Decentering the Self in Academia

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In the second year of my Bachelor's degree in English Literature, I was taking a course titled 'Literary Theory and Criticism' which consisted of a basic introduction to theories like feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism. Bite-sized, digestible introductions aren't very inspiring, but the course outline is dense and time is always short in a 16-week semester. As we work through postcolonial theory, the professor brings up terms like hybridity and dual identity, and as Pakistani students majoring in English, there are many casual, personal connections that we're able to make. In one class while the professor lectures on the colonial underpinnings of English departments in developing countries, I blurt out, 'So technically we shouldn't be studying here right now. But if we weren't, we wouldn't ever come to know we shouldn't be studying here. It's paradoxical.' I say this without knowing I'm echoing a critical concern amongst postcolonial theorists: that postcolonialism in fact perpetuates colonialism through its own work.[¶]

A week later, the professor catches me outside class and hands me a copy of *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*. Inside, there is a note:

> *To Aamna Motala,*
> *For her keen interest in the subject.*

I went down the rabbit hole of postcolonial theory and ended up doing a final research paper analysing Pakistani Anglophone writing from a postcolonial lens. As I think back to that incidental classroom encounter, I realise it taught me two vital lessons about pedagogy: one, listen keenly to student contributions in the classroom; personal reflections are part and parcel of theoretical discourse. Two, intellectual exchange can be possible outside the classroom if the instructor is willing to engage with students beyond the requirements of the course outline. However, once I started teaching at university, I also quickly learnt how easy it is to forget both of these lessons and how numbingly difficult it is to move beyond the rigid constraints of course outlines and a hierarchical teacher-student divide. At the same time, it is difficult to remember one's role as facilitator and mentor. Hence my task as an instructor

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[¶] This contention was foregrounded in a roundtable forum involving many self-proclaimed ex-postcolonial critics, published in 2007 in the PMLA titled, "The End of Postcolonial Theory?"

became to develop a pedagogical praxis which repeatedly evaluates what makes teaching and learning valuable. Many strands within Foucauldian philosophy helped construct such an ethics.

Learning is not imitation but an exercise in freedom, and this is echoed in Foucault's notion of desubjectivation. Foucault describes desubjectivation as a mode of thinking that is informed by embodied experience and can transform the subject.[1] This transformation is essential to honest intellectual pursuit and is only made possible by 'wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself'.[2] Maarten Simons explains it as a project that 'disrupts or destroys the "I" and "me"' and hence removes needless attachment to one's own ideas.[3] With this idea of transformation of the self in mind, I strive to be someone who is open to questions and critique, regardless of who challenges my ideas. Entertaining the possibility of such a rupture or discontinuity can lead to newer modes of thinking.[¶] Particularly as an educator, desubjectivation requires that I decenter my role as a source of knowledge and engage with the subjectivity of the student Other.

I did not construct this pedagogical understanding overnight, but came to it after a gradual process of learning. The first time I taught Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to second-year undergraduate students at the University of Karachi, my lectures drew on Chinua Achebe's critique of it as a text that reinforces racist, imperialist views of Africa. At one point a student objected that I was promoting just one ideological perspective on the novel and it only took a moment's reflection to realize she was right. In the next class, I introduced J. Hillis Miller's "Should We Read *Heart of Darkness*?" which goes against postcolonial criticisms of the novel and this move prompted many interesting debates in the classroom. The student's comment made me rethink how and what I teach. I learnt that my task is to introduce students to various positions that can inform their own stance, as the ethics of desubjectivation suggest.

The task of desubjectivation is complex and fraught with challenges. For instance, when I taught Shakespearean sonnets in an upper-level undergraduate poetry course at the same university, I had students from various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many of them could hardly make sense of the sonnets due to their limited facility with the English language. How could I privilege their voices and perspectives without first ensuring that they had at least some basic understanding of the sonnets? Once literal meanings became clear, it seemed that students related most to Shakespeare's procreation sonnets for their parallels with

Pakistani society's insistence on having children. An in-depth analysis needed to go beyond this comparison though. Students had no prior knowledge of the traditional Petrarchan sonnet form and Shakespeare's deliberate subversion of its themes and tropes, nor did they understand the cultural and historical contexts in which these were written—both of which are essential to critically appreciating the poems. Here, Foucauldian wisdom was put to the test. But where the adage of decentering proved inadequate, the one about discontinuity held true. Every unique context in the educational setting brings its own set of challenges, which is why an instructor must be forever agile, open to discontinuity and reinventing strategy. In this situation, I realized that before completely decentering my role, students' subjectivity had to be cultivated and their ability to make relevant connections had to be nurtured.

While teaching an introductory academic writing course more recently at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture, I encountered a different type of problem. I had taught this material many times before and yet never had I found students to be this quiet and unresponsive. During one class session in the middle of the semester, I just had to stop. I closed the book, sat down, and directly asked the students why they were finding it difficult to engage. The conversation that followed had nothing to do with the course, but everything to do with academia: students feeling burnt out, unmet expectations, the demands of university life, etc. For the first time in that semester I was speaking to students not just as students but as individuals who have lives outside this classroom. Students' interest and engagement in the latter half of the semester improved significantly. Sometimes spontaneously abandoning the lesson plan can help destabilise the strictures of hierarchy and allow for decentering of authority.

To be so actively engaged in constant reevaluation requires effort. Anyone involved in teaching knows how frustrating, challenging, and demotivating it can be at times. It is all too easy to simply not take an added step or go the extra mile. Over time, the initial excitement of teaching may wane. Decentering and discontinuity require consistent effort in the cultivation of one's self, or what Foucault calls, the care of the self. Although some critics have interpreted the care of the self as individualistic,[¶] Foucault describes it as a 'social practice'[4] that is contingent on reciprocal relations with others.[ø] Being involved in exchanges with others can be a mutually enriching experience. Such an exchange of ideas and reflections can enable both to learn and

[¶] For instance, Ella Myers's essay 'Resisting Foucauldian Ethics' critiques the notion of the care of the self for its excessive focus on individualism.

[ø] While Foucault remarks that one's relation to the self is 'ontologically prior', at the same time it is contingent on reciprocal relations to others. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he points to the fact that the self is not an individual subject but is instead a 'subject of' action, relationships and attitudes.

[¶] In an interview titled 'Power, Moral Values and the Intellectual', Foucault identifies the role of discontinuity in one's thought: 'One must consider all the points of fixity, of immobilization...as part of an effort to bring things back into their original mobility, their openness to change'.

grow. The increasing move towards interdisciplinarity in the humanities and social sciences is a promising and exciting development: it reflects this recognition that exchange and dialogue can be immensely invaluable.

The mutuality of relations from such a notion of care of the self aims to destabilise what Rosalind Gill terms 'the hidden injuries' of the neoliberal university. Gill calls academics 'knowledge workers' and uses her own experience as an academic to critique the capitalist setup of the academy. One crucial aspect she underlines is how secrecy and individualism are growing in the university and are precisely what we need to resist.[5] Her essay exemplifies the kind of research and insight that can develop from collaboration with the community around us as it 'break[s] the silence' about the neoliberal university and allows for sharing of experiences. Gill notes in a subsequent piece that six years later she continues to receive emails and letters from people who were moved by her essay.[6]

Individualism is difficult to resist because it is an inherent part of how the neoliberal university is set up and run. This becomes very evident when one is not employed as a full-time faculty member. During the Fall semester of 2021, I taught a total of nine courses at three different universities as an adjunct. I had to take on all those courses because most institutions only allow contractual faculty to teach a limited number of courses and the hourly pay from teaching at any one university cannot adequately cover living expenses. I would rush from one place to another throughout the week which left very little room for any sort of socialising or exchange with other colleagues. Adjunct faculty are essentially alienated from other faculty members which impedes the development of productive relationships that contribute to one's growth and learning. Their labour only carries economic value for the neoliberal institution, yet the non-monetary benefits of these relationships are far more significant.

Collectives and unions are formed and strengthened via dialogue within the academic community. Gill highlights the difficulty of achieving solidarity despite its importance in resisting the neoliberal university's competitive and divisive nature.[7] A lot of the adjunct faculty's concerns at the University of Karachi, including crucial ones like salaries not being released for over six months, were not taken up by the Karachi University Teachers Society (KUTS). This led to the formation of an alternative teachers' union, the Karachi University Temporary Teachers' Society (KUTTS Sangat), in early 2022 to put forth the needs and demands of contractual faculty. However, the main union members carried more influence with higher administrative authorities and contractual faculty strikes could often not materialise because getting full-time faculty on board proved difficult. An integrated union could have been more effective but it is the culture of demarcation between the contractual and permanent faculty that resists such a proposition. Without strong alliances and friendships, any resistance to individualism is not possible.

Structurally, the neoliberal university encourages individualism. It is not difficult to work in isolation and tend to only one's own requirements. As adjunct faculty, I am not obliged to be available on campus beyond my teaching hours, which is what makes an hourly wage system possible. My presence is thus limited to the temporal and spatial scope of the classroom. However, in order to make teaching a rewarding experience instead of just an effective one, transformation of the self and productive relationships remain central to my own growth as an instructor and an academic.

Notes

1. Foucault and Rabinow, *Essential Works of Foucault*, 240.
2. Ibid.
3. Simons, "Michel Foucault: Educational Philosopher?", 168.
4. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 45.
5. Gill, *Breaking the Silence*, 53.
6. Gill, *Beyond Individualism*, 2.
7. Masschelein, *Pedagogue and/or Philosopher?*, 208.

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