eagerness to study with me quite different from the carefree curiosity of their peers at UHyd. The two Iraqi students in particular, who seemed older than the others, were anxious to learn English:

--- *"Please, Professor, Ma'am. I must learn English. I'll work hard!"*

--- *"Please, Professor, Ma'am. I don't want to go back to Iraq. I want to study in America. Please help me. I need good English."*

--- *"Yes, Professor, Ma'am. It's so important!"*

--- *"OK," I say, trying to be reassuring. "I understand. We can't do much in just one semester, but come see me out of class at the campus guesthouse. I can meet you every day. Just come see me at my guesthouse."*

They never came. Nor did the others. There was a pall on campus that wouldn't lift. Yes, there were riots, closures, and cancelled classes, but that could have been an opportunity to meet one on one and work in small groups, without time limits. I think their not coming despite my urging had more to do with their uncertain prospects, depleted faith, and a weakened sense of agency than with the riots. In fact, in 2009-2010 OU's English Department itself seemed depressed beyond the immediate crisis. At issue, I think, was self-image and motivation, pivoting on questions of economics, social class, gender, and a community short-changed by the State.

The one time I saw OU students outside of class was at the end of my stay, at the staff's farewell party for me. I did not expect them to show up, yet students arrived carrying cards and bougainvillea branches they picked on the way. Given how little work we did together, I did not expect them and was shaken to see them arrive. The gap between their appreciation and my meager teaching was immense, as I saw it. Not only did I fail to do ESL triage for the Iraqi students, but I hardly had a chance to work with them on their critical thinking, let alone help them trust their competence. How *could* they be so grateful for receiving so little?

The more I think of it the more glaring the differences between the two institutions. In contrast with the need conveyed by the OU students in 2009-2010, I see a mini-rebellion that occurred towards the end of the semester at UHyd in 1995 as a measure of this select group of students' empowerment. We were discussing Cisneros' story, "Woman Howling Creek," when two students at the back of the class, a male and a female, stood up to protest:

--- "I'm tired of reading about how women are oppressed by men," exclaimed Alita, from the back of the class. "I'm tired of all this complaining. Can't we read something about strong women for a change? Something positive?!"

--- "This is really offensive!" added Prasad, who always sat next to her. "It's so depressing, and bad politics too! We know about women's oppression! We know all that. We need to read about empowerment, about liberation!"

--- "Yes, all this whining and self-pity doesn't help us move forward. This is reactionary material," comes from an agitated voice somewhere closer to the front.

And so it went for a while, with a few other students tentatively nodding in agreement, some shifting uncomfortably in their seats.

I was stunned. Cisneros was to be our last reading for the semester; I had placed her story as our final reading very deliberately, wanting to end the course on a liberatory note, depicting empowered minority women coming together to smash male authority. By now, I had assumed, after four months of close readings informed by progressive egalitarian politics, surely we will not fall back on formulas. For a moment hushed uncertainty reined in the classroom. Nobody expected this. For years these students have been standing up every time a teacher entered a class, and now this rebellion, and against this foreign, white, American woman no less! "I mustn't feel attacked," I reminded myself. "This is political, not personal."

--- "No, no," I said, gesturing for them—and myself—to calm down. "You are misreading the story. Let me explain...."

What followed was a lecture on "Woman Howling Creek" as an *emancipatory* story about cross-border

migration, about gender and patriarchy and poverty, and about women uniting in "sisterhood" to rescue one of their own. For all of the protagonist's abuse and suffering and the narrative's hinting that she may drown herself in despair, the story ends triumphantly with two other women deftly arranging her escape. The symbolic details are important too: the clinic as a site of sisterhood and communal empowerment; a woman-owned pickup truck as appropriation of masculine prerogative; the power of the other two women as independent, experienced, wage-earning Latinas; the truck speeding over a bridge that arcs above the creek's as it transports Cleofilas to freedom; and the triumphant shout of victory in the end as a response to the wail of *la llorona* ("the weeping woman") who, legend tells, drowned herself in this creek.

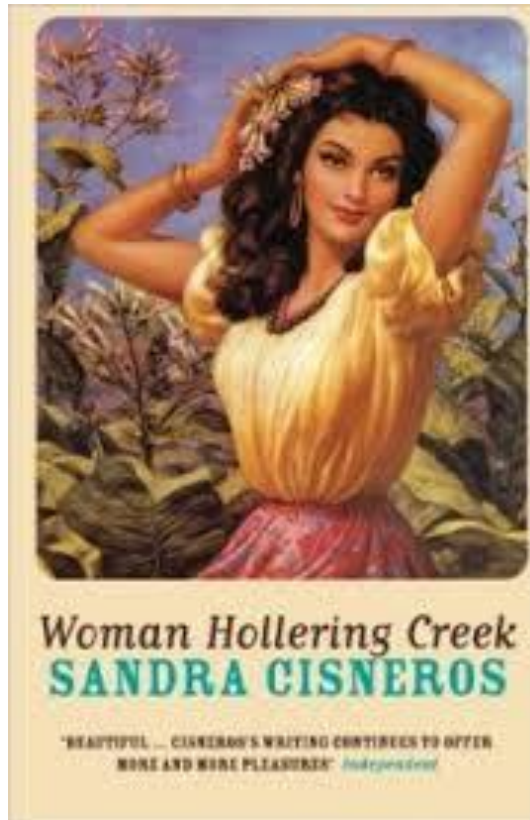
In retrospect, I wish I had read Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, before coming to India. Nafisi had the inspired idea of putting *The Great Gatsby* on trial (complete with students as judge, prosecutor, defense lawyer, and jury) when ideological objections to the text arose in her class. But Nafisi's memoir had not yet been published when I taught at UHyd, and I fell back on the more trodden path of lecturing to counter the students' misinterpretation. The lecture just poured out as of its own momentum.

It "took," perhaps because it so clearly built on our entire semester's work, though not without leaving me with residual questions. While I believe that the students' "uprising" was political, not personal, in what ways was it "political" and how do the two interact?

In retrospect I can see that that incident summed up a lot more than any of us had time to digest. It felt like an ordinary

misreading of the text that became a "teachable moment," but wrapped into it was the need to challenge a professor who was selected as representative ("cultural diplomat") by the U.S. government and was enjoying privilege as a white American. "Who is *she* to tell us? Can we trust anything *she* offers as not implicated in oppression—oppression of women, of dark skinned people, of the poor and disenfranchised?" At my end I also wondered, not without some satisfaction, whether the objection to Cisneros' story as reactionary reflected these two students' need to challenge the hegemonic power lodged in me as an emissary of a world they at once resented and craved?

It was good to end my first semester in India this way—after four months of discussing the importance of critical thinking. I am encouraged by UHyd's students' assertiveness, their standing up to me, "Linda Ma'am"



(rather than OU's "Professor Ma'am" ten years later). Here are students who arrived with exceptionally high grades and mostly economic comfort. In reality, some were Dalit, though I refused to be told who. Those were admitted under the affirmative action "reservation" laws that require universities to set aside a certain proportion of places for "scheduled" students and faculty, except that here, at UHyd, unlike OU, the mood was sunny. Whatever disadvantages certain students brought with them, they were part of a movement forward.

For my OU students, they told me in parting, the two things that stood out were the poems by Langston Hughes and the way I kept clambering up and down the high dais where the teacher's desk and blackboard were anchored. "Thank you, *thank* you for teaching us Langston Hughes," one of them said with deep feeling. Another commented with a smile about all this up and down, which demystified the usual professorial demeanor of bestowing wisdom from the heights of a raised desk. I hope there was something liberating about these graceless efforts, a sense that what we are doing is important!



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Coda

Whatever progress might have occurred in the sheltered pods that were my classrooms at UHyd and OU does not finally address the questions with which I started this discussion, notably, What was I doing in India as an American outsider sponsored by the U.S. Government's State Department? and, underlying it, Is it at all possible to teach radically in a situation where the visiting foreigner wields excessive power? Isn't the "cultural ambassador" position neo-colonial a-priori?

Though I addressed variants of these questions head on whenever possible, Indian colleagues on the left, especially the younger ones, were not quick to take my outstretched hand. At the Himalayan resort conference which I attended early on in my first "tour of duty," in 1995, it took three days of hard work for me to prove myself, provisionally. In 2010 a man I considered a friend introduced me on a panel as editor of "Radical Teacher" with a skeptically raised eyebrow. In 1995, a female colleague who had long ignored me, invited me to Hyderabad's hallowed Urvashi's Centre for Women's Studies and responded to my affirming that I felt at home there with, "I am not sure I can take that as a

compliment." Another woman, chairing a plenary at a national conference at OU's Center for International Programs, 2010, ignored my very visibly raised hand (though not the one white *man's* present) as long as she could, letting me speak only after another woman in the audience called out, "What's going on? You are calling on everybody except Professor Dittmar."

I don't take any of that personally; these people didn't know me. At issue is my privileged position as a visibly "white" American, supposedly Christian and heterosexual, stamped with the Fulbright's seal of approval, at times further inflected through my gender. I do cringe at the unearned honors I received, but I also understand the distrust and resentment. Being an American teaching in India is not the same as an American teaching in France or Germany, and even in those countries cross-national problems can arise. In an India that is at once "developing" and keenly aware of its distinguished heritage, at once struggling toward power and boasting great gains, at once bound to British (and now American) colonialism and resentful of it, at once proud and vulnerable, my American privileges were especially palpable. At issue is not just the content and method of teaching. At issue is also power, made all the more explicit when the teacher is a privileged outsider.

In this respect, I remember with special pleasure my invitation to lecture at St. Xavier College in Mumbai close to the end of my 2010 assignment. When I offered to talk about representations of organized labor issues and the working-class in American films my hosts paired me with one of their own faculty who lectured about that topic as treated in Bollywood films. What was to be a one-hour lecture turned into a fascinating half-day exchange. In his introduction to the program the Provost, a Jesuit priest in clerical garb, told the students to look out the window. The problems raised by our discussion, he emphasized—Indian and American *alike*—are lived day in day out in the streets below.

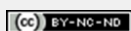
As I think back to the power relations enacted so blatantly at the Himalayan conference I attended early on in 1994, I wonder about what the black American poet/writer who also participated felt during those three days. Given the developing buzz around "black women writers," she stood out, ironically, because she was privileged as subaltern, privileged because not-privileged. That she also happened to be a rather shy person coming down with a severe respiratory infection (she ended up hospitalized) only made matters worse for her. Our other American colleague in that conference, a white male, was an opposite case. He made the mistake—big mistake—of lecturing on postcolonial studies *to Indians!* Under vigorous cross-examination it turned out that he never heard of Aijaz Ahmad, whom all the young Bengali leftists were reading at the time, nor read Fanon, for that matter!

That I did win provisional acceptance from my Indian colleagues at that conference was not because I joined them at mealtime. The test was in my own presentation, informed, as luck would have it, by an essay I had just read, written by the Indian political theorist, Ashis Nandy. I had already planned to problematize my own pre-assigned

topic—the predictable “Black Women Writers”—by emphasizing diversity and differences among them, but Nandy’s analysis of Gandhi’s and Tagore’s positions on national emergence led me to frame the intra-American concerns in Indian ones. Nandy’s dismantling of homogeneity regarding India’s liberatory struggles tied into my own challenge to homogeneity across the work of “black women writers.” Though I was still new to India at the time and had no idea who would be at the conference, this ended up addressing our black poet/writer colleague on the one hand and signaling to our Indian colleagues, on the other, the possibility of some shared exchange.

Did my students at UHyd or OU sense any of these issues, as some of their teachers, perhaps all, obviously did? Taught as these students were to respect and admire all teachers, were they aware of the undercurrents of distrust and antagonisms that run so close to the surface in our supposedly “post” colonial situation? As we got to know one another I was mostly “teacher.” My being a “white American” and a “cultural ambassador” mattered most to those who knew me least, not those who worked with me day in day out. I cherish the work with the students, both at UHyd and OU. I am moved by their curiosity, enthusiasm, and need. But as I leave them to their own lives now, I’m especially aware of the more ineffable consequences of my presence in India. What was radical about my teaching them? Was my colleague’s raised eyebrow, when he introduced me at that 2010 conference as an editor of *Radical Teacher*, justified?

So much that remains unsaid, personal and political, is tangled in such teaching. Clearly the point of teaching Cisneros was not simply to tell students about the “real” America. It was to say something about them and their future, about a world where ethnicity, class and language are partners in a person’s right to her wellbeing, in this case a woman’s. Most importantly, it was also an object lesson about how the story Cisneros tells relates to the work of the Urvashi Center for Women’s Studies, just a short bus ride away, to a rape that happened on the UHyd campus that same semester, and to radical feminist activism as it continues in India and elsewhere. Hopefully the disturbances caused by my privileged post(?)colonial status were useful, finally. In exposing what separates us it also showed possibilities of working together.



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