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‘Bodies, Texts and Theories: Teaching Gender Theory in a Postcolonial Context’

Sarah Lawson Welsh

This chapter focuses on the experience of teaching gender theory as part of the undergraduate study of postcolonial literature. It considers some of the broader concerns of gendering the postcolonial, with a specific focus on the experience of teaching Caribbean women’s writing to Literature students within a final year undergraduate module. ‘Writing the Caribbean’ has a mixed generic focus (the discourses of the tourist brochure, oral and written literature, slave narrative, plantation owner’s diaries, testimony, polemic and cultural criticism are all studied). Texts studied include Matthew Lewis’s *Journal of a West Indian Proprietor* (1834), Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place* (1988), selected early twentieth century Caribbean poetry, Grace Nichols’s *i is a long memoried woman* (1986), V.S. Naipaul’s *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961) and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1997). I reflect on two sets of experiences: my own as an experienced postcolonial teacher and published researcher of Caribbean literature, and those of my third year undergraduate students, who have varying prior experience of Caribbean writing and postcolonial theory. The module provides an interesting case study for considering some key pedagogical issues in the teaching of gender theory within a postcolonial context. How, for example, can particular teaching strategies, which foreground reflective learning, enable students to productively examine the complex imbrications of race, sexuality and gender in a range of literary and visual representations of the black female body? How might such strategies, translated into structured classroom activities, encourage students to consider overlapping spheres of power? What are the benefits – and perhaps the difficulties – of asking students to combine critical and

theoretical approaches in this manner? What might be the most effective ways of introducing often-complex theoretical concepts to undergraduate students and does teaching gender theory in a postcolonial context present any particular challenges?

Methodologies and Context

The project is underpinned by some larger issues regarding the interface between postcolonial and gender studies: I suggest to students that the study of postcolonial literatures might be productively complicated and interrogated by an engagement with gender theory. In turn, gender theory might be usefully problematised by postcolonial writing. More specifically, dominantly Western gender theories might themselves be critiqued by literary and visual texts from postcolonial cultures. I address these issues in relation to student data gathered from a short questionnaire on undergraduate experiences of gender theory prior to the module, and from interviews with past and present students on the teaching and learning of gender theory on the "Writing the Caribbean" module. Throughout, I seek to discover what pedagogic approaches best facilitate students learning to locate themselves reflexively – as reading subjects – within larger social contexts. My aim is to consider how teaching strategies can actively promote student awareness of the implications of different reading practices (both individual and institutional) and of the significance of location for creative and theoretical writing, reading and wider representational practices.

At the heart of these issues is the question of context: how we contextualise literary texts in different ways and what difference context makes to our readings; and how we might contextualise – and locate ourselves – as readers within a nexus of individual, disciplinary and other practices. Within the discipline of English Studies at least, it is often taken as axiomatic that students should be encouraged to place textual

and visual representations in appropriate historical and cultural contexts. My own Literature department's validated documents enshrine this principle as one of three key aims. Whilst I broadly agree with this view, I think there still needs to be interrogation of the assumption that context matters – and especially in a non-canonical and/or postcolonial context where the issue of "context" is sometimes a fraught one;[1] a common popular response to the study of postcolonial literatures is that it is "all about contexts" or "ideology" rather than aesthetic and literary qualities.[2] Grasping contexts relevant to postcolonial literatures may prove especially difficult to students who are out of their cultural "comfort zone", and my experience over almost twenty years of teaching, as well as students responses on this project, certainly bear this out.[3] My interest lies in the difference which placing textual and visual representations in appropriate contexts makes to students' learning experience. Why does context matter? Might it matter even more in the case of postcolonial studies? If students can be enabled to be "active learners," agents in evaluating why context might matter to their readings (rather than being simply told that it does), their learning and skill set is likely to be considerably enriched. With this in mind, my data collection aimed to encourage student reflection on the *process* of teaching and learning, as well as on the content of the classes. Students were asked to consider why they were asked to undertake certain tasks. Their active learning also involved encouraging a wider reflexiveness, in learning to locate themselves as reading subjects within larger social and other contexts.

The Questionnaire

This project started with my asking final year students how well their previous undergraduate study had prepared them for the discussion of gender, sexuality and

theories of race in a range of contexts; which modules and theories they had already studied, and which teaching and learning strategies they felt had best facilitated an understanding of often complex theoretical material.

Final year undergraduate study is often posited on levelness and learning outcomes reflecting increasingly sophisticated handling and understanding of relevant critical theories. Within the context of the teaching and study of postcolonial literatures it also presents further challenges for both tutor and students. Indeed, my experience suggests that considering and applying such theories in new contexts presents a significant challenge for most undergraduates, who by their final year, have often established a settled, typically Eurocentric, pattern and approach to theory. Establishing the stereotypes or cultural assumptions that students hold, often unconsciously, is as, if not more, crucial than the learning outcomes upon which a module is predicated. A journey must have a beginning as well as an end, and I believe we are sometimes too goal orientated around outcomes, especially when it comes to assessment matters. I have long regarded undergraduate students as *already* theorisers, even if they do not consider themselves to be so, and that enabling understanding and increasing confidence in handling and using relevant theoretical insights is at the core of what we do as English practitioners.

So how prepared are final year (Level 3) students for thinking about theories of gender, sexuality and race? Of 32 students taking the module, 19 responded to an initial questionnaire. 66% of these were Single Honours English students and 33% joint honours. The vast majority of respondents (83%) were female; this reflects the gender composition of Literature modules in the institution and indeed, nationally but also presents some interesting dynamics in class. Students were asked to list any modules they had previously taken at degree level which had included the study or

discussion of theories of i) feminism ii) gender, iii) sexualities or queer theory iv) race and ethnicity v) a combination of the above:

Fig. 9.1

First Year Modules:

- Women & Writing (15 responses)

Second Year Modules:

- Literatures of Childhood (11)
- Researching Genre Fictions (10)
- Writing the Caribbean (9)
- Literature, Space & Place
- Gothic and Horror (7)
- Literary Theory (4)

Third Year Modules:

- Writing the Caribbean (9)
- Shakespeare (7)
- Sex and the City (eighteenth century in basis) (6)
- Early twentieth century writing (6)
- Post World War II American literature (6)
- Nineteenth century writing (4)

The most cited module at any level was “Women and Writing”, which seems to suggest a front-loading of inclusion of gender study in the curriculum in order to set up pathways for embeddedness throughout the degree, or at least that gender study is deemed a core area of introductory level study. Literature survey modules scored significantly, and those from other programmes (American Studies: “Screening the Modern Immigrant”; History: “Race and Revolution”; Film Studies: “Introduction to Film Studies”; Media: “Gender, Sexualities & Popular Culture”) also featured in a smaller number of Joint Honours responses. However, the most cited modules were thematically organised Second Year modules.

Students were then asked to choose graduated responses to a further four statements:

Fig 9.2

From your degree study so far do you consider yourself well equipped to engage with feminist theories?

- 26% strongly agreed,
- 58% agreed
- 16% slightly agreed.

From your degree study so far do you consider yourself well equipped to engage with theories of gender (masculinities and femininities etc)?

- 32% strongly agreed,
- 47% agreed
- 21% slightly agreed.

From your degree study so far do you consider yourself to be well equipped to engage with theories of sexuality/ queer theory?

- 16% strongly agreed,
- 53% agreed
- 21% slightly agreed,
- 5% didn't know
- 5% slightly disagreed.

From your degree study so far do you consider yourself to be well equipped to engage with theories of race and ethnicity?

- 21% strongly agreed,
- 53% agreed,
- 21% slightly agreed
- 5% didn't know

In order to tease out prior knowledge and expectations of the study of gender, students were then asked to list any relevant theorists or key primary or secondary texts which they had studied (or of which they were aware) which might be considered examples of gender theorising:

Fig 9.3

- Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*: 39%
- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* and other Woolf texts: 32%
- Laura Mulvey, 'Narrative Film and Visual Pleasure': 21%
- Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*: 16%
- Elaine Showalter, selected writings: 16%
- Kate Chopin, *The Awakening*: 16%
- Sigmund Freud, selected writings: 11%
- Ursula Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*: 11%
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*: 11%
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*: 5%
- Mary Eagleton, *The Feminist Reader*: 5%
- Donna Haraway, 'A Cyborg Manifesto': 5%
- Gertrude Stein, selected writings: 5%
- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*: 5%
- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* and 'Everyday Use': 5%
- John Cleland, *Fanny Hill*: 5%
- Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*: 5%
- Bram Stoker, *Dracula*: 5%
- Jackie Kay, *Trumpet*: 5%
- The Beat Poets and Alan Ginsberg, *Howl*: 5%

When asked if they had ever studied/ discussed feminist theories, theories of gender and theories of sexuality from a non- European/ White American perspective as undergraduates, 53% of students answered yes and named the following modules and texts:

Fig 9.4

Third Year Modules:

- "Writing the Caribbean", 16%
- "Post World War American Literature", 16%

Second Year Modules:

- "Literature, Place & Space", 11%

First Year Modules:

- "Women and Writing", 11%
- Introductory module, "Reading Texts", (5%).

Caribbean Texts:

- Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*,
- Poems by Grace Nichols
- Poems by Jean Binta Breeze

African-American Texts:

- Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, 'Everyday Use'

The Caribbean- American bias here may well reflect individual tutor interests but also reinforces the notion that undergraduate study of black writers is still largely American in focus (rather than African or aboriginal Australian, for example).

"Writing the Caribbean": Teaching Competing Theories

My classes involving the teaching of gender theory in a postcolonial context aim to raise student awareness of some important questions regarding the use of feminist theory in readings of black women's writing: the relation between texts and theory, the relative specificity or universalising tendencies of certain theoretical approaches,

and some different ways of conceptualising the role and nature of theory itself. For example, I get students to discuss the problems (as well as potentialities) of using European-derived feminist models to read women's writing from other cultures. I encourage them to question whether there is such a thing as a "universal" female experience, and consider the importance of the cultural specificity of texts and theories. Given that students often have greater familiarity with texts from an African-American female tradition, and the predominance of these texts on many Women's Studies and English Studies programmes, it is also relevant and timely to interrogate the use of concepts derived from an African-American tradition of black feminist criticism in the critical reading of Caribbean women writers.

In introducing theory on the "Writing the Caribbean" module, I deliberately remind students of the "whiteness" of much of the theory they have hitherto encountered as undergraduate students and the disproportionate visibility – and thus hegemonic position – of many Western feminist theorists on the curriculum in relation to indigenous theorists and to those who theorise in different ways. This reflexiveness about my own position and about the institutional politics of the canon and of the HE curriculum aims to engender a similar self-reflexivity in my students. To quote an often-cited passage by Caribbean-born, African-American feminist theorist, Barbara Christian, it is salutary to remember that the Western models we use are not the only available models for theorising:

> People of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorising … is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in

> the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking… (Christian 1995, 457)

Case Study: Teaching Grace Nichols's Poetry

As preparation for the classes on selected Caribbean women's poetry, students were asked to read Grace Nichols's poem cycle, *i is a long memoried woman,* alongside Helene Cixous's feminist manifesto for *écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa," and key poems from Nichols's *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* alongside Audre Lorde's essay "The Uses of the Erotic." They were also asked to research a number of key terms relevant to the poems, drawn from postcolonial, gender and representations of the raced and sexed female body: "the Black Atlantic," "Black Triangle," "the Dark Continent," "Steatopygous," "The Hottentot Venus," "Aunt Jemima"/"the Mammy" figure, "*écriture féminine*" and "patriarchal binary oppositions." Noting the source of the information (or difficulties in sourcing the same) was deemed as important as the definitions themselves and the class was invited to feedback in small groups on both aspects of their research.

In the class, selected poems and extracts were read aloud and students encouraged to comment on their first responses to the texts and how an understanding of a term such as "Steatopygous"[4] and its long history in representing the black woman's body could enrich a reading of the poems. This exercise was then repeated in terms of a series of visual representations of the Hottentot Venus which I sourced from anthropological studies, political cartoons, press coverage and contemporary art works and installations. The aim is to foster not only focused research techniques and skills in reading poems in context, but to encourage the kinds of reading strategies which might illuminate the complex intersection of race and gender issues in many of

Nichols's poems. Using visual resources adds another dimension to teaching and students can be asked to add to the visual images by researching them further or responding to them in creative ways (through writing, painting, installation) as a means of encouraging thinking around the topic and student ownership of the project.

"My Black Triangle"

I often use this Nichols poem as a way of getting students to think about the complex intersection of racial and gender concerns in Nichols's poetry. In this poem, Nichols deliberately explores the different meanings of the black triangle. Historically, "the black triangle" or "triangular trade" referred to the three-way "traffic" of raw materials, manufactured goods and slaves of the Atlantic slave trade. However, the "black triangle" in Nichols's poem – as students are quick to point out – may also be read as a reference to the female pudenda. This introduces another layer of meaning: the idea of physicality, the body, its erotic desires and its creative as well as procreative potential. I ask students to think about how this changes our reading as we move from some specific historical and cultural contexts to the black female body being brought into a sharp and more intimate focus. The sexual and the textual come together but there is a third element invoked here: race and the spectre of a slave past. This may change our reading of the poem. I ask students to think about the yoking of body and context, the double lens of gendered image and historical experience in the poem. What does it suggest? How are black female bodies linked to the wider context of the "triangular trade"? An exploration of other poems by Nichols, such as some of the earlier sections of *I is a long memoried woman*, can illuminate the point that the slave experience was importantly also a gendered experience, one which encompassed quite specific experiences for the female slave. In short, "The black

woman was situated at the (re) productive core of the slave system with a unique legal status" (Beckles 1989, 37); by the time they attend this class, students have studied a number of texts and extracts which demonstrate how children born to slave mothers automatically took on slave status, irrespective of their paternity, and have discussed how this provided an additional economic incentive to the widespread sexual as well as racial abuse of slave women at the hands of white overseers and plantation owners. As is reflected in the Matthew Lewis text studied earlier on the module, the economic imperatives to get one's female slaves to "breed" became still more urgent after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, as this ended the importation of new slaves to replace those who had escaped, grown sick or died.

Finally, I encourage students to share their findings on the term "the dark continent" in relation to this poem and to think about how the "black triangle" invokes not only Africa as a key space for imperial exploration in the nineteenth century but also late nineteenth and early twentieth century psychoanalytic discourse on female sexuality. Freud famously defined female sexuality as "the dark continent". What students are usually less familiar with, are the ways in which his statement reflected both the racial and sexual discourses of the time, bringing together both colonial and gendered concerns in his image of female sexuality as the ultimate darkness, unknowness and otherness. Getting students to think about how the female body is at the centre of this concept and how spatial metaphors (the female body, or more precisely, female sexuality as unchartered space, the body as a territory which can be mapped, penetrated, invaded) is useful. Teaching gender theory in this particular postcolonial context demands a consideration of the racial as well as gender implications of Freud's construction, and the limitations of only reading from a Western or Eurocentric perspective. As the eponymous protagonist of Jamaica

Kincaid's 1989 novel, *Lucy*, puts it in response to the Western feminist tome her white employer shows to her: "My life could not really be explained by this thick book… My life was at once something more simple and more complicated than that…" (Kincaid 1990, 132). Freud's phrase is a good example of how gender and race, text and context(s) come together in metaphorical constructions such as the "Dark Continent" or "the Black Triangle". In Freud's coining and in Nichols's poem the female body is a key site: it always signifies something else. In Freud it signifies difference, eroticism, fearfulness, darkness, the unknown, or in psychoanalytical terms, Lack. In Nichols's poem it signifies a specific racial and gendered history as well as an empowering black female sexuality and (pro)creative potential. It is also useful to ask students to note how in "The Laugh of the Medusa" Cixous too uses figurative constructions to form her argument. Poem and theory can be productively read alongside each other in this context, especially as in this essay Cixous appropriates precisely the damaging metaphor of female sexuality as "dark continent" used by Freud in order to question and to abrogate its power. Cixous argues: "As soon as [little girls] begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can't see anything in the dark, you're afraid. . ." (Cixous 318) Pursuing the connections between the suppression of women's sexuality and sexual pleasure, and their writing, she counters: "the Dark Continent is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we've been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And they [i.e. men] want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack." (325)

I ask students to consider how Cixous's essay might speak to black women and to black women writers? It is difficult to ascertain how Cixous's metaphors might translate in relation to black female subjects, who seem largely excluded here, and for whom the metaphorical ascription "the Dark Continent" is altogether more complex and multi-layered than it is for the white woman. The collusion of whiteness and phallocentrism/patriarchy in Cixous's phrase, "the white continent, with its monuments to Lack," is also problematic when considered within this new context. These critiques are often beyond the grasp of all but the brightest undergraduates, but the notion that theory is a discourse open to debate and critique is not. Not all theories "fit" all writing, and I encourage students to engage with theoretical discourse as they would literary texts: with a critical eye. Perhaps more importantly, students are encouraged to think about their position as readers, how they locate themselves – and how they are located – by a range of factors, including the critical and theoretical discourses they use.

Seminar discussion on "My Black Triangle" often concludes with a reading which sees Nichols's black female persona exercising a similar kind of appropriation and abrogation of the metaphor of the "Black Triangle." She seizes control over the process of signification, by personalizing the metaphor ("*My* black triangle") and by stressing its close connection to the female body, allowing it to signify wider possibilities and more positive attributes: the ability to "experience the world [and one's own history] through [the] body," (Webhofer 1996, 14) to celebrate the creative potential for growth and the empowering nature of confident female sexuality, self-affirming and approving.

The Interviews

How do students react to Nichols's and to other Caribbean women's poems? What impact does gender theory have on their readings? What are the challenges of learning about gender theory in a postcolonial context? These were just a few of the questions that I and two student researchers were able to ask past and current "Writing the Caribbean" students. The student-centred nature of a pedagogical project such as this required student input, and I was lucky enough to have two taught postgraduate students who had taken the module in its first year of running, work with me as student researchers on the project, helping to compile the initial questionnaire and interview questions and in undertaking and transcribing the interviews.[5]

When asked about the main challenges in learning about theory, one male, mature student commented: "the theories themselves can be very complicated … the main challenge is trying to put a theory into practice." This student cited Cixous as using very difficult language, compounded by its being translated from the French. He was most attracted to theories which propose equality and spoke of context as being very important: "Wordsworth for example, was very much a product of his time; he doesn't know much about queer theory!" A younger female student reflected that she had experienced difficulties with the language and/or style of theoretical texts as well as the theoretical concepts therein, and the abstraction of some of the gender theory taught on the module. Another female student gave the specific example of Butler's *Gender Trouble* as a text which was "difficult to understand": "It was recommended in a first year module, 'Narrative Cultures,' and was referenced throughout the degree but I don't really think I ever fully understood the theory and felt that Butler made the concept unnecessarily difficult."

When asked about the main challenges of bringing race and gender theories together, the male mature student spoke of this challenge in terms of "an extra

paradigm shift. [It's] a challenge because it's come from the Caribbean culture. [It's] something unfamiliar." He observed a "sense that the West has got an interest in the female body, that [it] thinks of Caribbean people as highly sexualised," and reflected: "that can be unsettling – for both men and women."

When asked about previous awareness of gendered racial stereotypes, responses differed significantly. One female student admitted that she was unaware of these stereotypes, but added: "there is an innate sense of stereotyping within us all and we are not necessarily aware of it … To me, gendered racial stereotypes are two separate concepts and, up to a point, we are not aware of using them." For her, awareness of the long cultural history of stereotypical representations "very much alters understanding of the Nichols poems but, for me, also the Matthew Lewis text. It helped me to understand the context in which the texts were written and also the viewpoints of the writers." Another female student agreed: "Definitely, we all have/use the stereotypes but don't [always] realise. These characters and images are so familiar to us that we don't really consider them or deconstruct them. An awareness of the racial stereotypes certainly altered my understanding of the Nichols poem, and led me to consider the relevance and significance of the title 'i is a long memoried woman'." The mature male student was aware of the Hottentot Venus from eighteen and nineteenth century studies, but not the Mammy or Aunt Jemima figure:

> However when I saw the images I recognised them and had not made a connection, and that's why the course has been useful to me. Clearly we have these stereotypes, we just aren't aware of them. I remember playing cricket and if there was a tall West Indian... he must be a terribly fast bowler. [I thought: 'he's] going to be superior at cricket.' [Awareness of these

> stereotypes] adds depth and a historical perspective to the reading of the Nichols poem ["My Black Triangle"] – and her other work. It made me aware of how difficult it must be to have such a heritage in that you want to celebrate it. Rather like queer theory [it suggests a need] to reappropriate the territory – and to look forward.

The students were also asked which learning and teaching strategies best facilitated their understanding and use and application of gender theory. All but one respondent preferred the workshop with structured worksheet given out by the tutor beforehand. The mature male student commented: "The workshop allows a great deal of interaction with not just staff but also other *students* in particular. This is more important for a mature student perhaps: nice to hear other people's comments and it's easier to discuss and argue in small groups – even if there is no consensus – and then report back." A female student concurred in favouring this teaching and learning strategy: "For me, this gives more responsibility for learning and is more helpful and beneficial to me than simply reading or taking notes in a lecture." Another female student observed that "the tutor giving preparatory reading in handout form, and discussing it in a workshop format … feels a more comfortable environment to ask questions in, rather than a lecture." She too favoured tutor-led explication and discussion of how a theory might be applied to one of the course texts in a workshop setting. Students were asked if they had ever felt uncomfortable or anxious as a result of reading or discussing any of the course content. The same young female student had felt guarded in her responses or unsure how to respond, although she admitted this was "mainly because of a fear that I have misunderstood or misinterpreted the texts! I was unsure of my initial response upon first reading [but] I find that after a

group discussion has taken place my response is more structured than it was initially and I am more confident to share it with the class." Another female student said she had experienced "All of the above, particularly when it came to being assessed; however these feelings were mostly gone by the end of the module." The male mature student commented that he found Cixous "too polemical, not balanced – as a man I felt a bit of a target." He continued: "If you're studying Matthew Lewis, he uses terms such a creole/negro and sometimes you have to think about what the appropriate 'theoretical term' may be." He cited the "use of the word 'queer'" as just one example of "Theory [as] a field in which language is always shifting." On the issue of correct terms, he responded: "yes, I have a concern not to be seen as sexist, and yes I have a concern not to be seen as racist. But on the other hand, by actually reading the theoretical texts and understanding the position, that gives you the equipment and the information not to be sexist or racist. [It's] a double edged sword." The same student cited Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night,* a novel which explores rape, childhood sexual abuse and its lifetime effects amongst other topics, as "an uncomfortable text" to read and agreed that for him, "Slavery is an uncomfortable topic – in a film [we saw, there is mention of a slave owner] pissing on their slave. [It was] really hard to take." On the issue of not knowing how to respond at all, he commented: "It's hard sometimes to point out literary merit in an article where you find the content completely disturbing. For example – I wrote an essay on Lewis and I was concerned that my essay didn't come across as flippant, yet I wanted to acknowledge that there was humour in his text and that needed to be balanced with the awful truth about slavery."

Men in class: The Burden of Representation?

In an early planning discussion on the project, my research students and I reflected on the concept of "The Burden of Representation": we agreed that the module deals with the politics of representation of different kinds (race, class, sexuality) in Caribbean texts, society and culture, but this term may also apply to minorities within the classroom, such as different ethnicities, mature students or male students. Students were thus asked in interview: "How far does the fact that men are a minority in the classes alter the dynamic of classes; whether men are ever expected to speak for their gender in class and in written assignments; whether the gender discourses studied had represented men in any particular way or whether the tutor has represented men in class in any particular way?" The male, mature student commented that he was "very much in a minority [yet it had been] a life changing experience for me … being surrounded by these younger people. I've often chosen written assignments that are of male authors and have addressed issues that I have been comfortable with; for that reason I'm in favour of gender/gender writing/literary theory courses/texts being studied – it enriches you. Discussing gender theory has been the most challenging thing I've done at university." He continued: "Often in feminist texts I feel like a target: the 'white, middle class man,' [and I felt this] particularly when reading Matthew Lewis. [I wanted to say] 'he doesn't represent me, so I don't represent him'." But, "The tutor has represented a historically accurate account of gender – men *were* in power. But in terms of more recent writing studied there has been an emphasis on female texts. [This is] a corrective and a celebration. [I found this a] good mix from the context to the celebration." Another female student made the interesting point that "Often it seems that female students are able to speak regarding gender issues from both a female *and* male perspective – but perhaps men are unable or perhaps unwilling to give strong opinions on female experience." The

same student commented: “I think the module fully addressed the concept of double colonisation, yet I think the module remained balanced. For instance, when looking at the history of slavery, [the tutor] used a variety of texts. [Lewis’s] journal and Nichols’s collection *I is a long memoried woman*, worked well together. The texts were well selected – overall a balanced module.”

Conclusion/reflection

From the teaching of this workshop to different cohorts over two years, the following conclusions have emerged in tutor-led discussion. Context clearly matters and students can see more clearly how bodies are located, and how they have cultural meanings (as Cixous puts it), not just biological ones. They also can see how Nichols’s poems participate in and interrogate a longer history of cultural representation of the black female body which involves visual as well as literary and popular cultural representations. Location matters too when teaching gender in a postcolonial context since where a body is born, where it’s located, can define the world which is seen.[6] Moreover, where we are located also affects how we read – we usually sum up our discussion by thinking about the intended audiences of the theoretical essays and the Caribbean women’s poems we’ve studied, as well as “reading repertoires,” interpretative communities, and the different kinds of reading which this workshop has demonstrated. Students are usually much more aware at the end of the sessions that reading texts within relevant contexts is not enough: we need to be aware of the “blindspots,” limitations and pitfalls of our reading practices too. Significantly, discussion of Cixous’s and Lorde’s very different theoretical essays demonstrates that there is no single feminist approach, only different feminist reading-strategies. Likewise there is no such thing as homogenised “woman” or “black

woman" or "woman's experience" – even though it can be acknowledged that it was and is necessary to have some kind of group identification for strategic purposes at times, for example, during the Women's Movement of the 1970s.

Throughout the module we raise the issue of universalism and define this term. We also stress the importance of cultural specificity in speaking and writing of women, their bodies and experiences and how some of the representations we researched do the opposite: they fix, homogenize, limit. Alice Walker's observation that she sees "her brothers and sisters doing time in images not of their own making"[7] is very useful here. It is possible to connect this to Nichols's poems, which invoke representations of black women's bodies in order to question and subvert them.[8] In this concluding session, we discuss how certain feminist approaches may "fit" some poems better than others. I encourage equal critical interest in those approaches which don't seem to "fit" the poems. Does this have implications for the poetry itself – for its incorporation into academic courses, anthologies, etcetera? Might we see Nichols's poems as resisting or even critiquing the feminist theoretical concepts which may (and have been) used to read them? [9] In my experience, the best students feel liberated and excited by the interpretive possibilities opened up by this session, whilst those less strong end sessions more confident in their use of gender theory and more aware of to some of the complexities of using it in a postcolonial context. Both groups ultimately benefit from the shared sense of a non-hierarchical and supportive learning community which student-centred, self-reflective/reflexive learning strategies and carefully structured workshopping activities can engender. I strongly believe that learning is a process which takes place both in and outside of the classroom; the "gaps" around teaching contact time can be as important as the class time itself. It is clear from the student responses that the module offers an immersive

experience which empowers as well as challenges: students begin, to greater and lesser extents, feeling "at sea" in this non-Eurocentric (textual) space, but they soon learn to adopt and to experiment with new vocabularies and new ways of seeing as they progress through this rich terrain. One finding of special interest is the respondents' emphasis on collaborative learning, supported by pre-reading and pre-seminar time preparation. The praise for this evolving learning strategy in turn echoes the Caribbean oral tradition itself, and speaks to Christian's insistence that for the Caribbean subject "dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking."[10]

It is clear that a programme of study which offers engagement with feminist theory, queer theory, and debates surrounding masculine representations in literature, in addition to the issues surrounding the representation of race and ethnicities, works to prepare students for a module such as "Writing the Caribbean," a module containing literary texts and historical subject matter that British students are unlikely to have encountered previously. It is something to celebrate when students highlight the appearance of these culturally-interrogating perspectives on so many modules. However, it is also clear, given the students' observations that several of the texts central to twenty-first century gender theory (for example, Butler's *Gender Trouble*) are extremely dense, and arguably alienating to the undergraduate, as well as the students' developing awareness that the gender theory under study is overwhelmingly Western in origin, that it might be timely to review and revise the texts we use to explore gender in Literary Studies provision. bell hooks's title, *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism (*1981), reminds white feminists and gender theorists in Higher Education that our textual choices – both critical and creative – count. In this way, the module itself works to encourage tutors as well as students to "write back" to the HE contexts in which we operate. Not only have these respondents commented on

and interrogated the complex and intertextual journey that the course inspires, but they have worked to comment on macro-level pedagogical practice. So out of the seeming chaos of text and context, of Eurocentric and non-Eurocentric theory, of the contradictory maelstrom that is postmodern Arts and Humanities Education, comes this observation: gender study at undergraduate level needs to diversify, and to bring itself up-to-date in global terms.[11]

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Notes

[1] See, for example, Elleke Boehmer and John McLeod, "The Challenges of teaching Postcolonial Literature" for an excellent overview of this and related issues.
[2] See Section three of Janet Wilson, Cristina Sandru & Sarah Lawson Welsh eds, *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*.
[3] See David Dabydeen, "Teaching West Indian Literature in Britain"; Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'It's all about ideology: there's no discussion about art': Reluctant Voyages into Theory in Caribbean Women's Writing"; and section 3 of Wilson, Sandru & Lawson Welsh eds, *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium,* for further discussion of these issues.
[4] The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Second Edition, 1989) defines "steatopyga" as follows: "A protuberance of the buttocks, due to an abnormal accumulation of fat in and behind the hips and thighs, found (more markedly in women than in men) as a racial characteristic of certain peoples, esp. the Hottentots and Bushmen of South Africa."

[5] Although only a small number of students past and present gave interviews, their responses to the questions were highly illuminating.
[6] I usually direct students to further reading, especially Adrienne Rich's essay 'Notes toward a Politics of Location' at this point.
[7] Alice Walker quote, cited in Van Niederseen, White on black – delete this note in favour of citation in the essay?
[8] I direct students to further reading here, especially Tiffin, "Postcolonial literatures and Counter-discourse."
[9] Here I direct students to further reading, especially Christian (1987).
[10] I'm indebted to Dr Liesl King for this observation and for the basis of my concluding comments.
[11] Ideally, with more class time, I would set a third theoretical text on gender for preparatory reading, one by a Caribbean feminist theorist such as Sylvia Wynter, Evelyn O'Callaghan, Patricia Mohammed, Rhoda Reddock, Bridget Brereton or Olive Senior, in order to show how a growing indigenous body of Caribbean feminist theory is disrupting the simple polarities of "the West and the rest" and proving that the Caribbean can have its own traditions of feminist and gender analyses that draw upon but are not necessarily complicit with, uncritical of or unresistant to, dominant Anglo-American approaches. However, students can also use this as follow up material with considerable effectiveness.

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