

BOOK REVIEW

Re-mapping Literary Worlds: postcolonial pedagogy in practice.

Ingrid Johnston, 2003, New York, Peter Lang, 176 pp.
ISBN 0820457523

This insightful book begins with the introduction, “Overview of a Journey: Mapping the Territory.” Throughout thirteen chapters, Johnston engages classroom stories, insights offered by teachers and literature, and discourses of philosophy, and educational theory, questioning the diverse meanings that underlie the language of teaching and learning in postcolonial pedagogy and practice.

The book, based on research for the author’s dissertation which won the CSSE Dissertation Award, presents the writer’s journey, as she moves backward into her past as a teacher in South Africa in order to make sense of her present in Canada. She then looks forward into the future, imagining/re-imagining postcolonial literary studies in multicultural Canadian secondary schools. Johnston positions herself as a collaborative researcher with a high school English teacher in a contemporary Canadian classroom. This border-crossing (from South Africa to Canada) leads the writer to a voyage of exploration of literature, pedagogy and philosophy in postcolonial literary theories. Her research involves participant observation and interviews with students in two grade 12 one grade 11, and two grade 10 classes in a Western Canadian school with a multicultural population. Johnston raises three primary questions:

- What are the positive values for students from diverse cultures of engaging with literary texts that resonate with their own histories, traditions, and cross-cultural experiences?
- How might reading and deconstructing postcolonial literature in the context of a classroom enable students and teachers to problematize representations of self, place, and the “other” in literary texts?
- What challenges and difficulties does one teacher face as she attempts to introduce postcolonial literature to students and to engage them in deconstructive reading strategies? (2)

Johnston uses the metaphor of a voyage to explore the above complexities. And it is within this contextualization, that this book presents teachers’ stories of personal and pedagogical challenges. Johnston raises the complexities of selecting teaching material (short stories, poetry, drama, film, novel and nonfiction), literary theories, (poststructuralist, post modern, critical literary theories, and reader response theory). She explores possibilities for teaching these texts in the classroom, and shares the students’ responses. This book raises questions of social inequality, injustice, and stereotyping as they are represented in literature. It also helps the reader to question their own biases and stereotyping. Johnston suggests ways to select culturally different literature and present diverse perspectives sensitively to high school students, while respecting their cultural differences.

In “Mile One” of her journey, “Charting a Course: Under African Skies,” she describes herself as a traveler, a naïve high school English teacher in Durban, South Africa, imagining ways to help her students cross boundaries by reading multicultural literature. Johnston surveys the international context for multicultural literary education, arguing that in Britain, the United States and Canada, increasing immigrant populations have altered the cultural mosaics of classrooms. Teachers thus face the challenge of understanding and addressing the needs of their students, while becoming aware of “policies of multiculturalism, human rights, and antiracist teaching philosophies” (25). The author describes locations of representation in culture, race, gender and ethnicity, by saying that

When we speak of issues of representation in the context of literary education, we need to look beyond the presence or absence of “positive” images of minority or “third world” people in literary texts, toward the question of how social power operates in cultural and ideological practices in schools and how we call attention to complex relationships between culture, knowledge, and power. (28)

Johnston observes that the new movement of “World Literature” opens possibilities for multiple voices, perspectives, and postcolonial literatures presented by previously marginalized groups. She encourages teachers to develop “a practice of postcolonial pedagogy, implementing strategies of poststructuralists, postmodern and critical theories combined with a reader response philosophy” (59) that will guide teachers and students to see the world through different lenses.

Johnston explores the binaries of theory and practice and the tensions faced by English Language Arts teachers as they bring their own theories of postcolonial literary pedagogy to their teaching practice. Meg, the classroom teacher, and Johnston, the researcher, collaboratively selected texts and engaged students in reading and discussing the material. The material selected and the teaching strategies used provided students with opportunities to begin “to consider the significance and historical past in helping to shape their lives and from there to look outward and to see ambivalences in their own cultural heritages and intersections between their own lives and those of others” (p.83).

Johnston records the students and teacher’s responses to the content and strategies of this postcolonial pedagogy together with her own reflections, creating a narrative description of the research process. Selectively, the work is grounded in Bhabha’s (1994) image of a “Third Space,” where students, through literature, are able to fragment a “homogenous and transcendental sense of . . . identity” and cross boundaries of “fixed scheme[s] of location and identity” (123).

The book concludes with another mapping metaphor. Johnston tells us that the Catalan Atlas which included information brought back by Arabic and European traveler’s labeled unknown areas “*Terra Incognita*.” She suggests that for contemporary students “much of the world is still this terrifying *Terra Incognita* . . . The challenge for the future will be to find ways to encourage teachers to introduce a postcolonial pedagogy that will begin to dispel the myths.” (148)

The book is aimed primarily at researchers and practitioners rather than policy makers. Its focus is on literature and teaching English Language Arts. One of the strengths of this book is that its appeal is not limited to Canadian audiences. It has already

been translated into Mandarin, and selected by Pakistani educators as a guide for designing English literature curriculum. Johnston's book is directed to international English language arts teachers, student teachers and beginning teachers. The book presents a polyphony of voices, creating a space for dialogue and integrating the voices of students and their teacher with her own reflections and those of other scholars. Johnston has chosen to write in a style that is accessible to readers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are involved in developing curricula for diverse school populations. Her book is a valuable addition to the literature on the very important relationship pedagogical and cultural relationship between curriculum, researchers, students and teachers.

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References

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