

“An Unexpected Sound”: Recognizing Diverse Voices in Postcolonial Literary Interpretation¹

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Abstract

This article explores expectations about the ways in which readers from each side of the colonial/colonized divide might approach texts. Pedagogical articles about world and postcolonial literature frequently classify readers in one of two categories—Western or non-Western. Since I teach women from a dozen Asian countries at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, I had imagined that my world literature students would embody expectations about readers from the developing world: that they would relate to the characters and themes in the course’s contemporary texts. When I began teaching Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2003) last spring, however, I learned that my students’ responses to the text varied considerably from what I had expected. As a result, I began questioning my assumptions: why exactly did I expect certain responses from my students, and what is the significance of the alternate responses with which I was confronted? I argue that the assumed interpretive binary does not always exist. In addition to failing to recognize the diverse points of view that readers may bring to texts, the assumption frequently presupposes that postcolonial authors have imagined only Western readers as their audiences—a view that runs the risk of reinforcing oppositional lines of thinking rather than eradicating them. Using *Persepolis* as a case study, I propose avoiding the Western/non-Western binary when considering readers of literature, which requires paying greater attention to “minority” voices—an ironic assertion, considering the field’s alleged attention to diversity, heterogeneity, and cultural and historical specificity.

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In Jamaica Kincaid's *Annie John* (1983), the eponymous protagonist offers what has become a quintessential scene of postcolonial interpretation in literature. While paging through her textbook at school one day, the adolescent Annie discovers a full-page picture in which Columbus sits in the bottom of a ship with his hands and feet bound in chains, looking "quite dejected and miserable" (p. 77). Earlier Annie had identified her Antiguan ancestors as having "done nothing wrong, except just sit somewhere, defenseless," in contrast with the ancestors of Ruth, her English classmate, who did "terrible things" (p. 76). Therefore, when she sees the image, she thinks, "What just deserts [. . .] for I did not like Columbus. How I loved this picture—to see the usually triumphant Columbus, brought so low" (pp. 77-78). In Old English lettering, which is "a script [she] had recently mastered," Annie John scribbles a disdainful jab under the picture (p. 78), which contrasts vividly with her Canadian teacher's response: red-faced and wild-eyed, she tells Annie that she has "gone too far this time, defaming one of the great men in history" (p. 82). This scene demonstrates the complexity of responding to imperial narratives: Annie, as a postcolonial subject, can only offer a countering view by "mastering" the characters and language that are aligned with the former "masters." In addition, offering a critique also requires confronting Western readers, like her teacher, who honor the expansionist characters.

Postcolonial literary moments like this one have the power to become not only descriptive but prescriptive, with characters like Annie and her teacher shaping expectations about the ways that readers from each side of the colonial venture might approach texts. In fact, since I teach women from a dozen Asian and Middle Eastern countries at the Asian University for Women in Chittagong, Bangladesh, I had imagined that my students would respond much like Annie John to the texts we would read together in a world literature course. When I began teaching Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) last spring, however, I discovered that my students' responses to the text varied considerably from what I had expected. As a result, I

began questioning my assumptions: why exactly did I expect certain responses from my students, and what is the significance of the alternate responses with which I was confronted? Because pedagogical articles about world and postcolonial literature frequently classify readers in one of two categories—Western or non-Western—I argue that these fields frequently assume an interpretive binary that does not always exist. In addition to failing to recognize the diverse points of view that readers may bring to texts, the assumption frequently presupposes that postcolonial authors have imagined only Western readers as their audiences—a view that runs the risk of reinforcing oppositional lines of thinking rather than eradicating them. Using *Persepolis* as a case study, I propose avoiding the Western/non-Western binary when considering readers of literature, which requires paying greater attention to “minority” voices—an ironic assertion, considering the field’s alleged attention to diversity, heterogeneity, and cultural and historical specificity.

The two interpretive categories represented by Annie and her teacher recur in pedagogical articles about commonly taught postcolonial texts, and these categories seem to be determined by the reader’s ethnicity or country of origin. Several professors describe their American or Canadian students as resisting the political implications of postcolonial or multicultural texts. Lindsay Pentolfe Aegerter (1997), for example, notes that her “mainstream” American students begin reading postcolonial and multicultural literature by seeming to embrace notions of diversity, but once they encounter the “harsh and quite scathing indictments” of inequalities, the students become irritated, impatient, and frustrated (pp. 142-43). Similarly, Arun P. Mukherjee (1986) notes that her “privileged” Canadian students outright ignore the political implications of the postcolonial texts they read, preferring to focus on what they see as the texts’ universal themes (p. 28). When she taught Margaret Laurence’s “The Perfume Sea,” for example, Mukherjee focused on the nature of colonialism and its aftermath. When she received her students’ papers, however, she says, “I

was astounded by my students' ability to close themselves off to the disturbing implications of my interpretation and devote their attention to [. . .] such generalizations as change, people, values, reality etc." (p. 25). When not outright resisting or disregarding the political and historical implications represented in postcolonial texts, Western students are portrayed as lacking accurate information or cultural sensitivity, which therefore influences their interpretations of the texts. Lisa Botshon and Melinda Plastas (2010) describe their students—who vary in age, class, gender, and phase of life—as uniformly approaching texts like *Persepolis* with feelings of “national insecurity,” which is influenced by stereotypes and misconceptions of the Middle East. The authors intentionally teach the text, in part, to offer a “space in which students can question Western notions about the Middle East” (p. 2). Like Annie John's Canadian teacher, Western students throughout the articles are described as encountering postcolonial voices with irritation, negligence, and misunderstanding.

In contrast, articles about readers from postcolonial countries or from minority backgrounds are portrayed as approaching texts with an opposing interpretive perspective. Pedagogical articles rarely address students from the developing world, particularly in addressing literary interpretation, presumably because most of the scholars writing on this subject are teaching in a North American context. They still suggest that non-Western readers approach texts differently, however, by explicitly identifying when the professor differs from the students in background and interpretation. Mukherjee, for example, sets out a strong cause-and-effect relationship between her own identity and her interpretive concerns. In the first sentence of her article, she describes herself as “a teacher of literature whose sex, race and birth in a newly independent Asian country” gives her an alternative perspective on pedagogy and ideology (p. 22). When she describes her attention to colonialism in the aforementioned Laurence story, she states, “This, then, was the aspect of the story in which I was most interested, no doubt because I am myself from a former colony of the Raj” (p. 25). She

suggests that because she comes from a postcolonial country, certain reading concerns become foregrounded for her. A similar relationship between identity and interpretation appears in articles about minority students in North American classrooms. Christian W. Chun (2009), for example, advocates teaching graphic novels to English-language learners (ELL), because such texts “foreground racism and immigrant otherness,” which “resonate with ELL students” (p. 144). He makes a specific case for teaching Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* as an “ideal” text for such students, because it “directly addresses the issue of racism and its pernicious, deadly consequences”; students with an ELL background “often face the daily discourses and practices of racism that permeate the society in which they find themselves” (pp. 147-48). Kurt Lucas, in “Navajo Students and ‘Postcolonial’ Literature” (1990), likewise describes his teaching of literature from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Pacific to Native American students, finding that they relate to the texts’ themes of cultural change, human injustice, and education. Together, these perspectives suggest that interpretation is not only linked to identity, but grows out of it in a natural and almost spontaneous way. More specifically (and perhaps more problematically), these authors also assume that one’s identity can be rather easily determined. Much in the same way that Mukherjee defines her students as coming “from the privileged section of an overall affluent society,” and herself as “a non-white woman from the Third World” (p. 28), these articles suggest that classifying readers is a rather obvious process: they are First World or Third World, privileged or poor, mainstream or minority.

In spite of my students’ citizenship in a dozen countries—most of them postcolonial ones—their responses to *Persepolis* did not fit into this interpretive binary, which caught me by surprise. Beyond their countries of origin shaping their affinity with the text, I expected my students to identify with the precocious female protagonist due to my perception of their intelligence and bravery, demonstrated by the depth of thinking in their work and their willingness to study at a start-up university far from home. My students, however, expressed

difficulty in relating to Marji, describing her as far more bold, curious, and revolutionary than they were as children. As evidence of the kind of thinking and actions that were foreign to them, they cited scenes in which the child Marji believes herself to be “the last prophet” (Satrapi 2003, p. 6) or desires to join protests against the government (p. 17).² At the same time, they did not transverse categories of identification in order to share the “Western” perspective. Rather than being hostile to or oblivious of issues of power and identity, they were eager to discuss the ways in which Marji was restrained, as well as the ways in which growing up in wartime affected her psychology. And, because they live in a Muslim country where women (including some of them) frequently wear veils, my students were unburdened by the stereotypes and confusions about the signification of the veil that other critics describe as shaping their students’ responses to *Persepolis*. For example, upon beginning the text my students immediately understood that the veil failed to subsume female individuality or agency, noting in the text’s second frame that the veiled young women still have distinctive hairstyles and facial expressions, and, a few frames later, that the young women use their discarded veils to play schoolyard games (p. 3).

While on the one hand my students’ responses expose flaws in assumptions about readers in the developing world, on the other, their experience with *Persepolis* reveals an even more significant chasm in the way that critics often think about authors, texts, and readers within postcolonial studies. Beyond demarcating forms of interpretation, critics sometimes create an even more permanent divide between the two categories of colonizer and colonized: they seem to take for granted that within the sphere of postcolonial literature, the postcolonial subjects constitute the authors of the texts, and Westerners are their intended readers. Certainly some postcolonial texts prompt such a reading. Rhonda D. Frederick (2003), for

² Interestingly, Botshon and Plastas (2010) describe an opposite view among their American students, who identify with Marji: “The fact that Satrapi’s narrator is a young girl, illustrated very simply in stark black and white, allows for an easy identification between reader and text” (p. 5).

example, in describing her pedagogical approach to teaching Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, emphasizes how she helps students make sense of the narrator's use of the second person to confront North American and white English people about the way they become tourists and exploit Antiguans (p. 7). Frederick notes, "The author uses the second person singular strategically to position readers in her world. This technique indicates that she does not speak to tourists who might share her opinion" (p. 9). Although the accusatory "you" distinguishes between author and reader in this text, sometimes the assumption seems to extend beyond specific texts to postcolonial literature in general. For example, in "Teaching at the End of Empire," Stephen Slemon (1992-1993) argues for the necessity, in postcolonial pedagogy, of combining two critical approaches that seem contradictory: first, to use critical theory to question the voices of authority, and second, to incorporate anthropology to acknowledge local voices and knowledge.³ Although he makes a persuasive case, he concludes that postcolonial pedagogy should direct its attention to two primary locations: "the subject by or for whom the postcolonial text claims to speak—that is, the colonized—and the subject to whom the text is addressed within the circuit of postcolonial pedagogy: that is, the *student* subject within the discipline of organized literary studies" (original emphasis, p. 160). Although Slemon does not explicitly preclude the latter subject from sharing a "colonized" identity with the former, he does divide the subjects into two groups, using distinctly geographical language. Postcolonial pedagogy should focus on two "primary *locations*," with the student reader's "contradictory *emplacement* at the ambivalent 'end' of Empire" creating "a necessary *place* for this subaltern textual opposition" (my emphasis, p. 160). In placing colonized people and students in such different positions, rooted in distinct times and places, he implies that the two groups—colonial voices and student readers—can only share space within the classroom,

³ Slemon further explains that such projects are fundamentally contradictory within postcolonial studies because the first is "skeptical and deconstructive", and the second is "positivist and anthropological." While anthropology honors "culturally specific and local knowledge" (p. 157), critical theory by authors such as Gayatri Spivak argues that colonial subjects cannot express their ideas within forms of discourse that those in power will acknowledge and understand (p. 158).

where one group encounters the other. Obviously my students offer a reminder that that's not always the case. But more is at stake: if postcolonial studies truly desires to overcome the lingering effects of colonialism, then it must not perpetuate binaries built on power and identity where they simply do not always exist.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak anticipated this current problem, if we allow her work on approaches to categories of literature to serve as an analogy for categories of readers as well. In "The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies" (1990), she argues for expanding the canon to include more of what she calls the "others": literature by women, homosexuals, people of color, immigrants, and non-Western authors, among others. When she discusses literature of colonial and postcolonial sites in particular, she appreciates the increased attention it has drawn, but she also believes that this area of study should be a truly "transnational study of culture," yoked with other disciplines and accompanied by a rigorous language requirement.⁴ Otherwise, she fears that colonial and postcolonial discourse studies might create a canon of "Third World Literature (in translation)" that will lead to what she calls a "new orientalism." That is, as educational institutions validate and create space for this category of literature, they bring it forward for investigation and therefore control. She warns, "It can fix Eurocentric paradigms," and "it can begin to define 'the rest of the world' simply by checking out if it is feeling sufficiently 'marginal' with regard to the West or not" (p. 791). As Spivak notes, rushing to honor marginal voices can too easily bypass the knowledge and thinking necessary to understand nuances of countries and cultures; "marginal" can become conflated with "not Western." Although Spivak specifically addresses the study of non-Western literature, her insights translate to discussions of non-Western readers as well. All too often, our categories are

⁴ Spivak persuasively argues that such a study cannot be contained in the discipline of English (p. 791).

well-meaning, yet too simple. They do not acknowledge the available or existing range of positions or perspectives. In consequence, we run the risk of hearing or honoring postcolonial voices only insofar as they fit a preexisting pattern—or, even worse, of molding readers' responses into the form we have come to expect.

Such a mistake does not only disrespect readers and obstruct certain interpretations, but it also undermines some of the key values of the fields of world literature and postcolonial literature. When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe first coined the term “world literature” in 1827, he shared an inclusive vision where “works would be received around the globe” (Thomsen 2008, p. 11). Practically speaking, however, William Atkinson (2006) notes that the concept of world literature, as reflected in anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*, focused almost entirely on European and North American texts as recently as 1995 (p. 45). He adds that the shift from world literature meaning Western literature to world literature signifying “the literatures of most of the world” happened suddenly, growing out of an academic shift towards “the valorization of difference and specificity” (p. 46). While postcolonial studies originated more recently, its “most significant thinker,” Edward W. Said, has been “a strong proponent of world literature” who shares the values that Atkinson articulates (Thomsen 2008, p. 25). In *Orientalism*, Said ([1978] 2003) demonstrates the reductionist nature of most studies of the East. In the Preface to his book honoring its twenty-fifth year of publication, he explains his book’s goal of presenting thoughtful analysis as an antidote to polemical arguments “that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity” (p. xxii). Twenty-five years later, he reasserts his resistance to “terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics [. . .] and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse” (p. xxviii). If both world literature and postcolonial studies were envisioned as fields that would recognize difference, identify particulars, and acknowledge unheard voices, then

categorizing readers into two broad groups based on their countries of origin undercuts those fields at their very foundations. The principles that guide our literary interpretations must also apply to our understanding of literary interpreters.

Expanding our thinking to value the diversity in literature's readers becomes even more imperative in an educational context, particularly when the professor, like myself, hails from the United States, and when most of the students are from postcolonial countries. Multiple theorists have addressed education's function in society beyond conveying information (see, e.g., Althusser 1971; Foucault [1977] 1995). In the postcolonial context, English education becomes even more troubling; as Gauri Viswanathan (1989) has shown, English Studies actually began in India as part of the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects (pp. 2-3). For me to have an agenda of shaping my students' views of themselves and others—no matter how well-intended—presents ethical issues that are monumental in scope, placing me and my pedagogy within the legacy of colonialism.

As a result, when I learned that my students' responses to *Persepolis* varied from my expectations, I attempted to guide them through the text's complexities without suggesting a particular interpretation or point of identification. Instead I encouraged students to note relationships and connections—between texts, themes, people, and places, as well as between themselves and the people and events they read about—without eliding differences. Specifically, I facilitated an activity that serves as an example of how granting interpretive freedom may be applied to the classroom, as well as of the diverse student responses that it can generate. Because *Persepolis* is written in frames, at the end of our reading I gave each student some additional empty frames. I asked them to respond to the prompt, "What do you have to say to Marji? And what does she have to say to you?" While this prompt admittedly grows out of a reader-response approach to literature in asking the students to put

themselves in conversation with Marji and/or anything that we had learned about the text and its context, it does not presume that my students will have personal responses to the text that are “non-Western” in any distinct way.⁵

Interestingly, the most common way that students connected with the text was through concepts of war. Two students’ responses fit expectations, as they aligned themselves and their own experiences of conflict with Marji’s experiences of war. A Sri Lankan student, for example, drew herself standing back-to-back with Marji, saying, “It could be Iran to her, but Sri Lanka to me. Whatever the cause is, war destroyed our safe, happy world.” In referring to the Sri Lankan Civil War, which has been waging for almost the entirety of her life, my student portrays herself as a sufferer like Marji. In focusing on issues of oppression and power structures, my student’s comments align her with postcolonial issues, particularly since many scholars trace the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict to injustices that began under British rule. Similarly, a student from Myanmar, but who prefers to call her country Burma out of resistance to the current military regime, also discovered personal connections to the text. Like Sri Lanka, her country also has been engaged in an internal conflict; its civil war traces its start to the country’s independence from Britain in 1948. This student drew a picture of Marji pumping her fist and saying, “Down with the Shah!” She joins Marji in the scene, noting, “This is the experience I never had in my country. I like the courage she has as a child, for I want to have that kind of ability in my life. I also want to rebel [against] the dictatorship in my country with the kind of courage she has.” In attempting to locate a position for herself from which to resist the hegemonic power structure—and in seeing that potential for herself even if not yet

⁵ In “The Reception of Reader-Response Theory,” Patricia Harkin (2005) notes that “reader-response conceptions appear now [...] as assumptions in cultural studies, as well as in performance, postcolonial, and queer theories” (p. 412). Although a reader-response approach may be worth questioning along with other assumptions in postcolonial theory, that concern is beyond the scope of this essay. It also is important for me to note that this activity could be applied to any group of students, regardless of country of origin.

the reality—my student's comments evoke discussions central to postcolonial studies about what forms of resistance might be available to postcolonial subjects, as well as how effective those forms of resistance might be.

While maintaining their emphasis on war, many more students—particularly Bangladeshi ones—could only relate to the text's portrayal of the revolution by drawing upon family or national narratives, and these responses fit less clearly into expectations about non-Western readers. In Bangladesh, the most significant national independence narrative does not center on the country's release from British rule, which occurred in 1947 under the Partition of India (when Bangladesh was called East Pakistan), but instead on its independence from West Pakistan in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. According to Sarmila Bose (2011), a controversial author who questions the existing historical narratives, the prevailing view uncritically portrays Pakistan's military as the “bad guys” under which Bangladesh experienced “brutal repression.” *Persepolis*—in telling its story through a child narrator's perspective and black-and-white frames (with their connotations of depicting a dichotomized issue)—also positions the government as the brutal torturers and the people as its victims (see, e.g., p. 51), which may explain the students' linking of the Bangladesh Liberation War with Iran's Islamic Revolution. In one Bangladeshi student's frame, for example, Marji asks her if *Persepolis* is “related to [her] life somehow.” The student responds, “Yes, it helps me realize how lucky I am that I did not have to face the war in 1971 in Bangladesh.” While this example focuses on historical moments of conflict and oppression which are central to postcolonial studies, in this case the student distances herself from the war: she “did not have to face” it. Another student similarly both identifies with and detaches from the conflict. When Marji mentions her experience of war, the student responds,

“My country was in war many years ago in 1971. Though I didn’t experience the war, I can feel how [you feel]. I have heard about our war sufferings from my father.”

This student does not share Marji’s experiences; her point of connection is a generation removed, part of her consciousness only as a matter of history or family stories. Bangladesh’s national history may contribute in another way to these students’ failure to fully connect—and therefore to their inability to embody expectations. Because Bangladesh defeated Pakistan in the war, its origins as a country directly grew out of the military conquest. These origins vary considerably from most other decolonized nations. Simon During (1995), for example, notes that war often “has little place” in the national identities of decolonized countries. He states, “Most post-colonial nations and tribes have a history of defeat by imperialist powers. Freedom is often the enemy’s gift” (p. 127). Because Bangladesh is a postcolonial country that uniquely established itself as a result of a military victory, its history has the potential to complicate my students’ positions as postcolonial readers.

In contrast, another set of students linked themselves to the text’s conflicts, but only as a point of dissimilarity. A Nepalese student, for example, drew herself seated with a mug of coffee, with thought bubbles depicting her internal conflict between the importance of love and peace versus the necessity of revolution to bring about change. The coffee cup speaks to the leisure and relative comfort of this student’s life, while the thought bubbles reveal that these topics are abstract and academic ones for her. Notably, Marji and her story are not depicted in the frame; the graphic narrative merely serves as the backdrop for this student’s intellectual questioning. Nepal’s history as a country that was never colonized may contribute to this student’s response; perhaps many of the issues central to postcolonial theory—such as identity, domination, discrimination, and agency—are irrelevant in a context such as hers. However, Nepal’s history as an autonomous country is complex; after India’s 1857 War of

Independence, in which Nepalese troops supported the British, Nepal and Britain formed an agreement in which Nepal “became essentially a British protectorate” guided by the British in external affairs and allowing Gurkha soldiers to be recruited for the British military (Schmitt 1995, p. 142). Therefore, only the most literal understanding of Nepal’s history would result in declaring postcolonial theory irrelevant to its context. This student’s response also cannot be dismissed because other students from explicitly postcolonial countries mirrored her response, such as a Bangladeshi student who drew Marji on one side of the page, surrounded by symbols of weapons and the word, “War,” while drawing herself with symbols of love and happiness, accompanied by the word “Peace.” In rejecting points of identification with oppressed characters and in not portraying themselves as wrestling with lingering effects of colonialism, these students contest the category “postcolonial.” If we consider all of my students’ responses related to war on a spectrum, then, they illustrate a range of interpretations, from ones that fit expectations to ones a viewer would not necessarily be able to identify as being drawn by “postcolonial” readers, as well as many in between.

Another theme that prompted student comments is education—a topic that simultaneously highlights my students’ privilege and rootedness in an Asian context. In responding to the final scenes of the book, some students found points of contact between themselves and the character or narrative that they initially could not identify. At this point in the text, Marji leaves her country in order to study in Vienna, a decision made by her parents to protect her from the consequences of her increasing outspokenness (pp. 152-53). Because many of my students have left home for their education, they were drawn to these scenes. A Chinese student drew herself holding hands with Marji, commenting upon the difficulty of living abroad and remembering her own tears as she crossed the Chinese border. Likewise, a Cambodian student re-drew the scene in which Marji says good-bye to her parents (p. 152), which the student calls “the saddest scene in Marji’s life.” She adds, “It’s not much different from many

students [. . .], including myself, [who] has to leave family and country because of education.” Initially, these students’ focus on education appears to fit the mold. Education plays a central role in postcolonial studies; this article’s opening scene from *Annie John* revolves around education, and *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (1995), includes an entire section devoted to the topic (pp. 425-60). Pedagogical articles emphasize this aspect of students’ literary interpretation as well; Kurt Lucas (1990) describes his Navajo students as relating well to a particular postcolonial text because “they too are searching for a balance between their Navajo traditions and the promises of Anglo [his students’ term] education” (p. 56). My students’ responses, in contrast, do not highlight education as a dominating force that has worked to eliminate traditional forms of knowledge and meaning-making. They connect to Marji on a personal level, seeing her painful good-byes as reflective of the ones they have had to say in their own lives. While the students’ responses challenge notions of the “minority” developing world reader, they also demonstrate flaws in conflating them with the “privileged” Western reader. Clearly my students have educational experiences far beyond those of many other young women in their countries, yet these opportunities come with sacrifices, too. Many students are studying at the university on full scholarship, and due to cost or other hurdles, they cannot return home for a year or two at a time. Even in their privileged position, then, their experiences are distinct from those usually undergone by Western students who study abroad. These students connect to *Persepolis* from that middle position. While they are drawn to issues of education—which postcolonial studies also foregrounds—they have wrestled with it in ways that extend beyond the predictable meanings or implications.

Although my students demonstrate the flaws in the “marginalized” side of the existing interpretive binary, I would argue that the available categories restrict “Western” readers as well. I recognize that both culture and classroom dynamics can shape student responses to

the texts, so that even when North American instructors anticipate (or even hope for) diversity among their students, those responses can appear “remarkably similar,” as Botshon and Plastas found to be the case (p. 1), and as other critics such as Mukherjee, Frederick, and Aegerter describe. At the same time, I suspect that more variety exists than is sometimes acknowledged. Frederick confirms this possibility: at the place where she describes her students as “angry, defensive, or otherwise closed” to the text, she includes a footnote leading to a detail that none of the other authors acknowledge (p. 2). She says:

I would be disingenuous if I did not mention that a few students read through their discomfort and recognized Kincaid’s style as a strategy designed to inform and affect readers. While this essay is primarily concerned with students who were not able to do this, I want to take a moment to discuss the former group. These students tried to make sense of their initial discomfort with the text by interpreting it through the course’s themes and readings. I valued their efforts [. . .]. (p. 17)

In Frederick’s situation, at least, there are “privileged” students who do not necessarily share all features of the “(presumably) Western worldviews” that she otherwise hopes to reorient (p. 2). Although she states that she desires to “shift emphasis from points of identification between privileged students and postcolonial/multi-cultural writers and ideologies,” believing that such a focus “can reduce, or worse, continue to efface differences that motivate postcolonial and multicultural writings,” the variety of her own students’ responses suggest that her approach overlooks these “minority,” foot-noted voices (p. 3). If we can agree that there is no such thing as a homogeneous “developing world” interpretive perspective, likewise we should be wary of believing there is a “Western” one either.

Although texts like *Annie John* might have set readers up to expect two antagonistic approaches to interpretation, in the end they also anticipate the more complex and varied approach that I propose. In *Annie John*, for example, the final chapter of the book echoes the earlier image of Columbus chained on a boat—but this time it is the 15-year-old Annie who becomes a passenger on a ship to England. Although not physically bound, she wrestles with the attachments she has both formed and released as she undertakes her voyage. She recognizes that she is leaving her parents and her home permanently, and as a result, she experiences contradictory feelings, including some of being restrained, stating, “I felt I was being held down against my will” (p. 144). At the point of departure, she returns to her cabin below deck, where she finds herself in a surprising position—both sharing space with and diverging from the path of Columbus before her. In that moment, when she is between countries and identities, she notes that she can hear the waves lapping around the ship. Matter-of-factly, she states, “They made an unexpected sound” (p. 148). Because she was attuned to the sea, Annie could hear and describe its motions, which happened to correspond with her own complicated experience of leaving her home and family. In contrast with the interpretive binary that the earlier classroom scene seems to establish, here Annie demonstrates a more helpful model of postcolonial literary interpretation: of simply listening for and accepting diverse viewpoints, even when they are unexpected.

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