

Mount Saint Vincent University  
Department of Women and Gender Studies

**Post-colonial Complications for Feminist English Language Teaching:  
An Auto-ethnography from The Sultanate of Oman**

by

Jolani Rhodenizer

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*For all my fellow I-brats:*

*“The tale, which belongs to all countries, is a site where the extraordinary takes shape from the reality of daily life.” Trinh T. Minh-ha*

## ABSTRACT

### **Post-colonial Complications for Feminist English Language Teaching:**

#### **An Auto-ethnography from The Sultanate of Oman**

In this thesis, I explore the complex work and lives of feminist English language teachers in Gulf Arab contexts through interdisciplinary theoretical discussion and auto-ethnographic narrative. I consider three theoretical bodies of work: post-colonial criticism of and resistance to Western interventions in Southern contexts, feminism's (in)compatibility with Islam, and the politics of teaching English internationally. I highlight the major tenets of each as pertinent to the lives of English language teachers working outside the West, and explore resulting insights into my own experience teaching in the Arabian Gulf. I argue that feminist post-colonial and identity discourse severely restricts feminist educators and methodologies in settings where women's rights are at issue in the classroom. Findings of this research provide insight into my own inaction when teaching Muslim students in the Sultanate of Oman. In conclusion, I draw on Zuckerman's concept of xenophiles and Mohanty's "imagined communities" as a means of collaboratively addressing women's issues.

## **Acknowledgments**

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I owe gratitude as well to my fellow teachers who shared with me some of the stories and lessons recounted in this thesis. I hope all the other I-brats (as we were known) who are now working the world over will see some aspect of their lives in this examination and reflect on their own practice.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER 1-“HOW DID YOU LIKE LIVING IN OMAN?”

Context for Research.....	1
The Profession.....	5
The Problem.....	8
Some Considerations.....	13
Overview of Chapters.....	19

### CHAPTER 2- METHOD

Introduction.....	23
Setting the Context for Research.....	24
Coming to Auto-ethnography.....	26

### CHAPTER 3- FEMINISM AND POST-COLONIALISM

Culture in Education.....	32
Cultural Borderlands and Identity Politics.....	36
White Privilege and Feminism in an Omani Borderland.....	41
Problems with Post-colonialism.....	45
An EAL Teacher’s Post-colonial Reality.....	54

### CHAPTER 4-ISLAM AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS

Transitions.....	62
Historical Basis of Culture.....	63
Islam or Tribalism?.....	66
Theory and Practice.....	71
A Role for Feminism?.....	72
An Exercise in Solidarity.....	75
Resolution.....	83

## CHPATER 5- THE PROFESSION OF TESOL

Introduction.....	86
History.....	86
Language and Its Discourses as Colonizing.....	88
English as a World Language.....	92
Teaching English Critically.....	95
The Profession as Moral Testing Ground.....	100
A Procedural Dilemma.....	102
Muslim Contexts: Challenges to Critical Thinking.....	107
Conclusion.....	110

## CHAPTER 6- CONTINUED NEGOTIATIONS

An Opportunity Not to be Missed.....	113
Feminism and Islam.....	116
Feminism Must Not Be a Hindrance.....	119
What Teachers Can Do.....	121
Teachers As Bridge Figures and Xenophiles.....	124
It Can Start in the EAL Classroom.....	127

WORKS CITED.....	131
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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **“HOW DID YOU LIKE LIVING IN OMAN?”**

#### **Context for Research**

In 2003, my partner and I were recent graduates of undergraduate degrees and the teacher training program CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults) administered by Cambridge University and offered through language schools throughout the world. We were prepared to join what seemed (and still seems) to be an expanding job market, teaching English language to speakers of other languages. After searching internet recruitment sites, we choose a job in the Sultanate of Oman, teaching at a technical college. The project was the result of a new partnership between the Omani Ministry of Manpower and the Canadian Educonsult Network (CECN), whereby Western teachers would be brought in to deliver an English foundation year program which was already established and running in government run Omani technical colleges. Every new student in any program at the colleges was required to successfully complete a one year program of intensive English for academic purposes. Curricula had been developed by the Ministry itself and implemented by each individual college. CECN was responsible for teacher recruitment and placement within the network of then five (now seven) ministry-run technical colleges throughout Oman. Teachers were placed based on their experience and expertise to meet the needs of each college. My partner and I were placed in Ibra, a small town on the edge of the Wahiba Sands desert area, about an hour and forty five minute drive outside the capitol city of Muscat. The population in Ibra was accustomed to expatriates (mostly South-East Asian), living and working in their town as business owners, house servants, construction workers, medical personnel, and teachers. However, they were less accustomed to Western expatriates. Because the partnership between the Ministry and CECN was new in 2003, my cohort of teachers was the first to live and teach in Ibra. We were greeted

as pseudo-celebrities, being stopped as we walked into town for photos, drawing stares and attention. Word of the arrival of twenty-four Western non-Arabic speaking teachers, both men and women, who would be teaching English at the college spread quickly to those who lived close-by but students who came from more rural villages were not aware that they would be having Western teachers. For most of these students, several novel educational and cultural experiences were waiting. Their teachers, myself included, were also about to encounter the many incongruities in conceptions of educational priorities, student responsibility, and social and political equity that existed within the complex of this new educational venture.

Student reaction to the idea of having white<sup>1</sup> Western teachers at their college initially seemed mostly positive, possibly attributable to the status that comes with having white teachers with Western accents. However, when cultural differences both within the student population and between students and teachers became evident in classrooms, friction and subsequent resistance resulted. Expectations of students from the Omani educational system in regards to things like attendance, homework and cheating were not the same as expectations most Western teachers were bringing with them. There was significant diversity in the student population itself, as students from isolated rural villages outside of the town of Ibra adhered to localized traditions and religious practices which were different from students who came from more developed towns. In addition, Omani elementary and secondary schools were gender segregated, however the start of the partnership between the Omani Ministry of Manpower and CECN coincided with the implementation of new national standards of gender integrated post-secondary education.

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<sup>1</sup> While it was never directly stated in our hiring interviews or on our work visa applications, it was clear that whiteness was a condition of employment. A recent photo was a requirement of the application package and of the over fifty teachers in total hired for this project, none were visibly any color other than white. Also, other discriminatory hiring practices were clearly stated as policy. For example, it was explicitly stated that if we were Jewish, we were not eligible to work in Oman because of immigration restrictions.

All of these factors resulted in a student body that was new to instruction from English foreign expert teachers (as teachers were identified on official government documents), new to college life, and new to mixed gender classrooms. Many were also new to the town itself, and unaccustomed to living away from their families. Attending classes in the intensive all-English, all-day program represented a lot of firsts for most students<sup>2</sup>. Likewise, most CECN teachers (myself included), had no experience in Middle Eastern or Islamic settings prior to arriving in the small college town. Cross-cultural incongruities between non-Islamic teachers from secular nations and uninitiated students quickly came to the fore, and developing an educational narrative, meaning agreement between teachers and students as to behaviors and expectations, became especially significant to the success of the project.

Feedback I received from students regarding Western teachers, Western styles of teaching, co-educational classes, Arabic-free instruction and Western-centric teaching materials was diverse. Some students were eager to embrace novel classroom management styles and some were very resistant. Male and female<sup>3</sup> students could be found on every side of popular opinion about their Western teachers and the classes they were expected to be successful in. Specific issues such as seating plans (which will be discussed in chapter five) and presentation-based assessments became points of resistance for students, prompting protest against what some students explained as violations of their religious and social rules. Conversely, some students welcomed unfamiliar pedagogical practices they perhaps viewed as progressive or socially just. Often, each class would have a student (sometimes a male student and a female student and sometimes only a male student) who acted in a leadership role for their peers. In this role, an

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<sup>2</sup> There were exceptions: a few students had attended private schools in the capitol city of Muscat and were thus accustomed to non-Omani teachers or were mature students.

<sup>3</sup> I use these gender-exclusive terms because in the context of these Omani colleges, there was no space for queerness in public settings, with each person necessarily adhering to behaviors attributed to male or female genders, including gendered dress of white for men and black for women.

unofficial student leader would be the person who translated when necessary for those with low English language abilities, or act as spokesperson when something in class was objectionable to the group. Sometimes this included speaking out against classroom rules. An example from my own classes is my expectation that girl's voices would be heard in the public space of a classroom while men were present, often citing a familiar argument that such changes violated Omani gendered ideologies (a view frequently not shared by all students in any given class).

In order to build student-teacher rapport and collaborative learning, expatriate educators needed to earn allies in these student leaders. These invested students could fill the role of cultural adviser or intermediary; someone who could inform teachers of student concerns, opinions and reactions to teaching practices and curriculum, and communicate the boundaries and subtleties between cultural transgressions or outright violations. Likewise, they could facilitate negotiations and bridging the cross-cultural knowledge gap between secular teachers and Muslim Arab students. Given the lack of transition time for students, teachers and administration in regards to a new English-only program delivered via Western modes of instruction and the potential for cultural missteps, these informal student leaders became not only a voice, but also sometimes a target for their peers. Conservative voices resisted any change perceived as transgressing gender-based or religious practices, and thus targeted students whom they viewed as allying themselves with Western teachers or Western values and culture. For teachers who wanted more than supposed a-political language teaching or who resisted Western discursive expectations of Islamic students, these voices were often the only guide post along an ideologically treacherous path. Crossing existent cross-cultural divides was made far more complex thanks to the dichotomies of student-teacher, Canadian-Omani, cultural insider-outsider, and others. It is under these circumstances that I was attempting to use feminist

collaborative teaching methods to engage Omani students in critical social justice-centric language learning.

### **The Profession**

Most recent Canadian university graduates of English-using universities are aware of the opportunities that can be found teaching English domestically or internationally. For many young people, the profession creates access to international travel and immediate employment. It is possible to do this work in Canada but usually only those teachers who have international experience are able to find employment at university English language centers or with language schools catering to international students. Limited Canadian career possibilities does little to discourage degree-holders or retired public school teachers from relocating to non-English speaking countries<sup>4</sup>, even if for the short term. Qualifications for language teachers are often quite broad (usually teachers must have completed a degree in any discipline and a recognized certificate as a language instructor). Such an indiscriminate set of qualifications creates a diverse work force often more interested in the lifestyle associated with language teaching rather than the responsibility of such work. What is often under-recognized as a professional hazard is the philosophically and politically complex lives and work done by those teaching a language and culture that emerged from an imperialist legacy in this post-colonial world. Sometimes, these lives provide unparalleled opportunity for personal and professional growth, but sometimes there is equal potential for internalized ethical and political debates that can be debilitating. When one of the identities that a teacher claims is feminist, the confluence of acting in the roles of educator, employee and activist that constitutes daily living can become a very complex ideological competition.

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<sup>4</sup> Meaning nations where English is not an official national language or not spoken by a majority of people, but recognizing that almost every nation has linguistic diversity which often includes speakers of English.

The worldwide business of and demand for English language teaching means teachers are coming from all types of educational backgrounds, with varied levels of preparedness to engage with the sociological implications and volatility of the profession. For example, teachers may be asked questions about usage (like why Canadians often use “she” to refer to big-ticket possessions) or to adhere to what their personal politics would label gender-based oppressions in their classrooms (for example exemptions from oral presentation assessments for Islamic girls in co-ed classes). However, the prevalence of the notion of cultural sensitivity as an indicator of anti-colonial politics further complicates any dialogue of what “gender-based oppression” means locally and contextually. Teachers are communicating, embodying and resisting cultural stereotypes and discourses in often contradictory ways thanks to the lack of engagement with cross-cultural discourse being generated between themselves, and their students in their adherence to 'cultural sensitivity'. This challenges any notion of language or language teaching as neutral, and dismisses any option to withdraw from engagement with politically motivated lessons or discussions with students and administrators. Teachers are not only presenting language, they are presenting culture and values that may differ from local norms which can result in confrontations between students, teachers and/or communities. It can be very risky theoretically and professionally to publicly engage in these confrontations and they can serve to widen the inter-cultural gap between commonality and empathy. Practicing ELT in such a way that collaboratively identifies, deconstructs and challenges oppression as is, no matter what the context, and engaging students in critical thinking about English as a language with a history, is how to follow a feminist neo-colonial pedagogy. Conversely, to refuse to engage in these conversations ignores past colonial injustices and local cultural practices that may be contradictory to feminist values of social justice for women.

My choice to teach in the Sultanate of Oman, an Arabian Gulf Islamic nation embarking on a new business partnership with a Canadian educational partner, rather than a well established project in a secular nation, speaks to the kind of teacher and the kind of feminist I want to be; one who sees feminism as relevant to work beyond activist organizations and one who tries to hear voices taking part in debates beyond academia. However, the profession of English language teaching (ELT)<sup>5</sup> is wrought with historical legacies of oppression, Western-centrism, and colonization which seems to stand in immediate contradiction with working for increased cross-cultural equity. Alistar Pennycook's (1994) work on ELT as a product and producer of colonial discourse and Self-Other dichotomies explores ELT as "a site of cultural politics, a place where different versions of how the world is and should be are struggled over" (p. 146), acknowledging that ethics and politics are being confronted in classrooms. To understand ELT in this way is to recognize the historical oppressions rationalized as 'civilizing' through language, while simultaneously recognizing that current economic and cultural globalization has created a unique linguistic reality that is distinct from a colonial one. Thus, learners are engaging in a sort of sociolinguistic exploration of cultural politics, and for feminist teachers, this must include dialogue about women's lives. To practice this type of critical ELT is to take steps towards the exposure of and resistance to colonial or misogynistic discourses in teaching pedagogy and materials, as well as within the language itself. It is a rethinking of the implications of English language teaching globally, and subverts the role of TESOL in

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<sup>5</sup> Or TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Other common terms are ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language), but this taxonomy is unclear in its application: "The applied linguistic and pedagogic motivations for these label and acronyms may well be out of touch with the current complexity of English in the world and of World Englishes" (Nayar, 1997, p. 10). I will be referring to the educational setting of Oman as an EAL (English as an Associated Language) environment based on Nayar's (1997) explication: "In an EAL situation, environmental support is variable, indifferent, and unreliable, and although assimilation into the native-culture is never the goal, identification with a native target culture is optional and generally learner motivated" (p. 30).

perpetuating, entrenching, and advancing colonial Orient-Occident dichotomies and Self/Other positionings.

### **The Problem**

As the title of this chapter suggests, I am often asked how I liked living in Oman. Answering general inquiries of interest from family and friends is usually straight-forward. Most people already have the answer in mind that they expect to hear and often I am happy to provide it: Omani culture is very different from what I was used to and this made for an interesting but challenging two years. However, when someone asked specifically about my actions and opinions in regards to social conventions like veiling, polygamy, and restrictions on women's mobility, I struggled for an adequate answer: there is so much theoretical baggage loaded onto these questions. How could I explain my observations of the lives of women who were in my classes in a way that recognizes my location within the discourse, avoids knee-jerk reliance on colonial understandings of how things are “over there”, but does not remove the possibility of challenge to cultural codes that create social inequities for women?

The difficulty I had with answering how I liked living in Oman after the fact stemmed from the same inability to embody practical anti-colonial feminism I faced while I was living there. When students or administration casually asked me if I liked Oman, of course I would say yes; there were many aspects of Omani culture I preferred to my Canadian culture (and still do), and it would be rude to say otherwise as a visitor to the country. However, in much the same way as friends in Canada would do, some students would ask more pointed questions, like how I felt about specific incidents in class or particular aspects of their lives. For example, students would ask for my opinion on a school policy whereby girls who lived in residence could only leave campus on a chaperoned school-organized bus or when signed out by their closet male relative (usually their father or an uncle). In a reflexive way, students could use this information

to surmise my opinion of “their” culture, and in turn, formulate their own position on “my” culture (if it is possible to be so black and white in relation to borders between cultural memberships). Early on it became very clear to me that as a feminist and a teacher, my students were assuming what my cultural politics were based on their interactions with me, whether or not I would also have identified or employed that politics as my own. Being unable to formulate or articulate for myself a feminist politics grounded in the lives of actual women (which simultaneously failed to engage with students who were developing their own cross-cultural politics) was crippling to my sense of self as a feminist and as an ethical person.

One student in particular took me to task on what I thought of his culture. In an individual end of year oral assessment, I was to ask him a series of questions based on material covered in class. Students were encouraged to speak as much as possible and to use whatever language knowledge they had, especially in the second half of the exam which was meant to test free speaking (conversation style skills) rather than looking for production of specific target language. One of the exam questions was to describe his family and his family home (he was the eldest). He first told me of his brothers and sisters who all lived with his mother and father in one house. He gave their names and ages and explained what his father did for a living. He continued by telling me that his father had a second wife (polygamy is common in Oman). He called her his second mother and explained that she lived in the same house with his mother but on a different floor. He knew her name and basic information, including how many children she had and their names (his half-brothers and sisters). He had spent time with her and his siblings and thought of them as part of his extended family. I was listening and taking notes on his language skills and when he stopped speaking, there was a pause while I waited to be certain he was finished.

He continued by telling me about his third mother. He did not know her name but knew that she had children who lived with her. He knew she lived on the ground floor of his house but he had never seen her. He knew that she was the third of his father's wives and that one day a week his father was not available to him because that day was spent with his third wife. She never left the house other than when escorted by her husband, covered by a full veil. Anything she needed was delivered and no one else in the house was to speak of or to her. While this information was far outside the realm of what a student usually would say when describing their family, I continued to listen. No other student had ever been so forthcoming on his or her family situation, but I continued to look at my notebook and make notes while nodding but not speaking. Then he said, "I know this is bad, teacher. I know in Canada this is not okay". I looked at him with what I assume was a shocked look on my face and he looked at me, waiting for a response. While my mind was racing, my voice remained silent. He was waiting for me to confirm or deny his statement but instead, I awkwardly smiled and said that the interview was complete, that he did very well, and that I wished him a very good summer holiday. He smiled and said, "okay teacher", in a way that suggested to me an unspoken understanding of the gravity of the dialogue he was attempting to engage me in, perhaps because he could see that reflected in my face. I was aware that there was no real danger in regards to my personal safety, my social status in the community or my job: it was the end of the school year and I was scheduled to leave the country in a few weeks with no plan to return. However, there was a great risk to me psychologically and emotionally as a feminist and ethical person and in that critical moment, I said nothing. He said thank you, we shook hands and he left the room.

Disturbed by what this student said as much as by my own reaction to it, I shared this experience with other teachers and was further disappointed by what I heard back. Coming from a variety of post-secondary backgrounds from music to business, it seemed most other teachers

were much clearer on their own opinion of the realities presented in the “third mother” story. Some teachers agreed with my actions, saying that I should not have commented on this student’s story because it was not appropriate for me to publicly evaluate the cultural traditions of Oman; I was an outsider. I now identify this as an approach that can be labeled cultural relativism. Other teachers gave me a response of condemnation of Islamic marriage conventions and Omani culture in its totality, stating that the entire philosophy of family, authority and gendered roles is so deeply flawed that it was not redeemable. I now identify this approach as essentialist, ethnocentric and neo-colonial. Others fell somewhere in the middle. It seemed that the person who was having the most difficulty finding a suitable politics was me, the only teacher at the college with a background in Women’s Studies or any other area of study explicitly concerned with social justice (which may explain why I was aware of the complexity of the situation). However, it quickly became clear to me that analysis paralysis, defined by Ralston and Keeble (2009) as “an ambivalence in academia about doing something, both theoretically and politically, outside one's own backyard; and a hesitation to speak or act for anyone but (literally) one's self” (p. 25),<sup>6</sup> or cultural relativism were the only two tools I had in my feminist toolbox when I was thrust into a situation where my approach to cross-cultural feminist possibilities was taken to task. I was unable to engage with that student’s questioning of his own culture, or even provide him with my views on cultural philosophy; at that moment, I was paralyzed into cultural relativism by default.

As my time in Oman continued, similar confrontations between my political views and the dominant politics and morality of my students continued. Significantly, my own ideas of how to bring feminist politics into my classroom began to dissolve and then finally disappear almost completely. My extra-curricular activities turned to things of interest to ex-pats and

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<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion and analysis of this term and its use, see chapter two of Ralston and Keeble (2009).

tourists. I visited with students outside of class time less and less. When a student came to me with a question relating to cultural differences for women or religion, I gave answers that were deferential to their culture, meaning relativist. It was not until late in my second year of working in Oman that I began to recognize what identity I was performing: that of a privileged Westerner who was able to disengage with the cultural discourse being developed around me as a result of my inflated salary, native-speaker status and color.

Perhaps it was thanks to experience, the passing of culture shock, a new peer group or maturity on my part that I started addressing these issues. I began to challenge my colleagues in discussions about the complexities of cross-cultural analysis. I asked students to explain their actions; asking them why they thought what they thought and how they knew what they knew. Most students were very challenged by this approach and thus disengaged, a point I will examine further in chapter four. For me, this was the start of a process of evaluation; evaluation of my teaching, my lifestyle choices, and my responses to specific topics. While years of feminist education and Canadian social convention had taught me to be polite and “respectful” of other cultures, I found that in practice, to silence myself or to refuse to encourage my students to think critically was to ignore the complexity of the moral discourse that existed (and was being created) around me. This is echoed in the work of Megan K. Stack (2007) , who after living and working in Saudi Arabia, has observed "I spent my days... struggling unhappily between a lifetime of being taught to respect foreign cultures and the realization that this culture judged me a lesser being. I tried to draw parallels: If I went to South Africa during apartheid, would I feel compelled to be polite" (n.p.)? As a feminist, I have been asking myself the same question about Oman, as Alcoff (n.d.) has asked: “If I don't speak for those less privileged than myself, am I abandoning my political responsibility to speak out against oppression, a responsibility incurred by the very fact of my privilege” (n.p.)?

Despite starting with a woman-centric pedagogy, after a few months in the classroom I began to feel that feminism was failing me as a theoretical basis for my lessons. It has been through extensive post-service self-reflection around my teaching pedagogy that I now feel justified to identify my approach as feminist. This loss of confidence in feminism as a workable politics extended beyond my classroom to my daily life: how I managed my body, behaviors and voice as a white female teacher in an Arab Islamic country. This thesis is my attempt to evaluate post-colonial feminism as an educational philosophy that is conscious of and amenable to Islamic contexts, flexible enough to facilitate collaborative cross-cultural subaltern resistance to gender-based oppressions, and an essential component of anti-oppressive ELT.

### **Some Considerations**

English language teachers working internationally are often immersed in cross-cultural testing grounds where both students and teachers grapple with local and non-local discursive constructions of politics, education and each other. The body of theorizing known as post-colonialism has been very influential in this area, but has in some ways become an impediment for many of those involved in the profession of TESOL. Post-colonial feminism focuses on identity (bringing complexity to discursive constructions of essentialized dominated peoples, meaning “cultural others”, subalterns or those belonging to non-Western cultures), and on resisting the universalism of Western feminist issues into women’s issues globally. The implications of this thinking have deep impact on teachers attempting to address gender-based inequities in language classrooms in “Other” cultures; it can lead to a focus on the identities of those involved in the conversation rather than the issues under scrutiny, while ignoring the utility of the privilege available to those who inhabit various positions in various hierarchies of race/class/gender. Post-colonialism asks us to reject discursive understandings of women of color as dis-empowered objects and to simultaneously recognize the race-based power and

privilege available to white women. However, one of the central tenets of feminist praxis are that the personal is political and that the systematic oppression of women can be a common denominator around which women can organize for change. This leads to an obvious problem: how can a white woman feminist living outside the West use her voice for change in that context? Is it possible to do this while subverting white privilege?

After reflection on my own experience and discussions with other teachers as well as academic feminists, I have found that I did indeed feel compelled to be polite (meaning silenced) for reasons beyond social convention. As a leader in a language classroom, a highly politicized context, politeness that translates into complete disengagement with moral dilemmas should not become part of the operational model of teaching for a Western feminist teacher. Politeness as justification for cultural relativism is not an approach that I can support as a feminist, a teacher or an ethical person who wants to actively work against colonial discourse that is so deeply entrenched in the history of ELT. To remain silent as an observer or when directly questioned on issues like women's rights or classism was to deny my feminist politics and deny the dignity of those people whose rights were under discussion. In this thesis I will address questions such as: Is it possible for a Western teacher to engage in critical discussions of the cultural and social landscape for women outside the West without relying on colonialist discourse? How can a Western feminist English teacher facilitate discussions of Islamic (or Western) social inequalities, or take part in defining them in conjunction with students? How can a teacher actively work against social inequalities in the imaginations of her students through her pedagogy, or is it neo-colonial to do so? Is it even possible to deliver ELT by a Western feminist teacher without colonizing students and what do some influential post-colonial feminists have to say about that?

In conversations with both students and teachers, it became clear to me that my frustration with living as a Western woman in Omani culture was based not only on societal and legal realities for Omani women but also based on an ideological difference in the value of critical thought. While there is evidence to argue that Islamic doctrine and traditions do not advocate for intellectual submission, in practice, Omani students who were all necessarily Islamic, were actively discouraged as critical thinkers. I repeatedly found myself frustrated when students would resist giving their point of view in class; unwilling or unable to generate opinions on even the most unimportant of topics. Islamic doctrine as it is practiced in Oman advocates for adherence to teachings from religious leaders rather than reading and discussion. For a feminist who wants to support positive social change, working in a profession born of imperialism must mean teaching in a way that resists this history and encourages critical ownership of language (a point I will discuss in chapter five). When it became evident that critical engagement with social norms was unfamiliar to the majority of my students, I found myself even more confused and disillusioned with the practical application of feminism. How could I ask students to think in a way that was valued in my cultural context and a necessary part of being an agent for change but actively campaigned against in their own shared culture? Was this not the very definition of colonialism? This conundrum was yet another aspect of my inability to adequately analyze the world around me.

The Omani friendships I developed (and still maintain) have given me opportunity to further discuss this point and these former students have reinforced that critical thinking is not a prevalent part of Omani culture. However, as they often point out, it is not haram (forbidden). In fact, a few students demonstrated well-developed critical thinking skills outside of public spaces. In a private discussion after school, one girl argued that wearing the hijab and veiling is liberating for women while at the same time arguing against a social convention that women and

girls must sit in the back of classrooms. She argued that common dress created a shared women's community but that being relegated to the back of classrooms was indicative of denying that women's community access to education. This highlights why analysis paralysis created by post-colonial identity politics is so detrimental to social justice imperatives: being disempowered as a teacher to support and develop critical thinking in students will shut down those who are taking risks by asking contentious questions and challenging entrenched practices.

It is not possible to disengage with critiques of English, contexts of learning, or colonial discourse in the ELT classroom if one is to be a teacher who is concerned with social justice and the steps being taken towards (or away from) it. As Ralston and Keeble (2009) note in their work on the "dilemmas of development work and political action" (p. 10), "there is an impasse in feminist theorizing, which can only be called analysis paralysis, because the polarizing debates between post-structuralist, post-colonialist, and so-called identity feminists have led to a hesitation in individual women and women's groups in Western countries to act politically for fear of being labeled ethnocentric, neo-imperialist, or worse" (p. 10). While ELT is not development work in the sense of having a mandate for a specific social justice objective, teaching English can be a source of subaltern empowerment and opportunity for cross-cultural bridge-building. In this present context, English is the global language of business and politics therefore knowledge and ownership of such a language can create power for individuals through access to jobs, other cultures, and opportunities for coalition building. However, ELT originated as a imperial project and will remain as such if politically minded pedagogy is not put into action. There is opportunity for these pedagogies to be informed with a feminist focus on equality for women as well as developing a local critique of economic, social and cultural injustices for women. Unfortunately, the work of post-colonial feminists, who theorize for a more destabilized and oppositional version of what it means to be feminist, post-colonial, and

activist in cross-cultural contexts, has been directing the course of feminist moral philosophy towards, “feminist ideologies that tell us we cannot do anything without paralyzing soul searching” (Ralston and Keeble, 2009, p. 10).

I want to argue that while post-colonial critique has contributed to opposition of Western privileged experts as the only or best source of knowledge, it can also have dire consequences for individual feminists making efforts to navigate feminist and cultural politics. For academic feminists in positions of privilege who have membership in communities where theorizing is paramount, it is easy to become detached from women’s lives. The work of philosophers like Martha Nussbaum, Uma Narayan, Susan Moller Okin, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Allison Jaggar and others have opened debate over a functional politics that is sensitive to identity, cautious of assumptive discourse, and focused on power dynamics in action. However, English language teachers need a way to translate theory into the lives and thinking of their students. They need ways to understand and present culture as something constructed and how to use that knowledge for positive change.

One way ELT can facilitate this is through cultivation of teachers and students into xenophiles. Zuckerman (2008) has described “xenophiles” as people who can provide links across cultures or translate between cultures because they can move within and between more than one culture as sometimes insiders, sometimes outsiders, by virtue of experience. These figures are essential to global development and cohesion because they can translate culture in ways that increases complexity of inter and intra-cultural understanding and meaning, while not engaging in uncritical celebration of cultural values, a practice that can quickly slip into uncritical relativism. Post-colonial feminism challenges the validity of xenophiles because of its intense focus on insider identity as the benchmark for authenticity of cultural based knowledge. Under a post-colonial feminist model, it is only possible to speak *from* a culture and impossible

to speak *for* a culture, therefore to speak or act for change from the position of xenophile is difficult, even essentialist, even if it is to represent alternative knowledge or perspectives. This simultaneously creates a disconnect between would-be allies (Western feminists) and those who can bridge cultural based difference, as well invalidating bridge figures as a necessary part of intercultural coalition building. As Ralston and Keeble (2009) have argued, “The necessary synthesis...needs to address the fundamental problems with identity politics in feminism and become a social movement that addresses both sameness and difference and that operates both locally and globally to achieve a truly global feminism and global citizenship” (p. 14).

Ultimately, it is my hope that feminism can continue to further the dialogue surrounding women’s lives across cultural contexts in such a way that transcends difference by utilizing sameness as a point of departure, and that this dialogue can happen outside of activist organizations to reinforce that while caution is necessary in relations that span North/South power differentials, critical engagement is obligatory. Women stand to benefit the most from teaching and teachers who are sensitive to the risk of neo-colonization, yet equipped to evade it. Feminism should be cultivating a sense of responsibility to critique the cultural contexts of teachers, but to also cautiously facilitate locally developed, globally minded critiques.

I recognize that adherence to Islam adds complexity to an already very complex interaction of politics and pedagogy. While I may never know what its like to be a young Omani woman, I can imagine that a woman who never leaves her home except when escorted by her husband, is isolated from her family and whose only social interaction happens exclusively with her husband and children on her assigned day of the week, is not living a life open to possibility. Even if I did accept that my imagination is not up to the task of understanding how cultural insider status would intrinsically frame such a life differently, I cannot accept that I should not try to understand because I am an outsider. It is vital for me as a Westerner to open my mind to

the variety of ways of understanding and living in the world, but it is equally important for me as a feminist teacher to open the minds of my students to a similar experience. If we only look inwards, we cannot see the possibilities for engaging in dialogue that can forge connections and create a more sophisticated understanding of communities, cultures and philosophies for living.

### **Overview of Chapters**

Chapter two examines the rationale for auto-ethnography as the method for this philosophical exploration. Through a consideration of feminist writing as a vehicle to re-narrate master scripts, auto-ethnography permits exploration of one example of feminist praxis in cross-cultural settings without speaking for women as a privileged outsider.

Chapter three looks at the limitations of working feminism that results from identity politics and the consequences of individualizing the responsibility for privilege. White Westerners practicing feminism outside the West, in many cases, face accusations of racism and neo-colonialism when they act or use their privilege. Anzaldua's conceptualizations of world traveling and borderlands are considered as transitional identities. The danger of analysis paralysis (or the absence of action) is considered as a consequence of hyper-vigilance when exploring the complex interactions of privilege and post-colonial caution in how feminists work within non-activist professions. For the teacher who lives between and within worlds, it is important to be able to challenge assumptions where she lives, works and speaks from, as well as where she comes from. This chapter argues that feminists must engage with self-reflective theory but not disengage with critical practice.

Chapter four seeks to explore how the specificities of the Omani Islamic context challenges feminist politics. Through an examination of Islam as the most significant aspect of Gulf culture, I specifically consider the reasons why critical thinking is discouraged within Omani Islamic doctrine and practice, and the significant challenge this poses for teachers

working to create post-colonial owners of a world language. The (in)congruities of feminism and Islam have been well considered elsewhere (Mohanty, 1988; Mernissi, 1991; Ask and Tjomsland, 1998; Majid, 1998; Amireh, 2000), and while I support the view that feminism is not incompatible with Islamic women's struggles for rights, my interest in this exploration is to illuminate aspects of Omani culture that are pertinent to my struggles with responding to cultural discourse in a critical way.

Chapter five deals with teaching English as a foreign language as an historically imperialist entity and the complexity this brings to the profession if one is to follow feminist pedagogy. I attempt to show that TESOL is not inherently oppressive or colonial if critical feminist pedagogies form the basis for interactions with students in the classroom and beyond. This chapter aims to problematize the notion of English as a foreign language, and that to teach it is to colonize. Through an analysis of issues arising from my own student-teacher interactions, I explore how EAL teaching can be a vehicle for the subaltern to have voice in areas of power and can form the core of feminist support for women resisters and activists.

Chapter six brings home the urgency of this issue simply because of the worldwide demand for TESOL. Engagement with social discourse surrounding not only English as a global language but also cultural identities is considered as a general point of departure for developing international connections and a global consciousness. Zuckerman's (2008) concepts of bridge figures and xenophiles are evaluated as an identity model for global citizenship that can facilitate mutual cross-cultural intelligence. To truly be a feminist teacher, one must engage her students in questions of women's rights, women's lives and women's histories. To avoid being part of the colonial legacy, teachers must not choose relativistic hesitation towards sensitive cultural differences in classrooms but must cautiously participate in these discussions while facilitating and encouraging them in others. I will argue that to do so is not to colonize, despite the eyes-on-

your-own-backyard mentality that seems to define popular views on cross-cultural lives, and to define current post-colonial thinking.

Philosophically I recognize the danger of taking license in classrooms to ask students to think critically about their cultural heritage when language teachers are often new residents of a cultural context they may not yet understand or appreciate. This is especially true of some Islamic nations where this kind of thinking is presented by religious leadership as contradictory to the teachings of Islam. However, I also recognize the huge loss of potential for change in the minds of would-be global citizens who are trying to gain the ability to interact and understand a world that is connected across geographical and cultural boundaries in a hierarchical way. By deferring to Islamic popular doctrine is to neglect those dissenting voices who are advocating for change for women within Islam. These are often the voices who are speaking for Islamic women and as a feminist, I choose to align myself with these voices to bolster such thinking and further discussion among Islamic students of the world.

The message I want to convey then, is that there is a strong imperative for feminism in TESOL and irregardless of context it is not colonial or oppressive to engage students in critical discussions of language, their position within language or within their own cultural heritages. In fact, to teach in a way that does not present these ideas is neo-colonialist in that it does nothing to understand English as a former tool of colonialism (and now avenue to empowerment). Specifically, in an Islamic context like that of Oman where there is active discouragement of such critical thinking coming from male leadership, both culturally and religiously, it is impossible to teach in a feminist or anti-colonialist way without directly opposing an entrenched practice. However, traditions of critical thinking in Islamic doctrine are well documented therefore not “foreign”. To instigate/invite/engage with challenges to dominant social norms in the context of a language learning classroom is therefore not neo-colonialist, rather it is social

justice pedagogy. Trends in academic post-colonial feminism suggest that to confront “local” epistemology is condescending and oppressive. For academic feminism to be crafting such an opinion is to fail to facilitate a focus on women’s oppressions and ultimately to cease being an agent for social change. On an individual level, feminists of any variety have opportunities in their work and daily lives to embrace change or accept the status quo. Feminism is really about changing minds and it is important to remember that individual everyday acts are essential to this process. When theory does more to create hesitation in would-be feminists than to provide tools for understanding and moving forward, then the theory itself has become part of the problem.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **METHOD**

#### **Introduction**

The events that this thesis is based on were not part of any formal research, or observed and recorded with a far-sighted goal of using them as material for academic research (although I did keep a personal journal which was used as a reference during the course of this research). Actually, when I was living in Oman I had considered myself finished with post-secondary education (at least I considered myself finished in the role of student). In what was my first teaching position, I was going about the business of living and working as a feminist in an Arabian Gulf nation. As became evident, there was nothing simple or straightforward about negotiating culture shock, professional shock, and the discovery of the failures in myself and in feminist theory to adequately imagine, describe and transcend the intersections of Omani cultural landscapes and Canadian cultural landscapes. After two years working and living at this intersection, I decided to leave Oman and accept a position elsewhere. The psychological and emotional effects of disengagement with learning about or exploring the culture around me as a result of analysis paralysis negated my reason for being there: gaining a more complex world view that I could incorporate into a socially beneficial profession. Neither geographical nor chronological space resulted in clarity or insights into the sense of confusion and paralysis I carried with me to other teaching positions. It is for this reason that I choose to undertake a Masters degree in Women and Gender Studies in order to examine feminist literature for explanations and language to explain the variety of responses to my telling of the “third mother” story, but to also answer my own questions as to how to deal with sensitive issues of cultural difference. I needed to formulate a feminist politics that was contextually responsive and responsible, and I needed help to do so.

## Setting the Context for Research

As previously mentioned, this research grew out of my confusion, distress, and disengagement with feminism that came as a result of living and working in an Islamic rural village in the Sultanate of Oman. These experiences and my continued inability to find closure with those events led me to graduate school with a question: were the women in my EAL classes oppressed or not and was my feminism or even my presence adding to existing oppressions (or creating new ones)? My original plan was to conduct research with a few key students I remained in touch with after leaving Oman, possibly in the form of interviews or participatory action research. I had the option at that time of returning to Oman and could therefore conduct this research directly with those women and girls I had met and connected with while living there. Many people do not start graduate school with such a defined research question but it was very clear to me that I was there to make sense out of lived experience rather than because I wanted to pursue an academic career.

It became quickly apparent to me that this research was not going to happen. While logistically it was an ambitious project at the graduate level, what became the biggest roadblock were other feminists and feminist theory itself. In classroom discussions with my peers and professors in the Women's Studies departments of which I was part, there was resistance to the idea of a white woman doing research on Arab women, even though I was part of the research question. On several occasions when I was given opportunities to present my topic and ideas for methods, it was strongly suggested that such a research situation would not be looked upon favorably by the feminist community that ultimately would be passing or failing my work. Voices from many research areas and methodological backgrounds warned that the inherent risks of neo-colonization were very strong in the type of research I would need to do to answer the questions I was asking. This was incredibly discouraging. I was at graduate school because I

had lived experience that I wanted to analyze and make sense of and so I turned to feminist theory for explanations and ideas. However, what I was told was that the theory says I cannot ever make sense of it because I am white and it is inappropriate for me to be asking such questions; I did not have the epistemological right to ask the question I was asking. This was problematic for many reasons. Many of these questions came from discussions with Omani girls whom feminist theory says did have the epistemological privilege to question their culture. I wanted to explore those valid ideas and challenges. Also, these questions came as a result of real life experiences that are not unique to me (there are thousands of EAL teachers working in almost every nation). Analysis of where you stand should be a foundational requirement of feminist research.

I have persisted in investigating these questions and forcing myself to honestly and critically consider my actions as an EAL feminist teacher. I find it counter-productive to stop investigating and critiquing theory because the theory itself says we cannot or should not. In despite of (or perhaps because of) the difficult theoretical constrictions that have resulted from post-colonial feminist theory and identity politics, this thesis explores the complications that arose for me as a feminist teacher out of questions about the nature of my relationship to Muslim EAL learners in the Gulf. At its heart, the intent of post-colonial feminism is to bring to light the historical inequities created by imperialism and Orientalist politics. While it has been successful in this endeavor, some unfortunate outcomes of these investigations have been open hostility towards particular groups of feminists, a general move away from the practice and activism of feminism, and splintering of women into increasingly more specific identity groups, or as Ralston and Keeble (2009) call it, “silos of difference” (p. 32).

Initially, the literature I was exposed to did not confront my analytical paralysis, instead apparently favoring cautious relativism with harsh criticism for those who disagree. An

excellent example of this is Susan Moller Okin's collection of essays *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women*, (resulting from the strong responses to her article of the same name) in which she (her essay, her politics and herself personally) receives harsh criticism from several highly respected academics. In my own discussions with academic feminists and feminist peers, this message was reinforced: caution to the point of disengagement was advisable if my genuine focus was avoidance of neo-colonial research. Linda Alcoff (n.d.) writes:

There is a strong, albeit contested, current within feminism which holds that speaking for others---even for other women---is arrogant, vain, unethical, and politically illegitimate. Feminist scholarship has a liberatory agenda which almost requires that women scholars speak on behalf of other women, and yet the dangers of speaking across differences of race, culture, sexuality, and power are becoming increasingly clear to all. (n.p.)

I was told bluntly that as a white woman, it was arguable that I could not do ethical feminist research on the lives of my Omani students: “even ethnographies written by progressive anthropologists are a priori regressive because of the structural features of anthropological discursive practice (Alcoff, n.d., n.p.). Methodologically, auto-ethnography emerged as the best (if not the only) way to investigate the complexities of utilizing Western feminism outside the West. Focusing on my identity and experiences as the material for research, rather than those of Omani female students, has allowed me to explore the role of academic feminism in cross-cultural settings and hence why it was suggested to me that my identity would be at issue if I were to conduct research on Omani women.

### **Coming to Auto-Ethnography**

While autobiography is reflective, about memory, and about making the private self public through personal “narrative acts of identity” (Pavlenko, 2001, p. 324) (Juhasz, 1980; Spacks, 1980; Kimpson, 2005), ethnography is “writing about, against, and among cultures”

(Clifford, 1986, p.3). What is presented here can be called ethnographic based on James Clifford's (1986) notion of ethnographic writing being determined in six ways; contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically and historically (p. 6). These requirements are met here in that it is written within and against specific traditions and cultures, and recognizes the author's contested authority to represent the contexts under scrutiny. However, while this autobiographical text provides an exemplar "of what a particular kind of life can be like", it is not focused on "reclaiming one's own history" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 215), because it comes from a writer who is not marginalized. By most accounts, I was privileged in my position as a "foreign expert" and Westerner. This work is best imagined as auto-ethnography, writing from a personal place of experience but specific in the scope and context under investigation. Like a traditional ethnographer who travels to and writes about a context outside of their own, auto-ethnography directs the research to personal narrative and to a specific time period under investigation. However, this does not preclude elements of autobiography or ethnography in this writing, in both their limitations and liberties.

One of these limitations, as noted by Leslie Bloom (1998), is that "conventional female autobiography...limits the emotional roles women are authorized to describe...masking of anger, pain, or other emotions functions to de-narrativize women: it takes away their ability to actively narrate their stories" (p. 68). For an autobiography of a Western woman living outside the West, hiding pain or anger is not only about female authority as a writer but also about post-colonial authority. To disagree with or express anger in regards to cross-cultural incongruities, specifically those values and traditions that conflict with so-called Western values, can be interpreted as maternalistic and used to discredit the writer thanks to the popular opinion of cultural relativism as anti-colonial. As Linda Alcoff (n.d), has noted, "a speaker's location (which I take here to refer to her social location or social identity) has an epistemically

significant impact on that speaker's claims, and can serve either to authorize or dis-authorize one's speech" (n.p.). For me to describe disappointment or anger with an Omani cultural practice (for example, the dominant girls in my classes who silenced their female peers for volunteering to present a homework assignment), is to open myself to accusations of a lack of understanding of these women's lives based on my outsider status. To criticize aspects of Omani culture in autobiographical writing may be interpreted by my post-colonial readers as refusal to acknowledge Western-centrism. If I write about encouraging girls to speak out and make their voices heard in classrooms (despite classrooms being a site where this is often discouraged for women), my act might be understood as neo-colonialism (substituting my model of women's empowerment instead of students formulating their own model grounded in their experiences and knowledge). Writing of my perceptions of these events and so many others, I am constantly policing and sometimes silencing myself for fear of the post-colonial retribution that sometimes comes with taking a critical view of Other cultures.

Despite this, Bloom (1998) continues to valorize feminist autobiography in stating that "if feminists have an attraction to narrative, it is not the attraction to traditional narrative, but the attraction to the feminist project of rewriting the master script" (p.70). If we accept this description of what feminist autobiographical narratives actually do, then we must ask what the cross-cultural master script is. Is it one of imperialism? If it is one of imperialism, then feminist cross-cultural autobiographical narratives should actively work to re-write and subvert Orientalist dichotomies of North/South, and the universalism of Southern women into traditional bodies and lives. However, the punitive approach from post-colonial feminism towards Western feminists who are taking women-centered, critical approaches to contexts outside the West, makes this re-writing impossible. It nullifies the possibility of cross-cultural feminist autobiography if it is being written by a white woman. If feminist autobiography is to be post-

colonial, it must be oriented towards re-writing imperialist master scripts. However, post-colonial feminism resists this re-writing in that it works to undermine the feminist master script itself (the script of collaborative work for change organized around women and women's concerns) by creating silos of difference based on identity rather than politics. Destabilizing feminism's white middle class center is a necessary project but risks valorizing insider status as the only justifiable authority to speak against injustice, thus precluding any possibility for Western insiders to re-write the Western master script of imperialism.

This auto-ethnography is an attempt "...to deal with the cultural and political contexts of which I am a part, a self-reflexive move" (Pennycook, 1998, p. 28), because "this kind of writing can inform, awaken, and disturb readers by illustrating their involvement in social processes about which they might not have been consciously aware. Once aware, individuals may find the consequences of their involvement (or lack of it) unacceptable and seek to change the situation" (Sparkes, 2001, p. 221). This desire for change speaks to one of the purposes behind this writing: to highlight the analysis paralysis that is crippling students, teachers, and cultures who are endeavoring to be globally minded but struggling to find a method of living simultaneously in simultaneous worlds. Using my own experience, I hope to align myself with other ESL teachers who may be asking similar questions. This is decidedly not blaming teachers for inaction or adherence to uncritical norms in their pedagogy. It is unproductive to accuse someone of not 'doing enough' when their confidence in self, in culture, in history and in their ability to teach ethically is being eroded (which is how I would describe my experience). It is also not productive to blame post-colonial feminism for the situation young feminists have inherited. The deconstruction of second-wave center/margin dichotomies and prejudices has been essential in the current globalized world, but perhaps we are now past the need for deconstruction-centric theorizing. Imperialist histories and epistemological privilege granted to

the West has been explored extensively. However, such histories and privileges do not preclude participation by anyone interested in anti-oppressive cross-cultural dialogue, and this should include work outside of activism and cross-cultural communication generally.

It would be impossible to carry out this research without taking an interdisciplinary approach. A consideration of three literary canons (feminist theory, Islamic studies, and educational theory) is essential to contextualize my ethnographic exploration of English teaching in the Arabian Gulf. Each chapter therefore has embedded literature rather than a more traditional approach of separate literature review. This approach is more conducive to this research in that it considers the issue at hand holistically from multiple legacies of knowledge. It can be said that the interdisciplinary nature of the question itself contributed to the complexity of finding an answer during the process of living and working as a feminist English language teacher. The intersections of tribal and Islamic traditions and professional social justice imperatives placed restrictions on my ability to speak critically or cogently when encountering instances of cultural misalignment. In this way, it would not be the same research if I were to consider only feminist theory in my search to find an explanation for why I did not speak when asked what I thought about a woman not being permitted to leave her home unescorted. Exploring where these traditions/cultural norms come from provides a history that can be critiqued. Additionally, focusing on the work itself by asking if teaching English to Arab students is inherently neo-colonial, evaluates the specificities of how my profession was challenging my feminism. It considers whether I would have been asking such questions if I were working in the Gulf in a less politicized capacity, for example as a nurse or engineer. Perhaps most importantly, the state of post-colonial critique is the third piece of the triangle that needs to be considered if I am to resolve why I was internally silenced. What academic feminists are saying about the dangers of white feminism outside the West must be considered in order to

evaluate the utility of feminism as a social movement for non-academic feminists working outside traditional strongholds of feminist theory. Through this interdisciplinary examination my experiences of using feminist praxis in the Omani Islamic EAL classroom, I intend to demonstrate that inaction/withdrawal results in limited possibilities for political action, “when feminists are more concerned with silos of difference than with similarities and common political concerns” (Ralston and Keeble, 2009, p. 10).

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **FEMINISM AND POST-COLONIALISM**

#### **Culture in Education**

One of feminism's most significant contributions to theory, that the personal is political, plays out in a very significant way for English language teachers. For many students, teachers become representatives of a particular gendered cultural background in the same way individual students form essentialized exemplars of a new cultural context for teachers. In this direct personal to political flow of constructs and ideas, exchanges between feminist teachers and students can supplement or formulate student's conceptions of feminism as well, much the same way a first year Women and Gender Studies professor would inform university students. But what is it that Western feminist teachers are communicating to young women? Current feminist theory that can be labeled post-colonial has theoretically focused on cultural membership and identity(ies). Racism and a colonizing gaze from the West are thematically represented in Third World feminism as a threat to cross-cultural social equity, equal to or outweighing any threat posed by gender-based discrimination within particular cultures and contexts (Mohanty, 2003). Post-colonial feminism seems to communicate that in addition to and perhaps greater than gender based discrimination faced by women, is oppression from well-meaning Western experts (feminists included) who refuse to recognize their white privilege. Unfortunately, what has resulted from this excessive attention on differences between cultural and racial identities is vigilance and self-policing of Western privilege to the point of withdrawal or paralysis by feminists working with individuals whose group memberships and identities locate them in a power deficit. In the EAL classroom, this means women's issues, content, and questions of equity are not being addressed pedagogically or contextually. This chapter seeks to explore this point and examine some of the major theoretical premises of post-colonial feminism in an

attempt to show that the lives of EAL teachers represent a new frontier in trans-cultural identities, moralities and knowledges requiring a new visioning of identity politics that can handle the limitations of post-colonial theory. I will suggest that with increasing recognition of analysis paralysis as a consequence of post-colonial identity politics, we have entered a new theoretical arena, whereby disengagement, inaction and relativism have been shown to be inadequate modes for moving forward, calling for a more nuanced synthesis of philosophical approaches and feminist praxis.

### **Cultural Borderlands and Identity Politics**

Identity politics have come to play a larger and larger role in feminism and feminist politics largely thanks to the conflation of race with gender as an identity marker used to demarcate people rather than connect them. This has grown out of standpoint theory, pioneered in part by Patricia Hill-Collins and her complication of the insider-outsider binary opposition (1990, 1998, 1999), to include outsiders-within, black women domestics who necessarily gain knowledge of dominant white culture as well as their own. She uses this terminology to capture the border spaces inhabited by black women domestics, claiming that in contradiction to liberalism, black women never truly have free access to the spaces of privilege that they service and support. By virtue of coming “into contact with White communities via their forays into seemingly private spaces of White households” (1999, p. 7), black women had access to “the private knowledges that groups unequal in power wanted to conceal from one another. However, Black women could exercise power only from positions of authority in Black civil society and not in private and public spheres controlled by Whites, namely, within White families or the social institutions of government, corporation, and the media” (1999, p. 7). This duality of social position broadens the view of the knower beyond what can be seen from only one location. This concept is an attempt to capture the epistemological privilege awarded to women on the margins because of

their ability to know a multitude of social strata as only someone who inhabits them can. However, the ability to know envisioned in this way means women can only speak from where they stand, and their knowledge can only be of their own unique location. It is also limited in its scope in that it speaks of those whose primary lens is marginal and whose secondary view is of spaces of power. This is of critical importance in understanding the lives of white EAL teachers, because while their knowledge comes from dual spaces, their foundational views come through a lens forged in privilege.

Chicana feminists have conceptualized these intersectionalities via the notion of transcendental identities determined contextually and temporally. In Gloria Anzaldúa's (1999) ground-breaking work *Borderlands: La Frontera*, she terms those women whose knowledge comes from physical and psychological borderlands as 'la mestizas'. These women "operate in a pluralistic mode-nothing is thrust out, the good, bad, and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned" (p. 10), out of the physical and psychological borderlands they inhabit. La mestizas "not only...sustain contradictions; she turns the ambivalence into something else" (p. 101). It can be said that there are similarities between these women in the margins and EAL teachers who live in cultural borderlands; contradictions are used to challenge knowledge based in one heritage and create broader understanding out of the intersections and misalignments between multiple discourses. Again, there is a significant difference here for white EAL teachers in that Chicano women may not be able to opt out of these contradictions; many teachers who inhabit cultural borderlands have a choice to ignore the contradictions around them by remaining insulated in places of privilege that are created by Westerners living in many other countries. In Oman, such an area was found in the capitol city of Muscat, known as Qurum, a shopping/consulate district that included a Western-style breakfast restaurant, cinemas showing Hollywood movies, and of course, the ubiquitous Starbucks coffee shop. It is significant that due

to the existence of places like Qurum, Western EAL teachers could choose to never fully engage with the culture of their temporary home outside of their work environments.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it becomes possible for the privileged knower to maintain Western hegemonic paradigms of knowledge which is that of a tourist, rather than one ensuing of earnest cultural dialogue.

In acknowledgment of the significant differences between marginalized peoples who cannot avoid cultural confrontations, and those who can avoid these confrontations thanks to privilege, this analysis examines the theoretical rationale and possibility of choosing to engage in cultural discourse and subverting white privilege. EAL borderlands can be conceptualized in a similar manner as the borderlands of *la mestizas*: as demonstrative of the need for a transcendental identity that can be responsive and evolving but not destructive to what the knower brings with them. EAL educational borderlands are spaces where teachers are hired to represent, translate, and share their language and culture to a captive audience of students. In a move meant to construe culture as dichotomous, Western teachers are hired over non-Western ones with the expectation that they can translate a 'genuine form' of Western culture into a format for students who are invested in learning a language which is part of their own communicative context yet not indigenous. Culture is not an incidental aspect of teaching. This is why EAL teaching happens in what can be named an example of Anzaldua's 'borderlands'-like *la mestizas*, teachers must learn the character of a place and its people to know how to create something new. For the feminist EAL teacher, that something new is how and what to teach in order to empower students to manipulate, demarcate, possess, discredit, evaluate and recreate a language and its heritage.

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<sup>7</sup>Importantly, educational institutions for English language instruction are often designed to reflect a particular version of an English speaking context, rather than a local educational setting, thus decreasing the necessity for teachers to respond to or engage with novel sociolinguistic and sociological norms.

For la mestizas to acquire the tools for living in these borderlands is often overwhelming and absorbing. As Anzaldúa puts it, “in perceiving conflicting information and points of view, [la mestiza] is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries” (p. 101). Termed in this way, the direction for this swamping is top down: the source of these conflicting ideologies is white culture which denies/degrades the elegance and complexity of brown culture. This creates a psychological borderland of confusion, accidental deviance to both cultures, and immobilization. But what about when the situation is reversed, when the flow of one culture over another is brown to white, as in the minds of teachers living in imagined EAL borderlands? How does privilege affect the subjective position of the Westerner who is being swamped by cultural values in conflict with her own?

In Alison Bailey’s (1998) work “Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character”, she expands on the work of Hill Collins by considering Sandra Harding’s (1991) work, meant to include those who might be called traitors: those possessors of privilege who, in Harding’s words, “are not, by virtue of their social location, immune to understanding the viewpoints and experiences of marginalized groups” (qtd. in Bailey, 1998, p. 31). Harding observes a significant epistemic difference between how insiders who are “critically reflexive” of their privilege, and insiders who are oblivious to privilege, understand the world. According to Baily (1998), “Traitors do not experience the world in the same way outsiders will experience it, but outsider-within political analyses do inform their politics” (p. 31). Those feminists who do choose to engage, who resist racial, and by extension colonial, legacies would be included here. Bailey describes these women as “privileged subjects”: “traitors who...animate privilege-cognizant white scripts” (p. 33). “Race traitors are subjects

who occupy the center but whose way of seeing [at least by insider standards] is *off-center*” (p. 33). This does not rely on Collin’s insider/outsider dichotomous view of location:

Descriptions of traitors as decentering, subverting, or destabilizing the center arguably work better than ‘becoming marginal’ because they do not encourage this conflation of the outsider within and the traitor. Decentering the center makes it clear that traitors and outsiders-within have a common political interest in challenging the white privilege, but that they do so from different social locations. (p. 33)

It is significant to recognize that privilege itself provides whites opportunity to opt out of engaging fully with processes of cultural transcendence. However, this speaks more to a distinction we might make between those who embrace and embody social justice and those who do not, rather than between women of color and white women. Anyone can cast themselves as a privilege traitor in how they live in their everyday world(s). Being at ease in several worlds, living as a duplicitous self, managing cross-cultural divergence in ways that are resistant but not abrasive, and teaching English against the expectations of both student’s and teacher’s world(s) are all ways that teachers become privilege-traitors and therefore anti-colonial forces for change.

Conversely, in her work “Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color”, Mariana Ortega (2006) does not accept that white feminists can renounce their privilege. Instead she argues that any paradigm destruction undertaken by white feminists living in borderlands is a result of the realization of her “loving, knowing ignorance”. Loving, knowing ignorance is suffered by those who, “seem to have understood the need for a better way of perceiving but whose wanting leads them to continue to perceive arrogantly, to distort their objects of perception, all while thinking that they are loving perceivers” (p. 60). The wanting she writes of is “to be respected in a field that claims to care about women of color and their thought. She sees herself as someone who really understands women of color, who is putting the

voices of these women on the map, who is “giving” them a voice. She constructs a reality that is in fact close to what she wants it to be rather than what it is—a reality in which the voices of women of color are still taken seriously only if well-known white feminists quote them” (p. 62).

From Ortega’s position then, the white EAL teacher who strives to resist her colonial heritage is not aware that “the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures” (Anzaldúa, 1999, p. 101), as Anzaldúa says, and is trying to manage this straddling. Rather, she is simply being challenged by the inescapable reality that:

The presence of a woman of color invokes the white woman’s part of herself that inspires terror and loathing in herself...she provides the opportunity for the white woman to feel better (by being kind and even condescending) but also to feel terrible about herself, because she is reminded of the fact that she has privileges in the racist system that she inhabits, privileges that she loathes, but that she doesn’t want to lose...the choice to see women of color or not. (Ortega, 2006, p. 68)

Ortega is arguing that whites are always able to choose whether or not to visit borderlands and engage with knowledge developed there. Furthermore, she argues that when they do condescendingly visit, they exoticize those subjects who live in the borderlands into existing archetypes (objects) of white Western perception rather than take up those ways of being into their own conception of self. This does not reflect my experience of life as a Western feminist teacher engulfed in cross-cultural education. Ortega would hold that white privilege permits avoidance or denial of the complexities of life in cultural borderlands, both physically and psychologically. While we may accept that it is possible to avoid or deny borderland complexity, it is not compulsory as a consequence of whiteness (and also not possible in many settings such as rural,

economically disadvantaged, heavily regulated, conflict ridden, or areas with low numbers of Western residents).

### **White Privilege and Feminism in an Omani Borderland**

The physical space used for teaching happens in settings where there are cultural shared spaces (classrooms), student dominated spaces (library) and staff only spaces. Staff rooms in schools are where colleagues can discuss and debate everything from questions of method and materials to personal thoughts on daily happenings. Sometimes an international staff room is a place to hear discussion from teachers who, “ignore their own non-universal starting points of knowledge and their own vested interests” (Ferguson, 1998, p. 95), and “assume that we need to reconstitute our identities rather than reaffirming or revalorizing the authentic underlying identity, as essentialist identity politics supposes” (Ferguson, 1998, p. 105). Conversely, discussion can also lead to assertions that as employees, we should adhere to the directives of administration and community standards, even if that meant embodying or reinforcing cultural stereotypes of the West. For example, I went to Oman with my male partner, to whom I was not then married. While the terms of our employment did not explicitly state the need to be married in order to share housing, representatives of the Canadian educational company that placed us made it clear that it was in the interests of our job security and the success of the project that we identified ourselves as ‘married’ if we planned to share housing. Therefore, when we arrived in Oman, we declared ourselves as ‘married’ to our new community.

To my mind it was a feminist issue that my job and choice of housing arrangements were dependent on whether my marital status lined up with my lifestyle. If white privilege acted in the way Ortega frames it, it would have been possible for me to

remain in my Western world, ignoring local norms without real risk. I should have been able to tell anyone who asked that I was not married even though I was living with a man (as previously mentioned, my employment may have been contingent on my marital status lining up with my lifestyle). Furthermore, a less obtuse validation of white privilege should have translated into psychological space to ignore local expectations and not lie that I was married, avoiding any concern with the implications of a cultural outsider violating local sociological norms. Western based feminist principles concerning women's control over their own sexuality would have been unclouded by questions of the applicability of such a politics in that setting, and I would have been justified to refuse to claim that I was a married woman. This was not the case. To argue that white privilege in itself permits a choice to engage (or not) with cultural borderlands and the rules that govern behavior there, is to neglect a liberal class-based analysis of how access to power is permitted or denied.

The Omani cultural/social context required me to learn a new social script and adhere myself to it. I had to train myself to refer to my partner as my husband. We had to discuss and decide on a time-line that we would both consistently reference (it would have been a clear deception if we gave a different anniversary date or length of marriage). However, turned inwards, this adherence was destructive to my inner conception of self (a feminist, an independent person, a resistor of female social norms); I felt that I had accepted these new rules and made them a part of my self-presentation or performance. Viewing the move as a decision (rather than how I retrospectively frame it, as an exchange of my political convictions for greater financial opportunity), meant that I could not transcend this failure to enter into a new 'world'; a world where questions of what it meant to be a woman were juxtaposed with what it meant to be a woman 'back home'.

Through-out the first year I spent in Oman, I kept my true marital status hidden from students, unsure of how seriously local conventions would be applied to foreign teachers. As it turned out, they were applied very seriously as one female Canadian teacher who choose to date a local man (go out in public together, allow him to visit her alone in her apartment, travel together, tell students about her relationship) was told at the end of the school year that she would not be offered a contract for a second year because she ‘did not fit in’ with the community.

By the second year, I had developed relationships of reciprocal trust with a few students. My partner and I revealed to some of these students that we were not married and discussed the meanings behind both of our decisions to remain unmarried and to keep it secret. Out of these conversations I gained insight as to how relationships and marriage function in the lives of my students and the larger community. For example, out of this exchange I learned about the ways texting has created a youth sub-culture of casual and flirtatious virtual encounters done via technology and conducted in secretive language. These virtual relationships sometimes result in resistance or outright refusal of family arranged marriages which is the dominant Omani convention. This is an example of world travelling. My understanding of Islamic marriage and love were based on perceptions from a white Western standpoint. Through a purposeful transcendence of self as “Western feminist” to self as Western feminist AND inhabitant of an Islamic borderland (constituted by educators under community scrutiny and English language-based cultural representatives), I acquired new understanding of the world I was living in: understanding grounded in reciprocity of insiders’ privileged knowledge to which I had gained access only because of actively cultivated relationships.

I did not feel loathing (to use Ortega's word) for Islamic culture that denied me privileges she would claim I subconsciously felt I deserved as an attribute of my Western status (the privilege to live openly with a non-related male). Nor did I feel terrible (again, Ortega's word) about myself because I had the privilege of cohabitation with a man while keeping hidden my actual marital status (not an option open to Omani women). I felt terrible because I could not accept suspending my feminist politics in this way, in the interest of "cultural sensitivity" but I thought that I ought to conform to localized dominant norms lest I would be exploiting undeserved Western privilege. The complexities and incongruities of new and old cultural landscapes were not the problem; I was able to find a way through those in dialogue with supportive local insiders. The subversive knowledges that can be gained from "two-eyed seeing" (one eye on where you come from and one eye on where you are going) (Marshall A. & M. Marshall. "Two-eyed seeing: Traditional Mi'kmaq knowledge and co-learning." Mount Saint Vincent University, Mi'kmaq History Month presentation. Halifax, NS. 28 Oct. 2010), must become a part of a privilege-cognizant white identity.

### **Problems with Post-Colonialism**

White privilege (privilege being something that is always contextually taken and given, subconsciously and consciously, by both whites and women of color), means that cultural borderlands are constituted differently depending on your location within them. Post-colonial feminism advocates for a responsible politics that recognizes colonial discourse where it lives, and takes responsibility for its existence and continued power in systems of governments, theory, and international relations, especially as it relates to women's lives. As Anzaldúa (1999) puts it, "the ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet our culture takes away our ability to act" (p. 42). She is speaking of

the responsibility assigned to those in the borderlands to maintain and develop their cultural heritages and traditions that exist despite white interference. Defending culture on the backs of women is how communities, “shackle [women] in the name of protection. Blocked, immobilized, [women] can’t move forward, can’t move backward” (Anzaldua, 1999, p. 42). I would argue that my culture of feminism has taken away my ability to act responsibly as well. My frustration is mirrored in Anzaldua’s: inability to move forward in gaining understanding of the lives of my students, inability to move backwards away from ethical dilemmas happening inside and outside my classroom, immobilized into a post-colonial cultural relativism that did nothing to expose or interrogate the potential for neo-colonial teaching or feminist praxis. Most importantly, it blocked teaching practices that could have presented students with opportunities to investigate racism, misogyny, and essentialism in their own lives, especially in the EAL classroom.

Post-colonial feminist theorizing is inadvertently maintaining the status quo when they act to blame and shame those who have privilege based in imperialist legacies. Responsibility in the EAL teaching context is not to maintain oppressive norms in classrooms but to interrogate, resist and eliminate them. Living within such systems while deconstructing and resisting them from one’s subjective position could have permitted, as Sangeeta Ray (1992) explains:

...the deliberate undercutting of the notion of a single identity realized in the delineation of the constituted nature of one’s subjectivity [which] epitomizes the crisis of living in tension and living as tension...It is not enough merely to implicate oneself in one’s readings; the awareness of the critical interpreter’s role in the continuous production of meaning as she chooses to position herself should affirm the cultural, racial, sexual, and political inter/intrareality of her identity and that of those around her. (p. 199)

In recognizing the “political inter/intrareality” of one’s identity we can avoid the kind of standpoint or identity politics that leaves Western feminists without a role to play in the post-structuralist project of deconstruction of colonial legacies. Instead, it accentuates the connectedness of each person in the passive acceptance or accidental, unrecognized perpetuation of racial essentialism, and provides space for many voices without looking for a scapegoat. To the academic feminist who operates from a distance in this discussion:

Post-colonial intellectuals must realize that we are all spokespersons for our often conflicting and various points of view. And while we must unite to make visible hitherto unrepresented personal, social, and historical structures, we can so do by being critical and yet accepting of our differences and similarities, and not subsuming our own typographies and our own voices under one pure voice. We need to investigate our own status as subjects and objects of the post-colonial phenomenon. (Ray, 1992, p. 199)

The main problem with post-colonial theory depends on from what location you are viewing it. If you are a Southern feminist, despite all the theorizing and writing on the lives of women in this global climate, change does not happen quickly (if at all). If you are a Northern feminist, even if you recognize the unjust historical legacies of imperialism and the resultant benefits you continue to enjoy, there is a backlash against acting for change. According to the theory, Western feminists themselves embody and perpetuate global systems of North to South oppression. In her work “Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege”, Sonia Kruks (1995) notes, “Since no woman can avoid living a plurality of identities, a central dynamic of identity politics is to move toward ever-shrinking identity groups, for which the logical terminus would have to be not merely subjectivism but solipsism, since no one person’s set of experiences is identical to another’s” (p. 4). To follow this through, feminism as a movement and even cultures

themselves cannot exist; if each person is an entity onto itself without shared experience, a human connection and solidarity cannot be built. “Post-colonial critique...forces us to focus on the nature of feminist inquiry as opposed to the nature of the problem” (Ralston and Keeble, 2009, p. 167).

Kruks (1995) considers the tension that has arisen out of post-colonial analyses along lines of division within feminism itself:

Today, many feminists in the United States, particularly (though not exclusively) white feminists, are concerned about privilege less as a matter of what they themselves are denied as women than as a matter of what they unjustifiably enjoy...it is in addressing the dilemmas that their whiteness, their heterosexuality, their class benefits, or (increasingly in a globalized world) their first world nationality, pose that many feminists now discuss privilege, and they tend to identify themselves as oppressors, rather than acknowledging their multiple locations as both oppressor and oppressed. (p. 179)

This represents a definitive shift in analysis from women’s lives to the category ‘woman’. Feminism has always been critical of the structural discrimination women face but the category ‘woman’ has not been inclusive of all or even most women. Often those women who were excluded were the ones who suffered multiple discriminations precisely because of their multiple locations of class, race, gender, sexual orientation and others. Identities, including gender identities, have been deconstructed to permit space for analysis that is intended to be inclusive of the multiple locations inhabited by every person, and the privileges which are assigned or denied to each of those identities. This analysis of privilege as something which is denied specific individuals in specific ways highlights that privilege is indeed structural and systemic. To Kruks, post-colonial theory represents a “peculiar analytical shift” (p. 181). “Privilege generally ceases to be thought about as structural. Instead privilege is presumed to be the personal

possession of an autonomous self...This self is...conceived as one that should be held individually accountable for what it does with its privilege. The analysis of privilege tends to become not only intensely individualistic but also frequently moralistic” (p. 181). Such an approach indicts the possessor of the privilege as responsible for its oppressive consequences, whether its owner is aware, unaware or purposeful with those effects. Responsibility to mitigate or eliminate those structural privileges is assigned to their individual owner. Kruk’s assessment can be accurately applied to Anzaldua’s (1999) notion of world-traveling as a solution to white privilege in complex cultural borderlands. According to Anzaldua, the mode of becoming a world traveler is to shift your epistemological basis to be inclusive of other ways of knowing from various locations. These specific and deliberate theoretical efforts must be made by Western feminists in order to create solidarity with non-Western feminists. However, the assumption that individuals have the responsibility to make this epistemological shift means that blame for any failures to subvert oppression is assigned to individuals directly, rather than systematic or structural realities. While oppressions are blamed on the game, privileges are blamed on the player. For feminist carriers of such privilege, this can induce fear and panic of making a moral mis-step and inviting repercussions.

Blame and criticism are both possible repercussions, and may come from those who share one (or more) dimension of the combination of identities that make up one person's epistemological standpoint. In my first year of teaching in Oman, a European teacher who had previous experience teaching in Saudi Arabia was particularly vehement that 'cultural sensitivity' equated with relativism. For his students, this meant anti-Semitic language was corrected for grammar rather than content, and music was *haram* (forbidden). Music, while often a part of listening skill development for language learners, was absolutely forbidden in his eyes based on the convictions of a minority of students that named music sinful (except for a particular type of

chanting of verses from the Qur'an). This summative assessment was problematic in that some students were regular consumers of world music, had portable music devices and would occasionally bring me music to listen to because they liked it and wanted me to explain the lyrics. In a planning session for an evening class that this teacher and I had been assigned to team-teach, I suggested a listening lesson based on a song. His reaction was overly aggressive and accusatory, and ended with his raised voice yelling, (in our shared staff room), that teachers should not be working there if they were not going to accept the cultural landscape in which they were now working: music was haram to our students and how dare we try to bring our Western ways to them when it was, to his mind, the same as asking them to sin for the sake of learning English. Afterward, in asking some students with whom I had good rapport about this point, they explained that it was often only girls and very conservative males who would refuse to listen to music. Indeed in some of my classes, the group would request songs in class as a special activity leading into weekends as a sort of reward. This confrontation, while shocking and embarrassing, left me wondering if I was under-qualified to teach. I was terribly unprepared to deal with such fierce relativist convictions and perhaps more concerning to me was that I was unprepared to give a competent feminist philosophical counter-response to his accusations of Euro-centrism and neo-colonialism.

From separatist identity politics to immobilizing philosophical reasoning feminism is at risk of theorizing itself into a corner of the academic ivory tower when it is applied to cross-cultural settings. In their book "Reluctant Bedfellows", Meredith Ralston and Edna Keeble (2009) address a growing problem within academic feminism-that of analysis paralysis:

Analysis paralysis is not a new term...It tends to take on one of two, and sometimes both, of the following characteristics: an ambivalence in academia about doing something, both theoretically and politically, outside one's own

backyard; and a hesitation to speak or act for anyone but (literally) one's self...

this type of feminism results in an increasingly fragmented world view, with privileged individuals in particular afraid to be seen as "othering" others, thus actively discouraging outsiders from acting. (p. 25)

They are speaking to the challenges of "doing something" from the perspective of well-established academic feminists who have found some members of their peer group less than supportive (and sometimes cruel) in their attitudes towards those who conduct research projects outside 'their own backyards'. As an EAL teacher, the same can be said when attempts are made at anti-oppressive teaching methods that are not relativistic. Refusing to accept that all characteristics of the novel culture are valuable and ought be respected can put activists and feminist practitioners at professional risk as I demonstrated above (the teacher who claimed using music with Omani learners was blatant neo-colonialism refused to work with me after that incident which cast me as uncooperative to our administration). For EAL teachers looking to academic feminists for "guidance about solutions and strategies" (Ralston and Keeble, 2009, p. 34), this guidance is difficult to find. "When the efforts of others are labeled imperialist, neo-colonialist, and naïve, it has a devastating effect on people's ability and desire to "do something"" (p. 34). From my position as an English language teacher rather than an activist, doing something translated into recognizing and capitalizing on "teachable moments" in regards to women's lives in conversation and dialogue, but anxiety over such acts being, "paternalistic when insensitively handled by overzealous but naïve teachers, at best as pastoral, and at worst as condescending, which can be very off-putting for the learner" (Nayar, 1997, p. 20) was paralyzingly demotivational.

As an example of the volatility of the dilemma with feminist philosophical theorizing on political action, and actual political action for feminists in global contexts, respected feminist

philosopher Martha Nussbaum considers the absence of a normative theory of social justice from feminist theorizing. In *The New Republic* (1999), she explained that we need to discuss, “which liberties and opportunities human beings ought to have, and what it is for social institutions to treat human beings as ends rather than as means—in short, a normative theory of social justice and human dignity” (p. 42), and opined on how this issue would be addressed by feminist philosopher Judith Butler. Nussbaum writes that to Butler, “subversion is subversion, and it can in principle go in any direction” which is “a void...at the heart of Butler’s notion of politics” and that the readers of her work “fill it implicitly with a normative theory of human equality or dignity” (p. 43) (which is something Butler and her theoretical supporters refuse to do). Nussbaum goes on to say that Butler’s arguments have “led so many to adopt a stance that looks very much like quietism and retreat” (p. 38) and accuse her of “collaborating with evil” (p. 45). The tone of this article is not flattering to Butler or her supporters, and is in fact abusive to her politics and to her personally.

Not to be outdone, philosophers in Butler’s camp, who represent some of the most dominant theorists working in feminist philosophy today, provided responses in a collaborative article also published in *The New Republic* (1999) which were equally scathing. Warren Hedges called her a “self-appointed defender of clarity” (Hedges, 1999, p. 43) while Gayatri Spivak accuses Nussbaum of being on a “civilizing mission” and “collaborat[ing] with exploitation” (p.43). Equally unfavorable responses are given in the same exchange by Seyla Benhabib with Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, and others including Joan W. Scott who points out the root of the problem as she sees it:

To deduce politics from theory, as Nussbaum does, is to misunderstand the operations of both. The job of theory is to open new avenues of understanding, to trouble conventional wisdom with difficult questions. The job of politics (in

democratic societies, at least) is to secure some end in a contested, conflictual field. Politics and theory may inform one another at certain moments with successful or unsuccessful results-the outcomes are not predictable. (p. 44)

Summatively, she has captured what is actually being disagreed upon in feminist theorizing today; when should feminists do something and when should feminists write rather than act? For Ralston and Keeble (2009), like Nussbaum, the clear answer is to take action whenever possible. “We need to be able to carve a space that recognizes the contributions of feminist critical theorists, particularly from post-structuralist and post-colonial perspectives, while also demanding that academics themselves be engaged, particularly because their theorizing points to global and societal inequalities and injustices” (p. 26). Speaking specifically on exploitation of sex workers in the Filipino context they explore, Ralston and Keeble point out that, “[the sex workers] alone are not responsible for changing their circumstances of marginalization, exploitation or defenselessness in society, pointing to the necessity of those in privileged positions to act to change such unequal and unjust circumstances” (p. 26).

To ground this thinking in the world of TESOL, feminist teachers (who are not generators of formalized academic theory) are practitioners of feminism in Scott's contested and conflictual fields, and theory more than informs but actually constitutes the profession and lives of potential allies. I have engaged with these debates at the level of a graduate student with the benefit of both time and distance to reconsider my own actions and decisions in terms of praxis as resultant of theory. Most teachers do not scrutinize their actions with the same intensity for many reasons, one of them certainly being the complexity of the theory but also the unfortunate prevalence of, as discussed by Kruks (1995; 2005) as mentioned earlier in this chapter, guilt resulting from individually assigned responsibility for neo-colonial oppressions. Unfortunately, what has trickled down from these debates is not the need for careful consideration of when and where it

is best to speak or act for equality or to oppose injustices. What has taken hold of the minds of many degree-holding Western teachers, including mine while teaching in Oman, is that counter-main stream (non-neutral) pedagogy and politics cannot be followed by those with privilege unless they are, as Spivak (1999) accused Nussbaum in a response to her original article, “collaborating with exploitation” (n. p.). Complete inaction, even disengagement, or as Nussbaum (1999) put it “quietism and retreat” (p. 38), was the result of this debate. Lived reality becomes maintenance of the status quo, whatever the status quo might be; opportunities to explore new collaborations in search of better understandings that can capture the intricacies and complexities of new contexts are restricted from the Western teachers who populate the profession. Disengagement is the only option open to teachers. This is not a feminism that is challenging women's marginalization in globalized inequitable institutions.

I would argue that post-colonial theory has created avenues for relevant and valid critique of Euro-centric privilege and identity within feminist discourse. However, feminism is not limited to dismantling paradigms and structures that privilege white people/cultures against non-white people/cultures or those structures rooted in racist legacies. Such exclusionary thinking eliminates potential allies by marginalizing those who would support Third World feminist theory in non-Third World contexts. Feminist praxis must find ways to engage with all aspects of our post-colonial global village if cross-cultural discourse and collaborative resistance to racist legacies is to become entrenched in the thinking of all those working and living in non-Western contexts.

### **An EAL Teacher's Post-Colonial Reality**

Most people in Canada have seen images of Middle Eastern Islamic women in the media with covered hair and faces shown, “in juxtaposition with war, terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism and devastated countries” (Marco, 2008., p. 202). These images encapsulate

what Mohanty (1988) calls the discursively constructed “Third World Woman” (an essentialized image of women based on Western conceptions of what it means to be a Third World woman rather than a representation based on the actual lives of women). While Gulf Arab women live in an economically advantaged region and therefore cannot be called Third World Women (assuming that Third World implies First (the West) and Second (loosely, nations which do not clearly fall into either category) worlds exist as well), essentialism of The Islamic Woman is represented through discursive understand of Islamic public dress and liberal rights analyses. “Since the colonial era — and perhaps ever since it was first donned — the veil has been defined more by the imaginations of those viewing it than by the voices of those wearing it” (Sanders, 2001, para 3). In the Gulf Arab context the abaya (long black loosely fitted cloaks not to be confused with burquas) and hair covering (or hijab as a blanket term for the cloth that is used by women to cover their hair) “is the predominant form of female dress throughout the Arab Gulf states. Donning the 'abaya constitutes a veiling practice and is an institutionalized form of national dress that is socio-legally implemented by the state” (Al-Qasimi, 2010, p. 45). To the uncritical Western imagination, this discursive construction of these garments means “the abaya is seen as a tool of female oppression. Its black colour, in itself, is symbolic to western ideology, of negative connotations within its glossy layers. Its concealing qualities are perceived to erase women’s voices, thoughts, and individuality” (Unveiling the abaya, 2010, para 2). A recent example comes from France where veiling has become a national issue, where Yvette Roudy, the national secretary for women’s rights in the Socialist Party, explains, “The headscarf is a sign of subjugation, consented upon or imposed, in fundamentalist Muslim societies [...] Accepting to wear the veil would mean agreeing with women’s inequality in the Muslim French society” (as cited in Ardizzoni, 2003, Gendered Discourses and the Female Body section, para. 3).

There is a certain universalism of women's Islamic emblematic clothing items and how they are worn that is applied to all Muslim women and contributes to the reduction of “a complex phenomenon linked to difficult and contemporary concepts such as identity, ethnicity, religion, politics and gender” (Marco, 2008, p. 213), to a value-based dichotomy: symbol of patriarchal oppression or symbol of women's solidarity. Epistemologically, this is significant to understanding Omani perception of the meaning of abaya and hijab in that “In an individualistic society [meaning Western societies], this explanation may be somewhat valid, yet the same is not true within a collectivist culture such as the Gulf’s” (Unveiling the abaya, 2010, para 2). Familial structure and habitation patterns are such that Western phenomena such as the “empty nest” and teenage rebellion are as unknown to Omanis as socio-legally enforced gendered dress is to Western contexts. However, collectivist group identities apparent through common apparel does not equate with absolute universalism in the particularities of the mode of Gulf women's clothing. Not all women or girls veiled. In fact, tribal loyalties and geographic connections often dictated who veiled or who did not, but there was little inter/intragroup consistency: not all young women, older women, middle class women, women from a particular village, highly religious women (and other identity groups) veiled. Likewise with hijab: some Omani girls and younger women wear their hijab pushed far back on their heads, exposing bangs, or tied loosely so as to expose their jaw lines. Abaya worn by many women (and the requisite school uniform for students of a Omani public college) come in a variety of cuts including voluminous and shapeless, to slender and split down the front-middle so that when walking, the abaya blows open and the clothes underneath are exposed. Diversity in individualized choice in style equates with diversity in meaning (subversion, passive resistance, consent with hegemonic order) for something whose “meanings are constantly evolving and changing, often the subject of intense debate and political agendas, and always buffeted by the tides of history and individual

preference” (Sanders, 2001, Intro para.). While for some it functions as “a statement of women’s increasing confidence, individuality, and financial freedom [accomplished by] liberating themselves through maintaining a comfortable line between modesty and fashion, history and modernity” (Unveiling the abaya, 2010, para 7), others perceive it as “a legitimized form of subordination which simulates advancement beyond an older form of oppression. Indeed, it is under this pretense that productions of Islamic national discourse and their inherent subservience to the patriarchal order continue to be justified” (Al-Quasimi, 2010, p. 69).

One of the ways this justification is achieved is through the manipulation and re-negotiation of women's dress from representative of regional group identity to reflective of “ideological constructions of femininity as defined by influential religious scholars (Al-Quasimi, 2010, p. 49). Traditional fashions have almost completely disappeared from Omani public dress and can now be seen almost exclusively at formal events where only women are present, such as bridal events, or worn by senior women. In a not so subtle shift, what was considered appropriate and traditional dress for women (in the past Omani women wore colorful and highly decorated tunics over pants with embroidered cuffs in unique patterns and designs endemic to particular tribes or regions) has now become old-fashioned and unpopular, being displaced by black abayas and headscarves as are worn in other Gulf nations. Opposed to any notion of this change as a result of young women's desire to distinguish themselves generationally, or a deification of Islamic identity that is situated contextually and temporally, Al-Qasimi (2010) argues that, “While the implementation of the 'abaya is born out of discourses concerned with the articulation of authenticity and the preservation of tradition, it nonetheless contributes to a contentious form of female emancipation by displacing the boundaries of the home and serving as a literal marker of socially approved female conduct” (p. 50).

This complexity of sociological significance and meaning contributed to the difficulty for incoming foreign teachers of Oman's Higher Colleges of Technology English foundation program to establish non-hierarchical relationships with female students, when administrations indicated that a Sultanate-wide policy was being instituted that all girls in publicly funded college were to be required to remove their veils while in class (not their hijabs, only their veils which would hide their faces). This became a major point of contention that was used by students to juxtapose me as Western woman with themselves as Islamic. In my first meeting with one group, I had to ask any veiled girls to remove their veils while they were in our classroom as per the requirements of my administration and the Omani educational governing body. As discussed further in chapter four, this was the first time these students were in a co-educational school, adding an additional layer of emotional and psychological impact to female students who were unaccustomed to showing their faces to unrelated males. The reactions of many students were strong and negative. Some girls protested passively by shaking their heads, whether they were veiled or not, while others were more vocal, some protesting in Arabic. Male students embodied Omani male-as-protector paradigms, approaching the front of the class to explain to me why girls needed veils and it was inappropriate for me to ask them to remove them. I had been explicitly instructed by my administration to insist that 'no veils in class' was a condition of attending the program, without exception. I explained as clearly as possible that the school had instituted this policy and that it was not connected to my politics as a non-Muslim teacher. After a heated in-class discussion between myself and a few vocal representative students, the girls in the room stood up in unison and walked out the door. I followed and asked one where they were going. They replied to the head of department (the administrator for the program) to complain. I asked them to come back to the room after their meeting and explain

what came of their conversation with him (which never happened; class ended and the girls did not return).

To these students, it seemed that the ban on veils had been instituted by me. The Ministry of Education, the ruling body for Omani technical colleges, had decreed that women in public schools must unveil based on the rationale that the mandate of a technical institution is to produce graduates who were adequately trained to join the Omani workforce and it is not appropriate or expected behavior to veil in the workplace. The expectation was that students were to conduct and present themselves in a demeanor that was appropriate for employment in an Omani place of business; this did not include veils. One of the disconnects between female students and the policy was that employment was not their intention or motivation for completing the program; as students would explain, many girls had no intention of seeking paid employment. Higher education presented an opportunity to contribute prestige (as well as contribute financially)<sup>8</sup> until they married. Therefore, female students who veiled were less disposed towards novel sociological experiences than they were towards novel linguistic experiences. As a result of the discontent in my class (and those of several other teachers), the administration held a campus wide meeting for all new students, explaining in Arabic (while English-speaking foundation teachers were seated at the front of the auditorium) that the choice to unveil was not theirs to make; it was nation-wide policy and students must adhere or go home. It was made clear that the policy did not originate with Western non-Islamic teachers out of cultural ignorance, but that they would be the ones to enforce it.

This responsibility did not permit space for myself and other teachers to consider or develop our own thoughts on the practice of veiling in response to the actions or ideas of our students and community. We were given a directive to implement which many students objected

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<sup>8</sup>All students who met attendance requirements were paid a stipend as well as free tuition.

to, thus demarcating teaching staff from (some members of) the student body and (some of) their values. For myself, the question became should I distance myself from this directive or endorse it? In doing so, how would my actions be interpreted by students in terms of non-Islamic teachers as enforcers of an elite cultural (or colonial?) agenda? Indeed, how should I interpret this policy change from a feminist perspective? In terms of language learning pedagogy, design and procedure, it is important that students are distinguishable from each other so that they can be addressed by name in order to ensure each student is encouraged to speak, an important consideration in my evaluation of a no-veils in class policy.<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, I did not equate my responsibility to ask students to remove veils with oppression or neo-colonialism. It would be condescending to assume that national educational leadership was banning veils in college classes in order to emulate Western educational standards, rather than as a strategic move towards sociological and attitudinal change in regards to Omani women's roles. My politics as feminist and woman-centric teacher found no conflict with this locally developed policy.<sup>10</sup> Upon returning to the classroom, some female students were indifferent to the policy; for those who did not veil there was no personal change. Some resisted by keeping their veils as long as possible inside the room. Irregardless of the rule on veiling, boys would stand outside the classroom until their teacher had entered, and girls would remain veiled until after all boys were seated; in this way, only I could see their uncovered faces. The class progressed in this way; teacher versus (some) students, (some) female students versus (some) female students, and male students in a care-taking role guarding women's authentic identities through a mode that, “in the

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<sup>9</sup>After living in the Gulf for a few months, I could sometimes distinguish between students in veils based on body shape, posture etc. but not without knowing who they were in advance. I was never able to distinguish between women I had met if I had not interacted with them while they were not wearing a veil.

<sup>10</sup>I would not have initiated such a classroom rule independently however because for me to enforce a similar rule, despite professional social intelligence as a stated outcome of the program, would have resulted in a cultural confrontation viewed as attempted indoctrination of Western values.

Arab Gulf states...constitutes a social and cultural practice that continues to be inscribed within a complex of honor and shame” (Al-Qasimi, 2012, p. 50).

It is my contention that EAL teaching has been largely overlooked as what Pratt (1999) terms a contact zone in reference to “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (as cited in Albon, 2009, p. 10). The everyday decisions of teachers to choose one activity for girls and another for boys, to answer yes, no or refuse to answer when pressed for a Western-stamped approval on culturally dominant norms, to give Muslim female students the option to pass in a paper when their male peers must give a presentation, are real life examples of how teachers latently encourage students to embody entrenched cultural norms. Without support, training, and avenues for critical yet supportive discussion, EAL teachers become the tools of fundamentalists. They remain part of the problem if they are prohibited from recognizing and engaging with the post-colonial silencing that is imposed on cross-cultural critique from Northerners. My epistemological justification to speak on this comes from my experience as an EAL teacher but it is my aim to create dialogue and discursive space for cautious and informed feminist consideration of contact zones.

**CHAPTER FOUR**  
**ISLAM AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

**Transitions**

My first encounter with Islamic cultural boundaries outside of Canada was in the waiting area at Heathrow International Airport in London for a late afternoon flight to Muscat, Oman via Dubai. Also waiting for the flight was what appeared to be a family including children, three women (two of whom were wearing the abaya but not veiled and one woman in full veil and gloves), as well as two men in Emirate dress (a long white robe and red checked scarf over their heads, secured with a black band). The closed waiting area we shared is a spatial and social transition area from a Western world to an Islamic world. The crowd that occupied the space consisted of a wide variety of travelers and nationalities: business travelers wearing Western suits and ties, backpackers, tourists, South East Asian migrant workers, and Arab families. Gulf nationals who were returning to the United Arab Emirates, Oman or elsewhere were wearing their national dress, white for men and black for women.

Most of those in Gulf national dress were observing what I later recognized as Islamic conventions for gendered behavior and spatial arrangements of bodies in public space-women grouped together with women and men grouped together with men. The self-imposed physical division of people seemed to be based not only on nationality, but also by both nationality and gender for Gulf women. These partitions of space and behaviors for men and women is thematic throughout Oman and the Gulf, and are applied when entering most public Islamic spaces including restaurants, hospitals and shops. However, the interface of culture and gender and their applications for behavior is unclear for non-Islamics visiting these spaces. Is it expected that gender-based segregation would be observed by everyone regardless of nationality, ethnicity or other identity factor? In some contexts, behavior is legally compelled (for example in Iran or

Saudi Arabia where all women are required to cover their hair or risk arrest). In the Omani social landscape where most gendered norms are socio-culturally enforced and institutionalized rather than judicially compelled for non-Gulf nationals, there is uncertainty in regards to what behavior prescriptions are inviolable and which ones are more convention than expectation. Does this mean there is a commonality or alliance between women as women, over alliances based in culture, ethnicity or religion? Is there consensus as to socially acceptable behaviors for women and are they enforced; if so, how? To what extent are cultural conventions constructed (rather than emergent)? Do these conventions originate as religious injunctions or political mechanisms of social control “born out of discourses concerned with the articulation of (a specific and politically preferred) authenticity” (Al-Qasimi, 2010, p. 50) and what impact does this have on the relative power of each? How much clarity is there surrounding each of these discussions and what space is there to resist them for both locals and outsiders? As a teacher, these partitions shaped to a large extent the possibilities for interactions and exchanges both in my classroom and at my desk. Therefore, any evaluation or analysis of the potential for critical cultural discourse that may exist between English language teachers and Omani language learners must include a critical evaluation of Islamic historical legacies and influence in present cultural contexts. The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize working feminism (Pratt, 2004) in an Islamic setting to make clear the localized tensions that arise for Northern feminists who are trying to experientially expand their understanding of feminism in global educational settings, and the potential for solidarity between women and between ‘worlds’.

### **Historical Basis of Culture**

Islam has taken center stage internationally regarding the prevalence and power of religion. The attacks of September 11, 2001, the American invasion of Iraq, the on-going conflict in Afghanistan and other international events have left the world asking questions and

making presumptions about Islam. Understanding and evaluating Islam and Islamic political realities as something to be accommodated, feared, criticized or defended has become an important political issue. One of the more visible and contested issues surrounding Islam for Western-based theory and international agencies is the treatment and role of women. Some feminist academics argue that women's discursive relationship and legal rights under Islam has been paramount in the evolution of Islam from a religious doctrine into a system for social control and management (Mernissi, 1991; Moghissi, 1999). By either restricting or expanding women's participation in Islamic societies, nations have been able to achieve social and political agendas (Rajavi, 1995; Gerami, 1996). The carefully crafted role of Islamic women as carriers of culture and a site of cultural continuity (Jaggar, 1998; Ahmed, 1992) has been manipulated and utilized by organizations, groups and individuals looking to gain power; a political tool that is not unique to Islamic contexts (Appiah, 2006; Narayan, 1998; Okin, 1998a).

The way this power is maintained is through ownership of the license to control and manipulate the "consensus of the faithful" (Catherwood, 2011, p. 122), (based on the Qur'an and Haddith (non-Qur'anic sayings of the Prophet) and therefore, ownership of the minds of Muslims who are obliged to submit to these dictates. As Sam Harris (2005) explains in *The End of Faith*, the Qur'an is believed to be "verbatim transcripts of God's utterances", and thus "the literal word of God" (p. 34). In *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam* (1997), a recruitment booklet distributed by The Islamic Center for Da'awa and Qur'anic Studies in Texas as a guide for non-Muslims to understand Islam, it is explicitly stated that belief in the Holy Qur'an as the literal word of God is an essential and necessary part of being Muslim (p. 53), and that those revealed words are "the primary source of every Muslim's faith and practice" (p. 54). Therefore, the control of interpretations (and control of the teachings that come from these holy scripts) can be equated with control of the thinking of those who follow them. However, as

many feminists have argued, to uphold the writings and sayings credited to the Prophet as the literal word of God is to ignore the human (read male) influence (Roald, 1998; Manji, 2003; Ali, 2007; “Who Speaks for Islam”, 2008). To question the word of man is simply to challenge structures and systems maintained by those already in positions of power, and does not contradict guidelines for spiritual living as set down by the Qur’an. As Moghissi (1999) says, “Islam, like any other religion or ideology, has a contingent nature and is the product of its articulation with indigenous cultures and societies” (p. 17).

In the Gulf, those who hold and seek power actively teach and rule in ways that subsume this distinction under one category. The imperative to submit to Islam is concurrent with submission to political and religious leaders, because, “Islam does not distinguish between religious and civil authority” (Harris, 2004, p. 34), and this has “always been a religion of state power, with no political/religious divide” (Catherwood, 2011, p. 86). Mullahs (religious scholars or leaders) who claim the authority to relate the words and meanings of the Qur’an resist social change using Islamic doctrine on which they themselves have final say.<sup>11</sup> This authority ensures that critique and evidentiary demands on Qur’anic-based rulings does not happen openly; not only of the social practices and traditions that have been placed under the umbrella of Islam, but also of governments who declare themselves and their laws Islamic. This point is extremely important when considering an EAL classroom in Oman. Asking Omani students to critically engage with discussions of women’s social inequities or oppression generally (including anti-Semitism, misogyny, class oppression and others) is much more than a challenge of language abilities: it is a challenge to values and socially instilled systems of thinking (Kuran, 1997; Hoodbhoy, 1991), systems that often stand in contradiction to feminist concerns for women’s

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<sup>11</sup> “The majority of Omanis are Ibadhi Muslims. This sector is closely followed by Sunni Muslims. Ibadhi leadership is vested in an imam, who is regarded as the sole legitimate leader and combines religious and political authority. The imam is elected by a council of prominent laymen or shaykhs” (Islam in Oman, 2011, para.1).

social oppression and control. As Sam Harris (2004) notes, “needless to say, many Muslims are basically rational and tolerant of others... however, these modern virtues are not likely to be products of their faith” (p. 28). It thus becomes essential to determine if using anti-oppressive social justice pedagogies in this context is neo-colonial in the way it represents critical thinking as valuable and necessary, a skill that may be conceptualized to be in conflict with dominant local belief systems.

Islam is practiced by over a billion people globally but this is not to say that the practices of Muslims worldwide are either consistent or universal. The Qur’an and Haddith provide a specific set of rules and conventions recognized as the literal word of God to be universally applied (even though the origin of the actual words and therefore validity of these documents is contested) (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998; Manji, 2003; Ali, 2007). However, only by erroneously using the universalizing gaze of an outsider or the view of a fundamentalist could it be assumed that cultural contexts do not play a major role in the specific expressions of these conventions. As Soroya Duval (1998) observes, “Universality in Islamic history is reflected and characterized by a prevalent unity of belief whereby the holy message is operative at the macro level. At the micro level, however, Islam is specific. Islamic experiences appear therefore in the shape of activities conditioned by specific cultural and social constraints” (p. 50). In particular, the indigenous cultural traditions of the nation where Islam was founded has a vested interest in conflating the edicts of the Qur’an with tribal histories.

### **Islam or Tribalism?**

In her book *The Trouble with Islam* (2003), Irshad Manji, who calls herself a Canadian “Muslim Refusenik”, “refuse[s] to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah” (p. 3), but she does not refuse Islam outright. Instead, she claims that the core of Islam’s strangle-hold on its followers originated in what is now Saudi Arabia during the thirteenth century. Previous to

this time, Islam was making great gains in that population and the Arab empire was similarly making gains. Development and establishment of the two cannot be separated according to Manji who says that in the lead up to Islam's Golden Age:

The rapidity of Arab empire building would have crystallized priorities, making religion a servant of colonization and not the other way around. Might some verses of the Koran have been manipulated to meet political timetables and goals? Isn't it plausible that Arab warriors, more familiar with sturdy customs than with the novel faith, grafted many of these customs onto the Islam they exported? It's not hard to see how the cultural baggage of desert Arabs, such as tribal walls, would pose as Islam proper. (p. 156)

The conflation of Islam and Saudi tribal culture was solidified when the Muslim empire went into decline after a period of military expansion and ingenuity. According to Overbye (2001), defeats of the empire by non-Muslims in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries resulted in the destruction and co-optation of documents and systems of secular thought and debate that produced most of the Muslim empire's greatest contributions.

It also deeply destabilized the core of Muslim identity. Previous to this period of defeat and demolition, intellectual advancements and collaboration were venerated as accomplishments of Islamic thinkers and followers (Dallal, 1993). After devastating defeats by the Berbers, Mongols, Crusaders and Ottoman Turks, according to Manji, "the only undisputed glory that desert Arabs could now claim was the glory of Islam's founding moment" (p. 158), providing Arabs with a rallying point around which to identify and unify. "Therein lay dignity, even salvation, after such a spectacular freefall. But this balm was a bomb. The crucial equilibrium between past and future steadily degenerated into a defensive preoccupation with the past...I call it fundamentalism" (p. 158). Fundamentalism has resulted in the kind of culturally imperialistic Islam that can be observed in non-Arab nations where Arabic, although not a local

language, is used as the medium for study and practice of Islam, for example in Indonesia. As explained in *A Brief Illustrated Guide to Understanding Islam* (1997), the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and therefore any translation is not "a version of the Qur'an, but rather it is only a translation of the meaning of the Qur'an. The Qur'an exists only in the Arabic in which it was revealed" (p. 54). Clearly then, being Muslim is just as much about following doctrine as it is about learning a culture, a language, and a history based on a tribal desert system. "It's about founder's privilege. When Arabs claim the privilege to set Islam's agenda, they shed light on how intimidation has displaced intellect. As the Arab mind has addled, the Muslim mind has done so too-as if all Muslims must march (or hobble) in lockstep with the initial followers of the faith" (Manji, 2003, p. 149). Enforcement of a pedagogy of rote learning (rather than interpretation or explication) of Islam and the Qur'an by leaders bent on maintaining power, has spilled over into an uncritical acceptance of social conventions (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 2004, p.149). Nurtured as a way of life, this control mechanism continues to serve a specific agenda for specific Muslims: one that is not flexible or current, and not concerned with notions of social equality (Okin, 1999; Moghadam, 2001). As Mohammad Sabrin (2010) puts it, "a banking theory approach does little to develop critical thinking skills...aside from the ineffectiveness of such methods, such a teaching philosophy spreads a passive slave-like mentality to education which does not cultivate active citizens who will work for social justice" (p. v).

Maintenance of and uncritical submission to a doctrine created and perpetuated by male elite religious and political leaders is in defiance of older traditions of critical thinking or *ijtihad*. This is the central religious justification given by Manji as validation of critical thought as part of Islam. It is a tradition taken from the Qur'an that states that Muslims of good faith must interpret the holy documents for themselves rather than this work being done by a central authority (Al Hibri, 1999, p. 42). This ensures no one scholar is given power to manipulate Qur'anic

injunction and law for their own purposes.<sup>12</sup> Manji calls upon *ijtihad* as a solution to free Islamic minds from tribal rule. Islamic leaders (imams) who have reserved this tradition for Islamic scholars rather than ordinary Muslims, problematize this apparent fix by claiming that opening *ijtihad* as Manji suggests would provide footing for terrorists to manipulate and interpret the Qur'an for violent purposes (Manji, 2003; "Overcoming Extremism: Community Responses", 2007). This is a crucial point for social justice pedagogies: the prohibition against critical thought in religion determines and restricts the potential for students as critical consumers of doctrine, culture, colonial thinking and other constructed knowledges. As Sam Harris (2004) puts it, "a current reality under Islam [is] that if you open the wrong door in your free inquiry of the world, the brethren deem that you should die for it" (p. 116). It is important to acknowledge that *ijtihad* is being done by Muslims in the West (Zine, 2004; Mishra & Shirazi, 2010); evidenced by young women articulating diverse experiences of veiling as "eras[ing] the female presence from the public sphere [or conversely as] a political and social statement being made by the Muslim sister" (Mishra & Mirazi, 2010, p. 199). However, while *ijtihad* is happening in the Western context that Mishra and Mirazi carried out their research, it may not yet be happening in the Islamic stronghold of the Arabian Gulf.

Outspoken critic of Islam and its traditions, Ayyan Hirsi Ali was raised as a Muslim in Somalia and agrees with Manji in her critique of the connections between tribal Saudi culture and Islam as a religion. In an online interview about what she sees as the reasons why and how Islam is used to control women, she says:

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<sup>12</sup> "While *ijtihad* remains discouraged or even outlawed among the 85% Sunni majority, this is not the case in Shiite Islam. Thus writers argue that Shiites...are more forward-looking and open to change [while] the Sunni majority, for whom things are immutable, are more stuck in the past. While it is not possible to generalize, there is enough that is correct in such an interpretation to make a difference in the two forms of Islam today" (Catherwood, 2011, p. 89).

Islam was founded in an Arab tribal culture. It was a political movement and the founder, the Prophet Mohammed started to make social rules, and in the context of that culture a lot of that Arab tribal culture has been made divine and it has remained stagnant from the eleventh century. I describe it as medieval or even pre-medieval, in the way women are treated and the fact that there is no individual freedom possible within Islam. (foryoutube 23, 2006)

From Ali's perspective, Muslim women lack power (political, social and economic) as a result of the continuing dominance of Saudi tribal traditions in Islamic contexts and inert social rules based on those traditions. This kind of approach to legal systems and social custom has meant that tribal traditions that were established to maintain blood lines and positions of authority have resulted in an arrangement whereby power over women remains with either their closest male relative or their imam. As Manji notes, "Muslims today are not so much an international community as an Arabian tribe. In an Arabian tribe, lowly members must pledge uncritical solidarity to the sheiks. One's sense of identity, if not security, depends on conformity" (p. 149).

In tribal systems, women stubbornly remain at the bottom of the political hierarchy and their first allegiance must respectively be to their father, husband, or eldest son. For women, this means that regulation of their lives and indeed their legal rights are never in their possession, the same way their bodies have remained in the possession of male tribal leader-systems. One option open to women has been, as Wilhelmina Jansen (1998) has noted, religious argumentation. Under Islamic law and custom, Qur'anic injunctions are available to them as "legitimate excuses to defy the father...It is the paradox of Islamic ideology, which places so much emphasis on family cohesion and hierarchy, that it is used by women to undermine the authority of the father or husband" (p. 94). While religious argumentation provides locally compelling justification for refusing demands made of women by male relatives, it results in

another potential owner; imams. They become the filter through which religiously-based claims are made. However, because “Fathers and brothers do not like to see their authority contested by what ‘the imam has said’” (Johnston, 1999, p. 94), there is a struggle for ownership of women’s lives and women's social, religious and political power.

### **Theory and Practice**

A common argument against criticisms of Islam as a religion of oppression and hatred is that actions by governments, terrorists and societies do not necessarily equate with those of the doctrine of Islam and its holy documents. Practice does not always equal what is preached and so it is inaccurate to be critical of Islam (the religion), based on the actions of those who claim to be Islamic (the practice of a few) (Ibrahim, 1997; Kincheloe and Steinburg, 2006). Manji (2003) sees no room for such a distinction in the debates surrounding reasons for the manipulation of Islam as a tool of social control and oppression. She says, “Frankly, such a distinction wouldn’t have impressed Prophet Muhammad, who said that religion is the way we conduct ourselves toward others-not theoretically, but actually. By that standard, how Muslims behave *is* Islam” (p. 3). Put another way, “Islam, like any religion, is not what books make it but what people make it” (Zakaria as cited in Harris, 2004, p. 148). Ayyan Hirsi Ali (2007) sees this tactic as yet another manipulative tool to control what critiques of Islam can be made (or will be heard) and who can make them: “When people say that the values of Islam are compassion, tolerance, and freedom, I look at reality, at real cultures and governments, and I see that it simply isn't so. People in the West swallow this sort of thing because they have learned not to examine the religions or cultures of minorities too critically, for fear of being called racist" (p. 349). Sam Harris (2004) echoes this when he states, “nothing explains the actions of Muslim extremists, and the widespread tolerance of their behaviors in the Muslim world, better than the tenets of Islam” (p. 117). My own perspective and understanding of Islam was experientially based on a

rural Omani context rather than text or doctrine based. My knowledge of Omani social conventions and laws was acquired through conversations with teachers already working at the college, through orientation sessions from administration, as well as conversations with students. This knowledge was, of course, acquired through my secular Western lens. My interpretations of, for example, gender segregation or why Indian teachers were paid less than Western teachers, and why a male escort was required for me to eat at certain restaurants, were all framed within my established notions of equity, social justice and human rights.

### **A Role for Feminism?**

It ought to be possible to conclude that Islam as a basis for social organization can lead to the oppression and control of women from childhood through to adulthood if this is where careful consideration, research and evaluation leads. However, to take such a position as a Western woman is often interpreted as imperialist and culturally ignorant. As a tool for shutting down debate, it has been very effective to discredit these critiques when they come from voices located outside the Islamic world. There has been extensive debate over the utility of feminism in understanding the lives of Muslim women (Badran, 2009; Moghissi, 1999). One point of contention is a distinction Roald (1998) makes between the idea of equality and what *actually represents* equality based on context. According to Roald, Western paradigms of social equality rest on economic equality, “whether women have either private economic means or property to take active part in the production of society” (p. 31). Conversely, in an alternative model of equality which Roald designates as applicable to Muslim contexts, religious or spiritual equality is paramount, represented by rights to observe and practice religious rituals equally. She says that equality of man and woman is signified by, “equality in Islamic obligations, such as praying and fasting; whereas sociologically man and woman are depicted as having different roles. This division of roles related to gender contrasts with the Western paradigm where social equality

rests in the first place on economic equality” (p. 31). Her argument is that Western women need economic equality to achieve sociological equity, while Muslim women need religious equality to achieve sociological equity. Such a conclusion ignores the (perhaps predominant) importance of legal equality which can create religious, economic, and sociological equity. Economic equality in the secular West does not exclusively dictate women’s relationship to social power; it is one aspect of the multiplicitous concept of equity. Feminism works to create positive change in all areas of women’s lives and can be contextually specific. Only if we ignore that feminists are working in the fields of politics, economics, religious institutions, law and others can we then also question whether feminism (a women-centric approach to praxis) can be useful in Muslim contexts. While according to some, the job of putting feminism to work in Islamic contexts may not have been done appropriately by Western feminists, there are Muslim feminists like Laila Ahmed, Aziza Al-Hibri and Fatma Mernissi who have been doing this work.

However, as Roald goes on to recognize, cultures and contexts are not mutually exclusive. “Western” modernist values of economic freedom are present in both Islamic and Western societies. By this logic, she must also recognize that “Islamic” values of rights to spiritual equality and freedoms are also found in the West. What this serves to highlight is the false dichotomy of spiritual versus economic: indicators of equality are not exclusive, thus genuine equality would be represented by the presence of both of these types of freedoms. Framing equality in deference to cultural context results in societies where rights violations are permissible in specific forums. These forums are determined by patriarchal systems already in operation, systems which are only bolstered by relativist deference to localized cultural values and authority over women’s rights.

This argument is used against feminism, construing it as a Western imported philosophy that is not locally applicable or utilizable. If rights are constructed as individual vs. community

or economic vs. religious, then feminism is dichotomized with Islamic fundamentalism: if fundamentalism is explained as originating locally and therefore appropriate, feminist intellectual approaches are construed as foreign and Orientalist. As Haideh Moghissi writes in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis*, “In writing about Islamic traditions and fundamentalist practices from a critical perspective, one takes a stand against both the Orientalist and Islamist streams of study. Both these perspectives obscure the complex web of class, gender, ethnic, religious and regional differences that separate rather than unite the ways of life, and particularly the political and ideological perspectives of people in the Middle East” (p. 6). Her argument against the dichotomizing view of feminism versus Islamization is a plea for a more complete analysis of the lives and political motivations of women in order to recognize the contributions and limitations of each, rather than a complete dismissal of one or the other based on insider-outsider dichotomies. She goes on to say,

The question here is not one of compatibility between Islam and feminism. Feminism is diversified and flexible enough to embrace all individuals and movements which are self-identified or are identified by others as feminist based on distinguishable ideological and political characteristics. The problem arises, rather, with the attempt to push Islam on feminists in Islamic societies as the only ‘culturally suitable’ or workable project. In this way, women in Islamic societies are once more reduced to their ‘Islamic’ identity, erasing significant differences across regional, ethnic, religious, class and cultural lines. (p. 10)

In a line of thinking similar to that of Manji, she is arguing that critical analysis is being trounced by fundamentalism/foundamentalism, and by those carrying a flag of anti-colonialism and anti-Orientalism. Framing feminism as Western and yet another colonialist project effectively diverts attention from the infractions against women’s bodily, mental and economic integrity (stopping

this infraction is a goal fundamentalism often claims as its own, despite what the reality of these systems when in positions of power, actually produces (Moghissi, 1999, p. 120). While feminists may be working for greater equality-socially, economically, spiritually and otherwise-fundamentalists are working to reign in specific freedoms and increase others; those that fit within their version of an Islamic model of gender roles are encouraged but those that challenge established controls over women's power economically and socially are carefully guarded.

### **An Exercise in Solidarity**

One of the most visual and pervasive changes brought by leaders to impose "Islamic" social controls is the regulation of women's dress in public spaces. Bullock (2002) examines the role of hijab historically and describes the variety of opinions that have been presented by well-known Islamic feminists such as Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi. They represent a range of responses from endorsement of hijab as an affirmation of religious and cultural identity (Ahmed 1992; Bullock 2000), to outright incompatibility with feminist values of women's rights to choice, freedom of expression and movement (Mernissi, 1991). Despite my commitment to secular politics, the abaya and hijab became the vehicle through which I demonstrated my eagerness to form connections, be it with students, other Omani teachers or administration. During the month of Ramadan (Islam's holiest of months marked by fasting and renewal of spiritual dedication), the young female Western teachers at my college collectively decided to wear abaya and hijab as a symbolic collective act aimed at demonstrating cultural consciousness. For a new EAL teacher living in a new geographic and professional community, the importance of forming connections cannot be overstated in order to avoid the negative consequences of culture shock. In an attempt to simultaneously align myself with the other foreign female teachers (by opting into a group decision) and students (by electing to follow social conventions for an important holiday), I took part (not to blame peer pressure for the choice to wear the

abaya: not every teacher made the same choice so to opt out would not have made me stand apart from my peers). A thought-out and reasoned decision-making process brought me to the conclusion that wearing the clothing of our students was not “playing dress-up” or religiously blasphemous. It was, instead, a black cloth-covered offering of solidarity that I had an opportunity to extend.

When we arrived at school on the first day of Ramadan in abayas, it was to the delight of many students, both male and female. I had more than the usual number of visitors to my desk that day to ask why I was wearing the abaya, to be told that I looked beautiful, and to comment that I should wear it everyday from then on. (In a similar move, a male teacher wore the equivalent national dress for men called a dishdasha to a school function. He did not receive a similar reaction. Many students, both male and female, did not like that he was wearing their national dress and were quite vocal in their opinion. This is an interesting discrepancy that perhaps indicates the meaning behind each set of clothing; pride for men, propriety for women. It may be argued that the rules of politeness would impede comments except many students insisted to me that I let that male teacher know that it was not appreciated or acceptable to the student body.) As a teacher, I found wearing the abaya and hijab cumbersome. The way it is worn with a scarf wrapped around one’s neck and a long sleeved robe made it difficult to reach above my head which is a problem when writing on a white board. It was very hot and restrictive. I felt self-conscious of my body when I took it off, even at home. As a matter of course for this informal socio-cultural exploration, I questioned if my actions represented solidarity with Islamic students or Orientalist dress-up, or was I affronting the identities of my students in a putting-on of symbolic or meaningful emblems of their cultural identity? Were there psychological, professional, or social consequences I might not have even been aware of?

Behind closed doors when there were no men present, women and girls would happily try to re-pin my scarf for me so that it would stop falling off (which it constantly did), tell me that it made my face look beautiful and suggest that I should wear the cloak and scarf everyday, beyond the end of Ramadan. Due to social convention, men rarely commented explicitly with the exception of a few students with whom I developed trusting relationships. Even then, comments would extend only to a general appreciation of appearance and not engage any further. This lack of discussion may be partially attributed to the limited language abilities of my students whose English skills would have made such a conversation laborious in some cases. For many of my students, the difficulties with using a second language to comment on complex social and political acts could be a reason why student's responses were repetitive and shallow (though in follow-up discussions with teachers who also wore the abaya, the same limited engagement was reported from their students, even those with very advanced levels of English). Notably, I did not hear any negative reports from any teacher, even those teachers (male and female) who were not taking part.

Jodi Dean's conception of "reflective solidarity" as quoted by Mohanty (2003) explains my decision to wear the hijab: "I ask you to stand by me over and against a third" (p. 7). I see my choice to wear the abaya as a similar move: to align myself politically with my women students over and against male students. Strategically, it was meant to create solidarity with women in resistance to the power of men who controlled almost everything in our classrooms, from seating plans to who could speak and be heard. My power as the teacher was transferred to and shared with the women in my classes by my act of demonstrating my engagement with what was obviously not my culture and adopting, even temporarily, a part of it. My act of wearing clothing that was common to every female student at the school represented transgressions of cultural boundaries and opportunities for solidarity with those voices who were engaged in

critical thought about their customs and traditions; I was attempting to show that I was receptive to “their” culture and hoped as a result that they would see me as an ally. It also invited and created space for women’s voices in my classroom because something exclusive was being shared by the person with the most power in the room and the students who had the least power.

In wearing the abaya as the classroom teacher during Ramadan, I was choosing to align myself with my female students over and above the men in the classroom. I was attempting to experience a similar subjective position, (not an epistemological one), in order to show solidarity. But is choosing to wear an abaya simply choosing to adopt a religiously directed, masculine-determined essentialist representation of what a woman is or should be? This represented an opportunity to engage students in feminist discussions of women’s bodies as sites of political acts, culture as a performance, historical basis for culture and other entrances to critical consideration of the Islamic diaspora. However, in re-examining this experience, wearing the abaya and scarf did not open a dialogue between me as Westerner/woman/feminist/teacher and my Arab/women/Muslim/students. Instead, what was symbolically transmitted was my complicity in the status quo and submission to systems which do not and did not correlate with my politics. It seemed that covering my hair and body in black was interpreted by the community as an act to appease men and the culture rather than to engage women.

To answer these questions, I reflect that I also could have chosen to fast, a religious component of Ramadan, but I did not. This act would have shown solidarity with all Muslims (both men and women) and some teachers did choose to fast. I did not because my purpose was neither to align myself with Islam nor with all of my students as a group. The abaya for me was emblematic of women and their shared experiences and as such was part of their collective identities as Muslim and Omani women. My attempted traverse into that identity was necessary

to align myself as a Western feminist (woman-centric in my interests, politics and activism) with them as young Islamic women. The abaya is unique to women; it delineates them from men and connects them as women, regardless of difference (class, ability, tribal affiliation etc). Its purpose may be the “censure of female display” (Al-Quasim, 2010, p. 49), but abaya and hijab can play a role in bridging the subjective knowledge gap between Western feminist EAL teachers and female Muslim students. While some students might assume their teacher in an abaya was a demonstration of that person’s relativist philosophy, some others might accept it as a tool of engagement and inroad to discussion.

Another reason I would cite for the apparently wide-spread approval amongst students of secular white women wearing hijab and abaya is the meaning behind the convention of covering women’s bodies-as means of controlling women and women’s power (Ahmed, 1992; Mernissi, 1991; Moghissi, 1999). Falling into step with these dictates is to fall into step with gender norms and social systems of control. Contrasted with a male teacher’s experience of wearing Oman’s national dress (a teacher whose whiteness overruled and vetoed male alliance through dress), female teachers in local dress were approved of and applauded for embodying gendered object positions which take precedence over nationalist ones.

It is important to acknowledge that the challenges of these conversations in a second language probably represented the biggest barrier to discussion on hijab and veiling. The maturity of my students and the absence of a student experience narrative in co-educational classes are both very good explanations for why students were unable to evaluate and critique diverse opinions on veiling. However, what is significant to this auto-ethnographic analysis is that instead of recognizing these factors, I instead turned inwards for an explanation and found guilt and apprehension for asking non-white students to think critically about their traditions. Third world feminists might say that this possibility in itself represents white privilege, the

ability to respond from a cemented subjective position; specifically because of my whiteness, I was able to turn the lens inwards rather than being sensitive to the subjective positions of my students. However, another outcome of this ontological reality was self-loathing and inaction rather than increased awareness, caution, and improved cross-cultural teaching skills. I become apprehensive that I was racist rather than assume my teaching skills needed work. This is possible because of the personalized post-colonial blame for systemically-based oppressions (Kruks 1995, 2005) previously mentioned, compounded with relativistic ‘respect’ for cultural differences. When making the choice to robe, I was not consciously intending to signify my submission to convention and therefore to a stance of “tolerance” and acceptance, although that was how I believe it was received. Ultimately, the one who perceives an act understands the act from their standpoint which construed my veiling as relativistic adherence to local norms. Without an open dialogue already established, the essence of what I was trying to achieve was lost; in turn, strengthening hegemonic powers, whether social or political.

By the end of Ramadan, there were significant and observable changes in my behavior. I became withdrawn, especially in public space or in situations of conflict. I remained more cognizant of being a woman than of being a Westerner, a change compared to my pre-Ramadan self. I felt increasingly shy around men, and became more careful about where and how I placed my body in relation to men. In a similar vein, writing from a Saudi Arabian context, Megan Stack (2006) notes how “...the abaya implied that a woman’s body is a distraction and an interruption, a thing that must be hidden from view lest it haul the society into vise and disarray. The simple act of wearing the robe implanted that self-consciousness by osmosis” (p. 3). My own experience confirms this wholeheartedly, despite the important contextual differences: she was legally compelled to robe in public while I could freely choose not to wear it at any time and in any setting (perhaps it is because it was a choice that I felt so negatively impacted). However,

after Ramadan was over and I was no longer wearing the abaya, I was self-conscious about my body, its dimensions and the attention it attracted when it was covered in Western clothes. Even on my return to Canada in the summer, I would not wear revealing clothes like sleeveless shirts, despite wearing those clothes previous to living in Oman.

This sense of embarrassment or shyness of one's body is not likely to be mirrored by many of my students (although their behavior demonstrated it). Socio-culturally, commencement of wearing abaya and hijab signifies a transition into adolescence and symbolically unifies all Gulf women, regardless of class, nationality or other division. Taken even more broadly, hijab has been re-entrenched internationally via "the hijabization process as a way to achieve their own identity which was denied by their second generation "hybrid" [immigrant] Muslim condition" (Marco, 2008, p. 201), representative of subversion to dominant non-Islamic cultures. However, while wearing hijab may be a cultural marker of a developmental stage, it indicates a socially constructed connection between an extreme increase in modest dress and leaving childhood and the advent of sexuality. If it is the case that women are in possession of such power and are free to access it once they reach adolescence, then women and girls should be empowered socially and politically, privileged owners of power they exclusively can access. Abayas should be a visual reminder of that power. Then why is it that my students regularly reminded me that they were just girls or children, while male students of the same age were men? They held it to be true that boys should be able to freely move about town, shop, and visit friends without chaperones while they absolutely needed one. Should it not be the case that female students knew they were in control of something powerful (their sexuality)? This is where my experience of wearing abaya and that of my students start to coincide. I did not feel empowered while wearing the abaya and hijab, and I did not find a sense of camaraderie with Omani women. Instead, I felt restricted in my freedom of movement (physically and socially)

and in my relationships with men. Wearing it was a purposeful political move to show alliance with Omani women and girls, rather than representative of a change from childhood to adolescence. From my position as a cultural outsider, the abaya was devoid of any spiritual or social meaning, and for this reason, its meaning was reduced to its (dis)function as a restrictive piece of clothing intended to restrict movement and sexual power.

Importantly, wearing abaya and hijab was a choice for me while for my students it was socially expected (and sometimes enforced such as at the public college where I was teaching). Bullock's (2002) statement, "The popular Western notion that the veil is a symbol of Muslim women's oppression is a constructed image that does not represent the experience of all those who wear it" (p. xv) is reflective of some of the voices I heard at the college in my classrooms and in social settings. Many students felt their clothing was an important part of their identities as Muslim women and Gulf nationals, and served a purpose of upholding a version of social order they supported. However, while it may not represent the experience of *all* those who wear it, what about those women for whom it does? In the charge to valorize veiling as symbolic of women's empowerment and a weapon against the male gaze, who is listening to the Islamic women's voices who experience hijab as restrictive, destructive of possibilities for resistance to traditional women's roles, representative of a social hierarchy and location they did not chose or want, or even as a mobile prison? I asked, as Okin (1999-B) asks, "Am I the silencer of such (dissident) voices, in taking into account that hundreds of millions of women are rendered voiceless or virtually so by the male-dominated religions with which they live" (p. 123)? My experience resonates with the Islamic voices for change and choice that I heard in my classroom. It should be considered a feminist project to form alliances with women who question dominant social and religious norms, with the goal of increasing women's choices in dress, lifestyle, and

activism. This is not the same as imposing the questions, as the post-colonial argument against white privilege might argue.

### **Resolution**

I was not in Oman as an activist nor with any agenda beyond that of an English language teacher with a women-centric pedagogy. I have evaluated feminism as a political model and have tried to find ways to bring principles of equity and social justice into my classroom. In North-South relations, such a politics sometimes is not so clearly applicable or welcome; there were certainly times when it seemed there was significant disagreement between Islamic (and/or tribal) ideologies and the fundamentals of feminism. Some critics would argue that equality is not universally held as equal to social justice; 'do not push your ideas' is perhaps the only area where Islamization and post-colonial feminism find common ground. Manji (2003) and Nussbaum (1999) are right to point out that big changes for Islam must come from within but the silencing of dissident Western voices (potential allies) through post-colonial concerns about imperialism is not supportive of change. There is a distinction between inviting open dialogue and neo-colonial privilege as the basis for cultural confrontations. Submission to dominant local politics and religion by suspending social justice ideologies results when these distinct approaches are collapsed.

This recounting of my exploration of utilizing the abaya to explore solidarity demonstrates my deference not only to post-colonial feminist relativism and analysis paralysis, but to dominant ideologies of Islam as it is practiced in Oman. If cross-cultural narrative of critical cautious engagement had existed amongst my cohort of teachers, between teachers and students, or between Western and Islamic teachers at the college, I would not have needed to wear the abaya to enter those dialogues. In a setting where socio-cultural disparities heavily influence praxis, fear (of offense or neo-colonization) can cement feminists in their theoretical

places. A theoretical inflexibility is created and this rigidity of thinking does not permit dialogue with Islamic students of why they wear what they wear and manage themselves in the ways they do. These concerns are validated by Muslim voices that are asking similar questions, exemplified by Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, a Muslim feminist academic, who, “believes that many oppressive practices attributed to Islam are either cultural ones or ones that resulted from a patriarchal interpretation of religious texts”, yet is left wondering, “what should I do about oppressive behavior among some Muslims?” (1999, p. 45).

What I can do as an English language teacher and feminist about oppressive behavior among some Muslims is to refuse to align myself with practices that many Muslim women find oppressive. In my first year in Oman, I tried to align myself with my students by being congenial to local traditions that were explained as Islamic, and wearing the abaya was an embodiment of this alignment. The choice to robe was reached without engaging in an assessment of which students and which patriarchal groups in the hierarchy were consequently re-entrenched as authorities to speak on matters of culture. In my second year, I decided not to wear the abaya during Ramadan (although many other women teachers did). Many students came to me to ask why and try to persuade me to change my mind. I would explain that it was not my tradition; I did not like wearing it because it was restrictive and when I was covered by it, I felt embarrassed of my body. Responses varied from disappointment to confusion about why I would feel embarrassed (as discussed earlier, I lacked any positive associations of the abaya with a normal part of growing older and moving into adolescence), and interest. In a few cases this led into discussions around how, as they explained it, girls needed to wear abaya to feel safe from the stares of boys. I argued that if no one wore the abaya, then boys would not stare at girls and women in other clothes. This kind of engagement was what I had hoped to foster in my classroom procedures, but found almost impossible to initiate as a Western feminist educated in

a post-colonial tradition. I had been dis-empowered to start the discussion, and had to gain (what was for me) very negative experiential knowledge before I was able to be a critical feminist EAL teacher outside the West.

In year two as a returning teacher, I was treated as a sort of “insider” in the college (and broader) community, represented by greetings in Arabic from former students and introductions to siblings. This translated into more confidence to engage a new cohort of students in critical dialogue without fear that to do so was to be one of ‘those’ teachers who were on a ‘civilizing mission’. I approached my role in the educational community with gained insight on systems, practices and tone of Omani learners. This included associating covering my body with submission to religious and cultural hegemony around women’s dress as a mode of control. To my Western identity and body, this was oppressive and to transgress this boundary was not the kind of world-traveling for political allegiances and expanded knowledge that Anzaldúa (1999) advocates for. Rather, this was the kind of limited outsider-within survival act that Hill-Collins discussed. Such transitions devalue the heritages and values that black women domestics bring with them to white contexts, and it devalues my culturally-based understanding of women’s oppression that I brought with me. There must be a cross-cultural dialogue for solidarity to build, something that was absent from my experience with the abaya and hijab. Most practicing EAL teachers do not have the benefit of academic study and discussion in safe spaces to recognize that adhering to local norms does not represent an effort at solidarity with women. Conversely, it can actually be aligning one’s voice against those local women who would bring change (Pollitt, 1999). This points to the incredible potential for grassroots feminist action: not activism, but critical cross-cultural engagement of the type that post-colonial feminism denies and prohibits within Islamic contexts.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **THE PROFESSION OF TESOL**

#### **Introduction**

The teaching of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), like tea and sugar, ranks among some of the most economically and socially significant products and industries that can trace their history to imperialist origins. Racist ideologies and Euro-centrism resulted in imperialist linguistic civilizing missions that have continuing legacies into this historical context where English has become a global language. To recognize English as a global language, we must also recognize that, “a language becomes an international language for one chief reason: the political power of its people-especially their military power” (Crystal, 1997, p. 7) and this power has been used against nations and peoples the world over. The profession of teaching English to non-English speakers can easily be connected to a history of oppression but is this still the case? In this chapter, I will briefly explore the history and evolution of the global project and now industry of teaching English. I will consider the status of English as a global language and I will argue that English language teaching (ELT) is not inherently colonial; conversely it increases access to a global language which is an important tool for language learners to become post-colonial agents of change. Furthermore, I will argue that an anti-oppressive pedagogical approach to EAL teaching can be a feminist one due to feminism’s legacy of paradigm-shifting in favor of those who are marginalized. I will explore my own efforts at feminist teaching in the Sultanate of Oman, and examine some of the challenges to this work, both practical and theoretical.

#### **History**

British imperialism was an assault to the nations who fell under the policies and practices of colonial projects, including a linguistic assault. Racism and Euro-centrism were at the core of

these projects and form the basis of colonial discourse; a discourse that contrasted non-Europeans as Edward Said's cultural Others. Post-colonial writing and theorizing has effectively brought this issue to the forefront, so much so that as Pennycook (1998) discusses in his work *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, “Euro-centrism is perhaps so obviously part of colonialism that it would not seem to warrant much discussion” (p. 49). Colonial literature provides compelling evidence that “the long tradition of creating these often cannibalistic, always primitive and savage Others can be traced in European imagination from Columbus and Caliban to Kipling and Conrad” (p.15). Pennycook cited *Robinson Crusoe* as an example of British imperialism in action through language teaching, where Crusoe’s fear of the Other after discovering the remains of cannibalistic rituals becomes his motivation to 'rescue' one of the island’s natives (Friday) and teach him to speak English. Crusoe’s attempt to “civilize” Friday through language demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between ELT and colonialist discourse.

ELT is a product of colonialism not just because it is colonialism that produced the initial conditions for the global spread of English but because it was colonialism that produced many of the ways of thinking and behaving that are still part of Western cultures.

European/Western culture not only produced colonialism but was also produced by it;

ELT not only rode on the back of colonialism to the distant corners of the Empire but was also in turn produced by that voyage. (p. 19)

The two-fold implications of and for ELT then, was to conceptualize learners of English within a racist discourse and to provide justification for its own existence: uncivilized Others need ELT if they are to achieve personal and social progress, but ELT itself constructs Others as belonging to a culture in need of civilizing.

As Pennycook warns, “Crusoe’s...immediate start on the project of teaching Friday English (rather than, for example, learning Friday’s language), are iconic moments in the long history of the global spread of English. This is a significant observation and it is perhaps always worth asking ourselves as English teachers to what extent we are following in Crusoe’s footsteps” (p.11). His warning is a reminder that colonial racism provides the historical context for the origins of ELT teaching, and that it would be negligent to fail to address this issue in ELT classrooms and teaching pedagogies. This point is very current to those concerned with the political implications of ELT projects. In a story reported by Steve Chao (2006) of one Canadian education project in Beijing, one high school delivers all of its classes in English (including English language classes) by Canadian teachers using Canadian textbooks. Students can thus earn both a Canadian and Chinese diploma and a better chance at admittance to a Canadian university with the hopes that, “its graduates might one day be in a position to reshape China-and perhaps inject some Canadian values while doing so” (para. 12). Clearly, a shared notion of the inherent worth of Western values does not belong solely to history but is alive and thriving in many ELT programs. As teaching professionals, we must ask if this is necessarily the case in every ELT classroom and if it is, how are these messages being communicated? Can we resist this as post-colonial feminist language teachers? How?

### **Language and its Discourses as Colonizing**

Crusoe’s ‘project’ (student) whom he names Friday may be obtuse in its Orientalist underpinning but a much more subtle element of Friday’s racialized, colonialist education is the language itself and the ways English functions to sustain Self-Other dichotomies in Western culture. Pennycook’s (1998) argument is that ELT as a colonial product is inextricable from the negative discursive constructions of the Other (language learners) because these constructions have become part of the English language itself and thus, part of what is taught in English

classrooms: the “ways in which certain discourses *adhere to English* [original emphasis]” (p. 5) (for example, dichotomous juxtapositions of Self/Other, or native/non-native speakers). In a specific way, English is one of the lingering weapons in the imperial arsenal that is still articulating the “cultural constructions of colonialism” (p.15), so that while the physical presence of the British in the colonies may have ended, their economic, social and cultural legacies remain. The language itself evolved both within the colonies and ‘at home’ in response to the need to name and describe new contexts; an overarching “Orientalist construction of the inarticulate Other” (p.15), resulted. To paraphrase, Pennycook uses the example of the Indian colonial project where there was an imminent need to balance intermittently complimentary and competing discourses: the liberal (and morally obligatory) civilizing mission, and the production of docile consumers within colonial capitalism (p. 191). English as the language of education was contrasted with vernacular language as the most effective way to disseminate European knowledge and economic models, thus a dichotomization of function (and superiority) was applied not only to the language itself, but also to the owners of each language. In this way, English must sustain social constructs of colonialism because these constructs are more than ideas expressed through the language; they actually constitute the language itself.

Widdowson (1998) disagrees, equating such an approach with shooting the messenger if you do not like the message. “The language is the symptom not the cause. If this were not so one would have to argue that there was, and still is, some inherent quality in the language itself which gives it an advantage over any other, and that its spread is a measure of its intrinsic superiority: in Darwinian terms, an example of the survival of the fittest” (para. 4). Widdowson would agree with Pennycook’s position that, “The problems of society will also be the problems of the predominant language of that society. It is the carrier of its perceptions, its attitudes, and its goals”, but disagree that “through it, the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes...the guilt of

English must then be recognized and appreciated before its continued use can be advocated” (Ndebele, as cited in Pennycook, 1998, p. 6). This demonstrated example of the complexity of the relationship between language as a mode of expression and language as the home of social constructs, is not a reason to argue that EAL teaching is inherently colonial; conversely, in the complexity lies opportunity for grassroots ideological change through resistance to usage of colonialist discourses, leading to the elimination of such discourses from English and from the minds of its users. If we recognize that language can change and develop over time in response to political, social, and cultural climates, then we must also recognize that discourse can also change to better reflect the current post-colonial context. “Although one can trace similar patterns, domains and strategies over time, it is also clear that such discourses change in themselves, in relationship to language, and in relationship to other discourses. Contemporary discourses of Self and Other in relation to English, therefore, have historical continuity with colonialism but also sit in ever-changing relationships with other discourses” (Pennycook, 1998, p. 7). It is these ever-changing relationships that permit space for ELT that is both post-colonial and necessary for change to occur.

EAL teachers can partially be the architects of these discursive changes. I say partially because Self/Other relationships need to be resisted from multiple points, including the voices of the Other which have been silenced through imperialist educational agendas. To deny the necessity of ELT is to deny the opportunity for students to engage with the language of their own oppression<sup>13</sup> and to become agents in its evolution. The problem with colonialism is not the culture of those who were colonized: it is Western culture which has for so long constructed itself in opposition to those peoples who were colonized. Therefore, anti-hegemonic subaltern or insurgent knowledges need to have two-fold appeal; in one respect, knowledge produced from

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<sup>13</sup> One of the modes of their oppression, in recognition of the multiple intersections of oppression and privilege that accompanies every identity, and the resist the essentialism of non-English speakers into Third World Others.

and by the subaltern needs to be directed at the subaltern in an effort to reflect and nurture a cultural identity that is resistant to colonial discourses originating from exploitative and discriminatory circumstances.<sup>14</sup>

These knowledges must be directed at the culture and systems which are accountable for creating grievous discursive constructions of the Other and this can be most effectively achieved via the medium in which the constructions have been embedded: English. It severely limits the scope of who will (or can) hear subaltern voices if the languages of resistance are those which were extinguished or suppressed by the system they are speaking out against. Simply put, to speak back to the colonizer one must use the language of the colonizer. Without this, the Othering will continue for the subaltern, and subaltern critique of the Occident is only heard by the subaltern. These two target audiences for insurgent knowledges are not mutually exclusive and neither is the knowledge, but in some cases the overlap may be very thin. These efforts must be directed at not only those who are oppressed but also at a cultural legacy that is responsible for constructing these oppressions. As Pennycook (1998) puts it: “support and use of Indigenous languages, while important for cultural maintenance and development, does not confront the discourses that adhere to English. They are particularly tied to English and must be confronted through English” (p. 216). Pennycook is calling for a head-on attack of the discursive legacy of colonialism and the weapon of choice is the same weapon that was used in the colonial project in the first place: English.

This is not to absolve the West of its culpability in the imperialist project: post-colonial teaching that is highly attentive to anti-oppressive pedagogy can be the start of ameliorative steps

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<sup>14</sup> I use the word subaltern in the way that Gayatri Spivak explained its meaning in an interview (1992) with Leon de Kock: “Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference... Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern... just by being a discriminated-against minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'subaltern'...They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern” (p. 45).

towards a greater recognition of that culpability. In an approach that is decidedly not tied up in the complexities of “helping” (see Spivak, 1994) in a North-South direction, EAL teaching, like education generally, can be understood as a means to increased access to most varieties of privilege. If we view EAL teaching as an educational opportunity (albeit one in need of critical educators who work against the imperialist origins of that education), we must ask what is more colonial: to protect and restrict English and English-based knowledge to Western educational settings, or to teach English as a tool to access the language which has been the medium of creation and expression of their cultural oppression? It seems almost smug to acknowledge the request or demand of non-Western nations for access to English, and then theoretically conclude that the best way to interrupt the persistence of neo-colonization is to keep “our” English to ourselves. Additionally, ELT as an oppressive and exploitative economic project becomes much more complex when we consider nations where English has become a part of the indigenous cultural landscape, for example India. As Rajagopalan (1999) plainly states, “Many linguists are still happy working with such discreet entities as language *x*, a monolingual speaker of language *x*, etc., that no longer corresponds even remotely to anything concrete to be encountered on the face of this earth” (p. 204). Denying access to educational opportunities in an effort to protect “non-speakers” from becoming part of the post-colonial reality we all share seems to be neo-colonialism at its most effective.

### **English as a World Language**

I have been speaking of the educational opportunities and assumed benefits of speaking English as an additional or associated language in my argument for the necessity for anti-oppressive ELT pedagogies. But what are these benefits and are they real or just imagined? Is there a misconception of the prevalence and utility of English that has created a discourse of inflated importance for this language over other languages (for example Chinese)? Almost every

country in the world has students who want or need to learn to use English. As Widdowson (1998) has stated, “It is often the case that English is the gate keeping language, and its acquisition, therefore, will often provide access to economic and political power, because power is exercised by means of that language” (para. 3). The current worldwide demand for ELT is as undeniable as the imperialist history which forced English into its dominant place in educational, economic and political forums. A plethora of websites like [www.daveseslcafe.com](http://www.daveseslcafe.com) provide job advertisements for teachers, schools and recruiters from almost every country in the world to connect. However, is English a world language that permits communication between voices from within and without post-colonial settings?

There is debate around whether English can be thought of as a world language (known as World English or WE) or as a lingering imperialist legacy (Phillipson, 1992; Pennycook 1994; Yano, 2001; Mair, 2002; Jenkins, 2006; Rudby & Saraceni, 2006). According to David Crystal (1997), a language can be called a world or global language when it has achieved, “a special role that is recognized in every country” (p. 4). Based on a three-pronged analysis including the number of nations that grant a language ‘official-language’ status, the number of foreign language speakers and the number of people who count this same language as their first, Crystal concludes that English has met the requirements to be called a global language. He goes on to recognize that the cause for this is completely related to the power of the original speakers of English but nonetheless, thanks to the pace of communication, a global language is highly desirable. From universities to the United Nations, a common language greatly reduces the amount of clerical work, translation and miscommunication between international contacts. To put it in the words of Sridath Ramphal, “we *have* [original emphasis] a world language. It is not the language of imperialism; it is the language we have seen that has evolved out of a history of

which we need not always be proud, but whose legacies we must use to good effect” (cited in Crystal, 1997, p. 20).

To recognize that English is an international language also means recognizing that ownership of the language and therefore ownership of license to change that language also belongs to the world. This is echoed in the work of Widdowson (1994) when he states:

The very fact that English is an international language means that no nation can have custody over it. To grant such custody of the language, is necessarily to arrest its development and so undermine its international status...the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language [belonging to the West]. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it. (p. 385)

If the world communicates using English, then the inhabitants of the world are the owners of that language. This is not to deny that there are many issues to address in relation to who can claim ownership. Gender and class based denial of access to education extends to gender and class-based denial of access to English. This was very obvious to me when teaching EAL to Omani girls who attended college for a gap year (or less) between high school and marriage rather than as career preparation<sup>15</sup>. However, these are not arguments against the practice of teaching English. While EAL teaching itself may do little to amend inter-societal class and gender based discrimination in education, it can serve to reduce intra-societal Orient/Occident dichotomous conceptions and prejudices. “If one is willing to shift her or his attention from the differential status of speakers (eg. native-non-native) to the mutual practice of communication itself...then we see in the postmodern, glocalized world today that there are increasing, legitimate demands

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<sup>15</sup>Several girls would visit me to say goodbye at the end of the semester or school year because they were not returning to college to complete a certificate program: instead they were to be married and thus would not be completing their studies.

for cross-cultural communication to be construed and conducted as an endeavor of mutual efforts on egalitarian footings” (Lin et al. 2002, p. 311). Canada’s growing recently immigrated population is an example of those who will have increased economic opportunity if they have knowledge of English. Those who work in the petroleum industry are another group whose employment is sometimes contingent on a mastery of English as are women who work as expatriate housemaids, actors, or in women’s cooperatives that produce commodities for a Western market. The absence of an international language would make much of this trade and communication impossible. However, usage of one variety of English (for example British or American) is to perpetuate the racism and Orientalism inherent in those versions of English. For this reason, the existence of, and ability to use, a hybridized world language (which is a communication tool born of multiplicitous speech communities), can be said to be a hallmark of the end of colonialism and the beginning of post-colonialism. It signifies a move away from imposition of a language by one powerful group onto another group; a shift in power from the assumed authority of the authentic native speaker, to the hybridized language user. It is clear that anti-colonial teaching practices are an essential part of the post-colonial project; re-imagining English as a shared property of the world and not the elitist enterprise of the privileged native speaker.

### **Teaching English Critically**

If we are to accept that English is a world language and thus the property of all nations and all peoples, then an important element of teaching World English must be to recognize that English is the medium through which colonial cultural legacies and knowledges are expressed and perpetuated. This does not mean that “as English language teachers we are necessarily either overt messiahs or duped messengers” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 178), but it does mean that “certain teaching practices that have become bound up with the English language necessarily represent a

particular understanding of the world” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 178). Put simply, if language teaching practices exclusively hold, for example, accurate mimicry as the measure of success for language learners, then learners will also be required to mimic Pennycook's particular understandings of the world. Presently, this includes colonial understandings. Deliberate resistance to colonial usages of English is essential to creating change within the language and the lives of those who use it. Recognizing that “In some ways, it might be said that the English language class may be less about the spread of English than about the spread of certain links between English and various discourses” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 178), the feminist EAL teacher uses her classroom to expose those links to oppressive and imperialist discourses, and replaces them with collaborative, historically informed cross-cultural knowledges. Collaboration between language learners and English language teachers can position teachers as general contractors in the renovation of English into a truly international language, rather than as real estate agents marketing to buyers (buyers being students and language consumers).

World English is conscious of differences in usage, vernaculars, audience, formality etc., but not necessarily deferential to a centralized self-declared authority. British English is often conceptualized as the authoritative (neutral) version of English with all other Englishes deviating from it. Unique forms of English have become entrenched into local language in many contexts; not foreign or deviant forms of British English but free-standing adaptations and specific usages that also permit communication with speakers of other English usages. Acceptance of a “neutral English” means deferring to British English as the true English, and thus to British authority (and by extension to those who manufactured the need for their own language globally). If the language teaching industry is not willing to grant authority to learners to change and grow English in response to local contexts it becomes difficult to argue that the language is not colonial. Neutral language and therefore neutral teaching of language does not exist

(Pennycook, 1994, p. 294). Classrooms are sites of transference, resistance and creation of cultural discourse, whether explicitly or implicitly. By choosing to adhere to scripted unit plans and curriculum not developed in a context of learning, teachers are taking a non-critical stance towards the language and materials of the ELT profession which are often not contradictory to colonial discourses. In this way, it cannot be said that there is an apolitical teaching path, only one of least resistance to politically motivated change.

While it may be possible to shift power from teachers to students by creating usages of English that are locally specific, World English is a global language used in a wide variety of contexts. It would be naive to think that locally contextually pertinent uses have wide-spread applicability, or that any one set of uses could address the multiplicitous purposes/usages a world language must be able to respond to. Put simply, a language learner will never achieve proficiency if they are unable to communicate with speakers of the target language outside their own context of use. Furthermore, they must be empowered to communicate their shared participation and ownership of English as a world language if they are to contribute to the breaking down of privileged knower paradigms as they relate to English. This requires knowledge of a language beyond its mechanics and into its tone and appropriate usages. “A grammatical approach to language learning is concerned only with the intelligibility of sentences; a cultural approach deals with their acceptability and must take into account [the target language's] cultural value system” (Zaid, 1999, p. 4).

Broadly viewed then, such teaching represents, “progression from teaching culture to promoting culture [of the target language]” and means “a language program ceases to be a neutral linguistic environment since it encourages cultural-value confrontation along with language acquisition” (Zaid, 1999, p. 4). Here is where feminist objectives and anti-colonial language teaching may be in conflict; Zaid (1999) cautions against this type of culture-oriented

teaching by warning that such a design, “requires students to modify their schemata [archetypal knowledge structures for that culture] already determined by their native culture” (p. 4).

However, to label such a change as negative is to assume that all schemata are built on principles of social justice and contribute positively to a culture and therefore need not be modified. This would include Omani schemata of exploitative labor practices as the norm for South East Asian domestic workers but not for Western workers in other jobs. To conclude that cultural confrontations between English and non-English cultural values that result in changes to endemic schemata (such as the one cited above) is negative, is to valorize such a schemata; to assign a cultural belief system or practice an importance that means it ought to be immune to discursively based change. Perhaps it is precisely in these confrontations where cross-cultural language learning can coincide with post-colonial feminist teaching: education for social justice imperatives. These confrontations are a component of language teaching if one of the programs objectives is acculturation or transcultural competence.

One way teachers attempt to avoid cultural confrontations is through teaching ‘Standard English’ (a centrally regulated and standardized version of the language maintained by a Western authority). A neutral grammatical approach may be thought of as the best way to neutralize entrenched colonial discourse or imposition of Western culture and values. One must then ask where the center of English would be and who maintains it. If English is truly a world language, there is no center and if there is a center (England) than it becomes very difficult to justify its spread as an anti-colonial means of communication. If anti-colonial feminist teachers want to create learners and critical owners of what has been used in the past as a tool in their own oppression, then these learners must be empowered as co-creators of shared usages and rules. Learners must be able to recognize social constructs that make up the language and limit specific groups within it. While knowledge of the mechanics of a language is essential to its use, it is

also essential that students recognize what particular version of mechanics and grammar they are being presented with, and the cultural legacy of that version. “Rather than avoid the teaching of the standard forms of the target language, critical linguistic actions encourage students to learn the standard language critically, to use it to critique its complicity with domination and subordination, and to subvert the normative linguistic code” (Kubota, 2003, p. 46). In order to subvert dominant norms of language, learners must be presented with language learning in a way that exposes subversive norms and their functions (for example, the social implications for politeness and respect surrounding the use of Mr. for married and unmarried men, contrasted with the use of Ms. or Mrs. to indicate a woman's marital status). To rest on teaching mechanics, grammar and common usage is to passively colonize learners (for example, failing to acknowledge that the subject + verb + object syntax of English sentences indicates the centrality of individual as actor as a Western cultural value). “...if students have to write standard English or play the language games of the “dominant” culture, they should be given the opportunity to learn these practices in a critical and historical context” (McGee, 1993, p. 87) (for example adherence to a standardized spelling system of Latin origin rather than based in vernacular spellings which indicates a centralized linguistic and communicative authority). This approach to EAL teaching is essential to feminist teachers and collaborative colonial resisters.

A necessary component of this approach is the breaking down of the privileged knower status of native speaker teachers. The notion of the native speaker has been problematized in light of the increasing multilingualism, communication and flow of information that has characterized our globalized world in the information age (Rajagopalan, 1999; Davis, 2003; Doerr, 2009). Freedom to use and take ownership of English can never be achieved so long as users remain entrenched in a hierarchy of use. Furthermore, there is a hierarchy and exclusion within those groups who can claim native speaker status. A classic example is the context of

India. Many Indians are bi, tri or multi-lingual thanks to the presence of several commonly spoken languages. Due to British colonization and in despite of their physical exit from the country, English remains for many a first language, making them native speakers. This has implications as to what privilege is assigned to the label 'native speaker'. One example comes from the context of Oman where it was common for Indian teachers and therefore Omani students to use the expression “same same”, which is similar in meaning to, “same difference”, a common Canadian expression. In meetings and conversations in staff rooms, discussions around the use of such phrases by teachers and the implications for students who were meant to be learning “Western English”; it was often concluded that such usages amounted to “bad English” and not welcome in EAL classrooms. These concerns were driven by colonialist beliefs; this expression was not Western in origin therefore not real English. This demonstrates that native speaker as an identity equates with a hierarchy of knowers, with Western knowers at the top as paradigmatic authorities.

While the scope of English may be global making it a world language, this status is not dependent on a language being equitable. For the feminist instructor who is concerned with social justice, this idea must be deconstructed in order to create space for critical learners/owners. The way to do this is to change the focus from, as Widdowson (1994) put it, “contexts of use to contexts of learning, and consider how the language is to be specifically designed to engage the student’s reality and activate the learning process” (p. 387). This effectively nullifies the issue of specific varieties of privileged knowers, as well as constructing English as a communal property, not a foreign import imagined in opposition to local languages. For this to happen, teachers must accept that, “the context of learning, contrived within the classroom setting, has to be informed in some degree by the attitudes, beliefs, values and so on of the students’ cultural world. And in respect to this world, of course, it is the native-speaker

teacher who is the outsider” (p. 387). When students’ own lives and knowledges (including women’s knowledges and those that are locally marginalized) form the basis for lessons, English is presented as something that is malleable, to be manipulated for learner’s purposes, rather than the learners manipulating themselves to match standardized (foreign) usage which is context specific. Instead of students conforming to the language and a foreign usage of it, the language lesson conforms to students’ needs. Power as owners/creators of a language remains with learners rather than with privileged teachers, institutions or cultures.

### **The Profession as Moral Testing Ground**

Living as a transient outsider in a position of authority as well as a cultural representative for the West is a very complex location to inhabit. According to Johnston (1999), “...teacher’s lives are lived out in a world that...is both fragmented and united, and in which the breaking up of old unities is accompanied by transcultural encounters and juxtapositions of every kind” (p. 260). Because (as quoted earlier), “teaching practices themselves represent particular visions of the world and this makes the English language classroom a site of cultural politics, a place where different versions of how the world is and should be are struggled over” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 146), EAL teaching represents a grassroots-style philosophical debate carried out in front of a classroom. However, in my discussions with other teachers and based on my own educational experience, it seems most teachers are inadequately trained for such debates, especially when speaking from a complex ‘foreign expert’/cultural outsider quasi-professional location that often lacks engagement with its own history as an imperialist industry. “Teachers may be seen as paladins-as primarily well-meaning travelers who are nevertheless only partially unwitting ambassadors for more predatory entities” (Johnson, 1999, p. 259). Few teachers who relocate to new countries do so with a civilizing mission as explicit as Crusoe’s to civilize Friday. However, most are not engaged or conscious of their complicity with (through non-resistance to)

racism and oppression as a matter of course for how they make their living (in similar to Peggy McIntosh's (1989) conception of white privilege that can be found inside the "invisible backpack" whereby privilege is so entrenched that it is constructed as a neutral perspective rather than coming from ignorance).

EAL teaching "in its daily practices...is conducted by definition at the meeting point between two or more cultures and owes its very existence to difference and to ongoing contact between cultural Others" (Johnson, 1999, p. 276). Acculturation to the target language is often an explicitly stated outcome of many language programs. However, as Zaid (1999) notes, "the hydra-headed goals of a culture-focused language program may overwhelm the EFL teacher, who also recognizes that he/she is not a trained expert in anthropology or sociology" (p. 6). What is needed to engage with this meeting point is a body of professionals who have a critical philosophical toolbox (and willingness) to navigate the friction and change that is happening between and within cultures. "Simply by introducing into an EFL classroom a cultural topic which brings about a conflict between what is done in the native and target culture, the teacher may be perceived as advocating the social position of the target culture" (Zaid, 1999, p. 6). In contexts where cultural friction results from conventions around practices such as are veiling, polygamy and segregation, there is limited mentorship and few resources to model what anti-oppressive teaching would look like. This can be partially attributed to, as Johnston (1999) puts it, "a lack of an overarching EFL career narrative with appropriate causal links to draw on in discursively presenting the events and decisions of [the EFL teacher's] life" (p. 268). This deficiency of professional narratives and anti-oppressive best-practices leaves teachers struggling; forced to create and test methodologies in situ. With this level of complexity, it is very difficult to adequately or effectively practice feminist teaching and cultivate a stable professional community.

Relocating to a new country to take up an EAL or EFL teaching position often presents teachers with challenges to their own world views, cultural heritages and values based in their newly adopted professional and social contexts. This can spur critical consideration or restructuring of teachers own identities within their own culture and in relation to Other cultures. “In moving to a foreign country to live and work, expatriate teachers are almost by definition embracing diversity and seeking out new voices and cultural values. Another way of expressing this idea is to say that they are seeking to define themselves in relation to the context in which they find themselves: that they would in a very real sense not be the same people if they were in a different setting” (Johnson, 1999, p. 270). This creation of a contextualized identity happens via clumsy survival of a series of cultural confrontations (mirroring those experience by language students), culminating in a world view. In the Arabian Gulf, many of the dilemmas that presented themselves involved women students and for a feminist teacher (which is how I described myself), this was of particular importance.

### **A Procedural Dilemma**

In my previous Canadian context, I would have labeled my politics woman-centric: feminism informed my decision-making process and social compliance. For these reasons, it was deeply troubling that an introductory classroom management topic like seating arrangements escalated into a full-on gender-based confrontation. To contextualize this incident, it is significant that Oman, like many developing nations, contains a mixture of modernity and tradition. The influx of new money from oil revenue post WWII meant rapid development of infrastructure and almost instantaneous availability of technology. As was explained to us with pride by students, previous to 1970, Oman had just two primary schools, no secondary schools, and two hospitals in the entire country, contrasted with international business and educational opportunities open to the Omanis in our classrooms. In the span of forty years, the generation

gap has widened to such a degree that parents who grew up without electricity are raising children who have hand-held electronic devices. The small village I was teaching in was over an hour and a half from the capitol city Muscat in the rural interior of Oman. This meant students in my classes were mostly children of small business owners, farmers, fishers, or government employees. While many members of the community, including parents, had no formal education beyond that of religious training, students in my classes had aspirations for international travel and college diplomas. As Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (1998) have observed, "Increased generational conflicts challenge traditional structures of authority, and accentuate tensions between individual priorities and collective expectations" (p. 5). This describes what I observed in the student body at Ibra College of Technology where I was teaching: some students had mothers who were working in professional capacities such as banks tellers and public service jobs, while others came from families where women never show their faces in public or leave their homes without a male escort and this obviously had a deep effect on how female students understood women's roles.

This was the context into which twenty five or so Western English language teachers were placed and asked to institute a new policy of mixed gender classes for young adult students who had never been in co-educational classroom settings before. This translated into a lofty goal of desegregated classes without a specific procedural plan or policy for how to achieve this. Indeed, there weren't even any guidelines for teachers as to what would be considered the "new" standards for classroom seating plans or what would be haram (forbidden). Quickly, transgressions of the boundaries between these two came into sharp focus. Within classrooms, students automatically segregated themselves when they choose their seats-girls in a row in the back of the room and boys in the space at the front with a wide gap between the groups. This was how they managed themselves in other public space (as I had seen in settings like airports or

restaurants). In other school spaces, for example, the library, there was a designated girl's side and a boy's side and in Omani mosques, women and men have separate isolated sections, not women behind. From my perspective as a Western feminist teacher, the implications and meaning of such a seating plan were affronting<sup>16</sup>. Segregation into women's and men's spaces (with women at the back) was considered appropriate by my students based on what was explained to me as religiously dictated practices; however, this practice was not entrenched for them as students; they had never learned in co-ed classes. Rather, it was a social practice borrowed from other contexts such as public meetings or presentations and transferred to a cross-cultural classroom. I was aware that there may be gender-based challenges to feminist pedagogy from my preparation research and that some of my teacher training would not apply to this context (for example, I knew it would not be acceptable to assign students tasks with mixed gender groups, or to plan mingle activities). I was willing and I thought prepared to engage with these challenges. However, I could not accept having all girl students in the back of a room where their access to the board was blocked and arranged in such a way that they could not work with anyone beside the person sitting directly next to them. Likewise, if they had questions my access to them was blocked by the physical barrier formed by male students and their desks between the teacher and them.

Asking students to change the arrangement of their desks became a significant issue. The thought of sitting directly beside an unrelated male was shocking for girls as was explained to me by some female students in the course of resolving this issue. In this early stage of my initiation to teaching in an Islamic nation, my status as cultural outsider put me in a dichotomous

<sup>16</sup> The use of the word 'affronting' as opposed to 'offensive' is purposeful. Offensive is overused and suggests that to offend is to violate a person's predetermined boundary of what they find tasteful or acceptable, rather than ethical. It is also reminiscent of political correctness, a technique for avoidance of interrogating the issue at hand in favor of manipulating the rhetoric. What is at issue here is the lack of a clear line as to what constituted and what was transgressive of woman-centric politics in this cultural context (one of the overarching themes in this thesis). Affronting better captures the sense of incompatibility (with feminism, with equitable teaching methodologies, and oppressive hierarchical arrangement of space) represent by this seating arrangement.

relationship with students, established staff, and administration over several dimensions: religious, cultural, and gender-based role expectations. Also at play were aspects of being new to the profession which creates its own set of challenges. My priority in this cultural disparity around seating arrangement was to establish my classroom as place of equity; a class where feminist values (as I conceptualized them) were pervasive meant girls could not be relegated to the back of the classroom. This was not well received initially by what seemed to be the majority of students in my initial classes, both female and male. Boys in particular would come to my desk and explain that mixed seating arrangement was not how things were done in Oman, and some girls would explain that it made them feel uncomfortable. Some of these same students complained to the administration, only to find that administrators were just as unsure how to proceed as I was (and other teachers who had tried to institute a similar policy). The regulating body for the colleges had instituted co-education classes without specific outcomes which left individual colleges to implement the new policy. It was put back to teachers to find a solution within their individual classrooms, meaning it was not necessary that each class followed the same plan. Thus, I was led back to my initial feminist politic, meaning girls were not to sit segregated at the back of my room, but unsure of an alternative arrangement that would be acceptable to my classes. Through what I would now call negotiations between key students in each class and myself as the teacher, an agreement was reached within the first week of classes. The room was divided in half, side to side rather than front to back, so that girls all sat on one side and boys on the other with no group ahead or behind the other. Some students were satisfied with this, some were dissatisfied and some (both girls and boys) were very pleased. The administration was satisfied with this plan and so was I.

I do not find this solution to be colonial, an imposition of my value system or based on a “Western model” of equality. The process of negotiation was carried out with a few key

students, those who were most able to have such a conversation in a second language (which means a certain personality type and social group was most likely overrepresented in those negotiations). Importantly, both genders were represented. There was consultation via translation with those whose voices were not present in the negotiations (which happened during class, sometimes individually and sometimes in groups). A democratic process of collaboration led to a localized solution for the friction between our cultural differences, rather than a white teacher dictating class rules based on Western value systems. True to the spirit of feminist resistance, girls were not *forced* to submit to the rule of male administrators, a teacher's sense of equality or other social conventions; rather, in a democratic process and collaborative decision making meant dialogue was opened between genders in a very public and politicized space. In subsequent classes and in my second year of teaching, this practice of girls beside and not behind boys became entrenched; incoming students knew of this convention based on what they heard from older students and siblings who had attended the Ibra College. Many students would seat themselves side-by-side in groups. Perhaps most importantly, students (especially girls) would tell me they liked this arrangement because they felt the classroom belonged to them as well as the boys. They could see better, hear better, and felt empowered to speak in class because they drew confidence from the group around them and from my insistence that the classroom space belonged to them as much as anyone else in the room<sup>17</sup>. Because each college functioned as its own institution, some other sites opted not to follow suit. Some of those teachers choose to adhere to established inequalities in the name of politeness or worse, false cultural sensitivity. This locally and collectively developed act of resistance to entrenched gender roles is to my mind an example of the shortcomings of a post-colonial hands-off approach to cultural tensions

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<sup>17</sup>Within each group, there was a micro-arrangement of bodies; girls who were most uncomfortable sitting in close proximity to boys would sit very close to the wall and more outspoken girls would take seats on the edge of the empty space between the gendered groups.

and “politically neutral” teaching. Both the process and the outcome are examples of empowering English language learners to be activists, resisters and internationally culturally-literate citizens.

### **Muslim Contexts: Challenges to Critical Teaching**

Avoidance of essentializing one’s students must be at the forefront of any feminist pedagogy. It must pervade and shape all interactions between students and teachers in an active process of resisting colonial discursive stereotypes. As Lin, Wang, Akamatsu, and Riazi (2002) noted, “The answer to the question of whether an English speaker will serve as a good teacher or model is largely socioculturally situated (eg. depending on the interactional practices that the teacher and her or his students co-create in their specific sociocultural context)” (p. 312).

Teachers who fail to recognize essentializing colonial constructions of their students establish interactional practices that reinforce the dominance of Western ways of using English and of conceptualizing Others as exoticized in global contexts. Students and teachers co-create these learning environments inside their shared classrooms. While teachers remain in a position of power attributable to their possession of unshared knowledge in student/teacher relationships, students are experts in the functioning of educational institutions in their own contexts. As a starting point then, students and teachers have discreet sets of expertise that can be exchanged.

There is a strong challenge to this model of reciprocal learning for Arab students in particular: “The paternalistic familial pattern and its authoritative hierarchy extend throughout society. This is reflected in the region’s educational system, which emphasizes an *imitative* rather than a *creative* approach to learning; traditionally, students have learned primarily by memorization and imitation rather than by independent research and original work” (Parker, 1986, p. 96). This observation accurately reflects one of the most challenging issues I faced as a feminist teacher working in Oman. How could I encourage students to take possession of a

language beyond mimicry and adherence to 'Standardized English' when imitation was one of their most deeply entrenched educational values? It is important to recognize that not every student embodied this value; some actively resisted. However, the majority of students did closely follow an imitative approach to learning and those who were exceptions to this generalization were often harshly treated by their peers in an attempt to self-police their fellow students into a similar role. One female student who was boisterous and out-spoken with demonstrated leadership qualities did not easily fall into a peer group. When asked why, potential friends would tell me they did not want to associate with her because she was “not a good girl”, meaning she broke social conventions in a way that was unfeminine and not supported by the community. Her ability to manipulate language and courage to speak publicly in front of male students and teachers did not win her friends but her linguistic and social risk-taking did position her as a feminist resistor. Unfortunately, she did not return to the college for year two of her program. Other students from her community explained to me that her family would not permit her to return because they did not approve of what she was learning there or how she was behaving.

In addition to policing themselves into narrow social roles, students often essentialize their teachers in ways that are restrictive and limiting. Western teachers are essentialized as loud, pushy, hyper-sexualized and naturally knowledgeable about all aspects of Western culture. This tokenism of teachers into representatives of all that is Western, including Western morality, hampers the development of a nuanced understanding of cultural difference or sameness, and dictates pre-constructed paradigms for behavior. The example I have given in the introduction to this paper, of the student who told me about his third mother in an oral interview, can be used to understand how such essentialism is enacted in the lives of EAL teachers. In his telling of his mother (who never interacted with her husband's other wives, never left her own home and

rarely saw her family), he filled the space for dialogue about our respective thoughts on this issue by interjecting, “I know this is bad teacher. I know in Canada this is not okay”. This political, ethical and cultural exchange captures the complexity of life as EAL teacher because it speaks to the degree of philosophical posturing and subtlety of speech that is required to engage in critical dialogue while simultaneously resisting stereotypes and essentialist assumptions on both sides. Perhaps the purpose of his statement was to dispel awkwardness and therefore he may have been saying what he thought I wanted to hear as a Western woman; he was demonstrating his understanding of dominant moral discourse of the West and of a Western woman specifically. However, labeling his words in such a way is a neo-colonial move in that it removes his agency to make his own moral decision. Perhaps he felt safe to engage in this conversation in the environment of our classroom when no one else was present; it would be controversial and risky to him personally to make such a statement in a public setting. It is possible that based on his knowledge of popular Western feminist discourse, he assumed that I would agree with his condemnation of such a situation; that a woman who never left her home was wrong. Whether I actually agreed with his assessment or not was heard because his understanding of the discursive construction of my Western cultural values prompted his words. The weight of the application of this essentialist discourse from students to Western teachers makes, “more complex their political role in reproducing patterns of domination and exploitation” (Johnson, 1999, p. 257), because it removes the possibility of intellectual flexibility to develop a mutually satisfying vision of socio-cultural equity.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most troublesome issues for language teachers in Islamic nations is how to engage with social issues that find dominant Western and Islamic perspectives to be at odds. A few ready examples include anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic language (more than one student told

me Jews were enemies of Arabs) and as I have been addressing throughout this thesis, the treatment of women and girls. While these seem to be cultural issues rather than language issues, as I have demonstrated, the two are inseparable. Post-colonial politics and theory are clear that Western morals should remain in the West or else we are simply continuing the historical legacy of EFL teaching for civilizing the savage Other. Casewitt (1998) argues that, “learners of EFL should not be forced to actively (in communicative exercise) or passively (in drill work and reading) give voice to or assent to thought and behavior which contradict their most deeply-felt values” (p. 18). He also argues that we must use the contexts, precepts and belief systems of students which already exist as the basis for our materials and lessons so that the language they acquire may be used effectively by them. To do so is to ‘respect’ their autonomous cultural heritages and histories. This leads me to ask if Casewitt is suggesting that I should teach my students how to correctly make what I consider to be hate speech and misogynist comments if that is the context in which they want to use English? Racism against people of African descent is not unique to Oman so if I encounter a student using the n-word in any context, does not the precepts of social justice demand that I intervene, even if I know that student personally holds racist beliefs? Is it respectful of my cultural heritage or other cultural heritages, indeed our humanity, to ignore racism in our co-created sociocultural context of an EAL classroom? The answer is no. Is it important that my lessons and classroom be locations of mutual respect and social consciousness? As a feminist, the answer must be yes. We can assume that Casewitt is not taking such extreme example as a case for arguing for the use of contexts of learning as the basis for lesson planning. Rather, he is likely referring to the absurdity of texts that, for example, ask Islamic students to play a game based on speed dating (which was the case in the introductory grade level course book I was using in Oman) or even advocating against insisting that Omani girls to stand in front of a mixed gender class to give

presentations. However, these examples highlight the fatal flaw of a pedagogical approach that is based purely on relativistic valuing of contexts of learning.

If the classroom is a site of political posturing (whether implicit or explicit), feminist teachers should not uncritically permit language or themes that incite hatred, oppression or inequity, even if these themes emerge out of dominant cultural norms. This does not warrant a label of neo-colonial teaching methodology. Following in this line, if it is not socially acceptable (or legal) to voice anti-Semitism publicly in Canada and yet it is acceptable in a teaching context where I am working, am I colonialist to insist as the teacher (meaning the person with authority and power to insist) that hate speech is not part of our lessons, even if it is part of daily life for my students? Am I colonialist if the topic comes up in class and I choose to engage with it in a critical way rather than to simply focus on the mechanics of the language of the issue? Feminist or anti-oppressive teaching would not permit usage of hate-speech even if it is considered contextually appropriate. Contexts of learning provide the necessary basis for anti-colonial teaching but social justice must moderate these contexts and address oppression, whether locally situated or internationally practiced.

The roots of ELT as a tool of colonization are readily accepted. Given our current post-colonial context, as teaching professionals and theorists we need to ask, “How does one establish a relationship to the language and culture of the colonizers when they represent both colonial oppression and the possibilities for anti-colonial struggle” (Pennycook, 1994, p. 213)? English is a global language and as such is inextricably a part of any global anti-colonial struggle. Power inequalities exist externally and internally to language. For these reasons, “EFL teachers have no special reason to feel guilty about being complicit in a gigantic neo-colonialist enterprise in the guise of emancipatory pedagogy” (Rajagopalan, 1999, p. 205). The imperialist world from which current English usages evolved no longer exists therefore the teaching of English in

service to the Empire is no longer a valid description of what teachers are doing. The complexities of ownership, usage and teaching world Englishes is evident in the complexities of cultural communication and translation that happens in language classrooms.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONTINUED NEGOTIATIONS

#### **An Opportunity Not to be Missed**

English language teaching is a business and meant to be a money-making venture. This reality is central to who gets hired to teach, who sits in EAL classrooms, and who is setting administrative policies. The profession is often populated by a transient work force: I have taught in Oman, the United Arab Emirates, China, and Kuwait over a period of four years, and there are career language teachers who have worked their way around the world and back again. Not all teachers are concerned with the political implications of their teaching. Some are better described as travelers rather than educators. In the case of a Western teacher who ‘just teaches what’s in the book’, students are being presented with particular representations of, “Western culture and politics that are uncritical of whiteness as a social identity, and the elevation of this subject position to dominance at the apex of the racial hierarchies instituted through colonial violence” (Thobani, 2007, p. 171). Teaching and expatriate life of this sort goes unchallenged when analysis paralysis is thematic in the profession and results in backing away from teaching practices which challenge hegemonic local realities. There is no a-political language teaching and there are no a-political teachers-just those who are more or less cognizant of the role of politics in their pedagogies. My concern is with those who fail to recognize this consequence, or worse, those who choose to abdicate their responsibility in the neo-colonial oppressions that are created by this kind of teaching. More to the point, my specific concern is that I am not one of those teachers.

Feminist teachers must have educational license to engage students in teachable moments of cross-cultural discord, frankly and conscientiously. In Islamic nations, this includes dealing

with the on-going conflict between Jews and Muslims. One teacher told me of a private after-school conversation with one exceptional female student where the topic of Israel and Palestine was broached. The student vehemently expressed her hatred for Jews and stated that she would kill one if she had the opportunity for what they had done to her Palestinian brothers and sisters. This teacher asked her if she wanted to kill any of her foreign teachers to which she quickly answered no, of course not; she liked all of her teachers and enjoyed the chance to talk about the world outside her own country and learn a second language. Then she was asked if she had ever considered that one of her teachers might be Jewish, or have Jewish family: she would have no way of knowing if this were the case unless a teacher self-identified as Jewish, which means she might have Jewish teachers right now and not even know it. Based on her reaction, the teacher concluded that this student had never considered this possibility and seemed a little shocked at the implications of what she had said based on this new knowledge. She recovered by saying that she knew we were all Christian (even though in actuality this was not the case. There were atheists within our ranks). It was true that none of us were openly Jewish (on the visa application to gain entry to Oman, there was a tick-box to state religion: Christian, Muslim or Jewish. Ticking the last box would result in being denied entry). She said of course she would not kill any of us and the conversation quickly turned to the hardships faced by those in the Gaza strip. This exchange served for me as a starting point for careful reflection on what it was I was communicating when I avoided or ignored these questions in open dialogue with students in classrooms.

In my first year of teaching, I was not prepared or nuanced enough in my cross-cultural navigation skills to have this conversation; I lacked the theoretical confidence to engage students with critical questions of cultural values. Such a conversation was only possible behind closed doors, and with particular students. The girl just mentioned did not represent a typical student,

male or female, in that she was more informed than most and a much more independent learner. Because of these factors, an alternative perspective she would otherwise not have been able to access was presented for her consideration. The possibility of guiding students to and through similar philosophical explorations depends on the teacher for the most part, not the student, as the teacher sets the tone for what material might be considered off-limits in the classroom and how emboldened students can be to ask sensitive or potentially inflammatory questions. Avoidance or declarations of “it’s not my place to say” from teachers can force these types of inquiries behind closed doors and establishes Western values as submissive or conforming to local gendered norms. This fails to address the questioning of students or other silenced voices who may be exploring or seeking out alternative world views.

In my experience, there is strong cultural exclusion of critical inquiry into Islam or laws and leadership which draw power from Islam. Despite this, such inquiry happens and as teachers, we can either support such critical endeavors or refuse to act in support of thinking for change. Post-colonial relativism and disengagement, while unrecognized, was my personal and professional starting point as an EAL teacher: “it’s not my culture and therefore not my place to comment” became how I escaped from confrontations that contrasted my culture with that of my students. Adhering to a relativist stance is to accept that the status quo is not open for debate lest it lead to critique of indigenous cultural norms and the possible adoption of “foreign” values or morals in a West to East direction (a very problematic dichotomization). In EAL classrooms, this approach advocates for deliverance of language and material “as is”, dictated by text books selected by institutions and directed by curriculum developed by those in power at institutions (often adopted from external sources like the British Council or credential-granting bodies like Test Of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL). If teachers adhere their teaching to these curricula or materials without entering into critical presentations of English language, its use and

its global presence, entrenched colonialism will go unchallenged; instead they will be re-inscribed and re-inforced in language learners. My teaching has changed significantly thanks to the privilege of time and graduate school to deeply consider my pedagogy. This privilege is not available or pursued by a majority of teachers, and thus a significant difference between post-colonial EAL teaching and imperial EFL teaching is that those teachers who might have been collaborators with change have been silenced.

### **Feminism and Islam**

Teaching EAL through critical feminist pedagogies can be considered a variety of cross-cultural grassroots feminist activism. Consciousness-raising activities have always formed a central tenet of feminist activism and cross-cultural settings should be no different. This does not equate with missionary work of the colonizer; in fact, feminists should actively work against presenting ideas and concepts as universal truths as this permits space for a localized feminism focused on issues that are of particular concern to the context. What needs to be happening is open dialogue between teachers, students and communities that can provide mutual knowledge-sharing and knowledge-production prospects. As a first step, we need "...reflection [which] encourages analytical insights that challenge the unquestioning privileging of Western feminism as the final hegemonic answer to questions of asymmetry between the two genders" (Ask and Tjomsland, 1998, p. 15). At the same time, these insights do not preclude the potential benefits resultant from broader dialogue and cross-cultural knowledge sharing that could take place; classrooms could become workshops of cultural inquiry for both local and external cultures. By recognizing that, "group identities and boundaries are ambiguous and permeable, and decisions about demarcating identity are always partly arbitrary" (Alcoff, n.d., n.p.), no one system of analysis or informant position becomes privileged over another. Thus, solidarity is built: teachers and students become citizens of the world and from the world.

Concepts such as economic freedom compared to religious freedom (an argument used against the applicability of ‘Western feminism’ and rights discourses as imported /not local therefore colonial), legal versus spiritual Islam, and other equality–concerned topics can have a place in English language classrooms. However, post-colonial feminism has curbed the liberties feminist teachers can take in opening these dialogues for fear of accusations, blame and guilt. Grassroots conscious-raising about women’s issues is a part of a feminist teaching pedagogy but in Islamic EAL classrooms, it has been recast as covert neo-colonialism on a mission of cultural genocide of non-Western cultures. When this is coupled with an educational environment where critical thought is discouraged, feminist EAL teaching is almost impossible. The challenge is not concerning incongruities between Islam and feminism but incongruities between feminist teaching and Islamic students. Whether students find any validity to feminist claims or not becomes irrelevant if teachers and students are never able to have those conversations. As Moghissi (1999) asks,

...by not recognizing the legitimacy and the vitality of women’s voices within the Islamic world who seek the same developments in their countries as feminists do in industrially advanced societies, would we not adopt a double standard in dealing with non-Western peoples and cultures? Would not such an argument lead to a new form of ethnocentrism under the guise of countering Euro-centric and ethnocentric outlooks? (p. 94)

Irshad Manji says Muslims should embrace *ijtihad* and begin personal explorations of the meanings and interpretations of the Qur’an in order to make women’s equality and social justice a reality under Islam. It has been argued that this approach serves to legitimize the reinterpretations that have already been done by extremists groups and gives them license to continue doing so, meaning the Qur’an will be used to justify terrorism and human rights

violations (Banna, Heydemann, Loane & Manji; 2007). To take it a step further, Ayyan Hirsi Ali says nations and followers must abandon Islam completely because at the core, Islam demands submission and passivity to one's place in social hierarchies which is never going to result in gender equity or non-oppression. She says that Muslims do indeed preach what they practice and despite what some may say, what they preach is not love and peace. Ali's approach is very radical and will only serve to create equally radical responses (evidenced by her current personal situation whereby she requires security guards despite now living in the USA (Ali, 2007). Her work and insights are highly valuable contributions, only possible with the voice of an insider. However, such radical thinking contributes to an overall atmosphere of intolerance and perpetuates opposition and resistance from those whose lives she is so harshly critiquing. While I defend her right to decry Islam, her solution is simply not practical. Conversely, the work of reformers often does not go far enough. Creating barriers between Western feminists (which is also the label that would be applied to Islamic feminists by Islamic reformers) and Muslim women by juxtaposing "locally" developed ideologies and "foreign" contributions, is to fall into Moghissi's (1999) notion of the post-modern trap wherein the local is unjustifiably venerated.

I agree with Manji that change must come from inside but like Ali, I also see a place for change from outside. This may take the form of acceptance when female students in EAL classrooms want to speak out of turn in class, negotiate with teachers on behalf of their classmates for extra time to complete projects, or try to control the actions of all students through manipulations of class space and teacher time. It can also take the form of assuming professional risk to speak out against girls seated in the back of classrooms, or against girls being exempt from giving presentations. The problem as I see it is how the discourse between Western feminists, Muslim feminists, and other post-colonial thinkers remains contentious and accusatory. The line of thinking that 'local' means isolated and automatically admirable,

meaning worthy of efforts to sustain it (Okin, 1999), is just as ungrounded in reality and impractical as Ali's revolution.

### **Feminism Must Not be a Hindrance**

I have found it enlightening and informative to discuss my research with a range of people, from academic to activist to anyone with an opinion. When I try to explain that I am arguing for taking a critical stance when it comes to “cultural tolerance”, people outside of academia often respond positively. However, the discussion often leads to a reiteration from those same people of cultural stereotypes and Orientalist understandings that I then find myself trying to deconstruct, contradict, and discredit. It is a very short and fast-moving slope from arguing against relativism to arguing against Orientalism. This is not the case with academic feminists. I often find myself on the defensive in the other direction. It is unpopular with academic feminists for a white woman to argue for a critical stance on non-white cultural matters. Is this because of a reaction to the history of feminism's negligence of women's concerns beyond those of privileged white women? (Holm, 2011). Is it the case that a nuanced understanding of culture, white privilege, and social justice can only result from years of study and higher education, paired with experience outside of Western contexts? If it is, allies of causes advocating for interventions in oppressive globalized systems and economies will be in short supply in any context. This is the trap feminist EAL teachers may find themselves in: engaged at a more than public/popular level with cross-cultural issues, yet inhabiting a popular/public space which restricts discourse and opportunities for development of a politic that is sensitive to multiple cultural perspectives on the world and on living in it.

In Mohanty's book *Feminism Without Borders* she addresses this issue of alliances between groups of actors in regards to Third World political struggles. She resists grouping feminists into “a singular entity of “Western feminism” (p. 46), or Third World feminisms.

Instead, she uses these terms as an “analytical or political category” (p. 46) which can be used to explore links between groups and political agendas. This permits “imagined communities” (p. 46) of Third World struggles-“‘imagined’ not because it is not real, but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and ‘community’ because in spite of internal hierarchies within Third World contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant contribution to...‘horizontal comradeship’” (p. 46). This imagining of community is therefore not based on color or gender, but is based on political alignments, therefore permitting membership to anyone who has similar political objectives. By this reasoning, not only can white women participate in Third World struggles, they are freed of historically assigned guilt; by joining with Third World feminist struggles politically, their imagined community is not a white colonial one. While white women’s historical legacy might necessarily locate them in the position of the oppressor<sup>18</sup>, collaborative politics can override such limitations and dissolve barriers to action that are based on identity. As Ralston and Keeble (2009) put it, “We have responsibilities to others beyond our borders...it is a huge failure of imagination to think that we can’t understand. We can and must transcend (not erase) our particular identities in order to forge strategic alliances with others in the face of the many problems the world currently faces” (p. 22). Such an imagining of political communities is however limited in that it necessarily remains in the space of discourse. Importantly, the role of the teacher is not the same as that of the activist-their role is not one of leadership but rather one of collaborator and supporter (as the saying goes, teachers can be the sage on the stage or the guide on the side). In the case of the teacher who is faced with questions originating from the lives of students, answers based in discursive spaces can fulfill the feminist teacher's role of deconstructing gender norms and seeking deeper considerations of women’s lives, while inspiring others to action. Conversation,

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<sup>18</sup>In one dimension of their identities but not in others, meaning it is essentialist to privilege one identity over another which may marginalize women (for example, ethnicity over class).

discussion and leading questions can be the domain of activism for teachers until they transcend the limitations of their outsider identities and become actors for change in collaborative capacities. As Anzaldúa (1999) says, “whites will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead” (p.83), which is not contradictory to Ralston and Keeble’s (2009) excellent point that “action should not be discouraged and that privilege should not preclude action” (p. 22).

### **What Teachers Can Do**

With the current level of cross-cultural engagement required of teachers when they exit degree programs and teacher training, many are ill-prepared to engage students in meaningful ways for change. As Pennycook (1998) puts it, “Resistance and change is hard work...too much work that looks at post-colonialism suggests an easy appropriation of English, that turning English into a tool for one’s own use is simply a matter of writing about the local context and sprinkling a few local words here and there” (p. 193). Along with the complexities of the language itself are the complexities of the local student-foreign teacher dynamic and all the identities they enfold. In a classroom, there is an obvious power hierarchy in operation between teachers and students which is constantly contextually created. This power dynamic can be a microcosm of the external global power relations between non-Western English language learners and Western English teachers. As Roxana Ng (2002) argues, power and authority are two separate entities but which coexist and reinforce each other. “‘Power’, however derived, is a more individual property which is subject to negotiation interactionally. ‘Authority’, on the other hand, is formal power granted to individuals through institutional structures and relations” (p. 92). Schools and formalized educational credentials are the structures that grant authority to teachers, necessarily so, in order to facilitate the transference and building of skills and knowledge in students. Power is assigned to teachers through their identity affiliations, from

membership in linguistic and cultural groups at the top of global hierarchies which have gained and maintained power at the expense of the groups their students have membership in. The area where transcendence happens (from disengaged teachers to anti-oppressive teachers) is the use of individual power for insightful instruction of world English (and education in itself) as a weapon to be used against oppressive systems (including gendered ones and colonial ones).

These relations are constantly being negotiated and maintained via interactional activities between students and teachers within their respective identities, including gender, cultural affiliation and even age. Some identities mediate or even negate others so that:

at the local level, teachers themselves, both expatriate and local, are disempowered and marginalized...socially and professionally...thus rendering more complex their political role in reproducing patterns of domination and exploitation...Although expatriate teachers are well-paid and enjoy relatively high status, their very identity as foreigners renders them marginal in social and often professional terms, and they themselves sometimes underlie their marginality by restricting themselves to expatriate enclaves and social circles. (Johnson, 1999, p. 257)

Where post-colonial theory can come to bear in these negations is in challenges to the informal power granted to teachers based on their status as Western cultural members and therefore English language experts. Ng (2002) argues that, “in an interactional setting, authority can be challenged by those without formal power” (p. 92), and I would argue that post-colonial EAL teaching necessitates challenges to authority (for example the conceptualization of English as a “foreign” owned language rather than English as a world owned language) and individual power (deconstruction of the idea of “native speaker teachers”; or male children as chaperones for women and girls). Both students and teachers must work against these systems which are

sometimes granted/assigned and sometimes taken. Pedagogical acts can form the basis for this approach and can be initiated by the teacher and taken up by students.

Using EAL classrooms as sites to challenge power and authority is where post-colonial feminism can create confusion and inaction on the part of teachers. Teachers who adhere to relativism actively work to present a “different but equal” approach to cultural traditions and social relations, including traditions originating from colonial histories. When cultural histories (local or foreign) remain above critique, then informal power and authority based in racist and colonial systems and policies go uncontested. As Mohanty (2002) advocates, educators must, “take responsibility for the material effects of these very pedagogical practices for students” (p. 202). She advises that, “the authorization of experience is thus a crucial form of empowerment for students—a way to enter the classroom as speaking subjects” (p. 202), while cautioning that, “this focus on the centrality of experience can also lead to exclusions; it often silences those whose “experience” is seen to be that of the ruling class groups. This more-authentic-than-thou attitude to experience also applies to the teacher...I often come to embody the “authentic” authority and experience for many of my students; indeed they construct me as a native informant” (p. 202). Clearly, to validate the experiences and lives of students as central to a cross-cultural education is to empower them to direct the course of their own learning, to engage with their nation’s cultural histories, and to contextualize their reasons for learning English in a post-imperialist world. “Unless [culture] is explicitly understood as historical, contingent, and the result of interpretation, it can coagulate into frozen, binary, psychologicistic positions” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 203). A feminist EAL teacher must direct students “away from the “add and stir” and the relativist “separate but equal” (or different) perspective to the co-implication/solidarity one” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 242).

## Teachers as Bridge Figures and Xenophiles

During the course of this research, I have written while living in Canada reflecting on my time in the Middle East, while living in the Middle East practicing/developing my politics, and once again from Canada reflecting on the process in its entirety. This has permitted a deep and broad consideration of the ideas and challenges presented here. There is a certain epistemic privilege I feel as a result of the not-completely outsider position from which I theorize. It allows me to align myself with Gulf national cultural insiders and their politics. However, as a secondary outcome, I consistently find myself countering those who would obtusely criticize Gulf Arab culture despite that my racialized identity should translate into a stronger group identity with white Canadians. I struggle with this because it seems that still, I am inhabiting a very unsettled middle ground where my alliances neither follow race lines, or consistently follow relativist/objectivist lines, and that my politics are very audience specific. I have become a cultural translator; someone who will always find themselves between and yet within cultures. There is certainly a need to translate between those who are clearly insiders and those who are clearly outsiders, in both directions, which is in many ways a role feminist and post-colonial EAL teachers fill.

Susan Darraj (2002) makes this point as well from her perspective as an Islamic American feminist: “I applaud American feminism for attempting to bridge an intimidatingly wide gap, but that bridge must be rooted in firm ground at *both* ends of the divide” p. 311). This suggests that not only are people needed who stand firmly at both ends, but also those who have one foot on either side, echoing the work of Anzaldua and other post-colonial feminists. In his work on blogging for social change, Ethan Zuckerman (2008) has termed these people bridge figures, individuals who are bi or tri cultural and who can fill gaps between cultural understandings. These are individuals who have a foot in two or more cultures, retaining both

these identities, similar to Lugone's concept of world travelers, but different in that bridge figures are not necessarily in a power detriment while Lugone's world travelers are. There are parallels in that both world travelers and bridge figures have lived between and within different cultural worlds, and bring a certain undeniable authority to speak; they are empowered to represent perspectives on both sides with a deeper understanding than they could gain as a casual observer or visitor. In a podcast on CBC Radio, Zuckerman explains, "Being an immigrant or born of parents of different cultural origins does not automatically make one a bridge figure as it requires active forging of bonds and connections to truly act in the role of a bridge; motivation to make these connections is key" (Bowie, Misener, Jolly, & Young, 2008, n.p.). These individuals are able to move between worlds because their experiences translate into epistemic privilege. This is not to say that they can speak for others, but rather that they can act as translators.

Importantly, I am not a bridge figure as I have one cultural origin, but I am more than an informed outsider. For the Omani student who asked me why women in Canada wear short skirts and tight clothes, I can explain the sexualization of women's bodies and conceptions of women's power. For the Canadian who asks me how I could live in a place where women are not permitted to travel alone and still call myself a feminist, I can explain the complexities of activism and cross-cultural communication. This is the role I now see for myself. I have become a representative of each group to the other group in ways that would not be possible if I was a complete outsider to either. I could not communicate the subtleties of why some women like polygamy if I had never had those conversations with women who had actually lived it. Similarly, I could not explain why financial independence means greater opportunities for independence in all areas of life for Canadian women. According to Zuckerman (2008), those people who forge connections between cultures (even if they have no membership in that culture) can be called xenophiles. This is someone who crosses cultural bridges and then in turn

leads others across those same bridges, actively seeks out cultural variety around the world, and makes connections through gaining knowledge of different ways of understanding the world through the lens of another culture. It requires a way of being in the world where there is more than an interest in “Other” artifacts, symbolism or landscapes, but an ability to see and challenge cultures concurrently and in a balanced way. “My suspicion is that many xenophiles have lived in or close to another culture long enough to lose the certainty that their home culture is the “right way” to think about the world” (Zuckerman, 2008, n.p.). According to Zuckerman, in this interconnected world, xenophiles will become increasingly important because they will be the ones to create a deeply global perspective and help translate it for others. We can not become bridge figures unless we were born and raised within or between more than one culture, but we can become xenophiles through an active engagement with the challenge of looking at the world from multiple points of view subversive to a colonial centering. This is in alignment with Appiah’s (2006) conception of cosmopolitanism which, “leaves space for xenophiles as well, individuals who commit to an open, curious, receptive approach to the world, actively seeking to understand the complexity and diversity of the world we’re living in” (Zuckerman, 2008, n.p.).

There is always the risk of uncritical relativism when we talk of understanding different cultural viewpoints and relating them to other cultural contexts. However, xenophiles understand that it is about making connections with and between people and culture, not necessarily upholding or accepting them. As Zuckerman puts it:

At heart, we all believe that the way we were raised to look at the world was the right way to look at the world and it’s a very strange moment when you realize that someone you like, you interact with, you trust, views a situation very very differently from the way that you view it. I think it ends up being sometimes deeply unsettling. That’s the power

of culture...it changes how you look at the world. (Bowie, Misener, Jolly, & Young, 2008, n.p.).

The change might be in realizing how the actions of people in small towns in Canada affect the lives of poor women in India, or how it is possible for Muslim fundamentalists to follow-through with suicide bombings, but the change should never be to begin supporting all cultural values and systems that one encounters. A xenophile's scale of engagement goes beyond appreciating cultural products (food, art, etc) to a shift towards a multiplicitous interpretation and perspective on the world and their place in it. This creates an ability to be flexible, collaborative, and engaged in a variety of cultural contexts. Those people are assets to any community in that they are able to see injustice as everyone's problem not just along lines of a specific cultural identity or membership.

### **It Can Start in the Feminist Language Classroom**

English language teachers can be xenophiles. I think of myself as a xenophile. I am able to translate and explain to a white Canadian audience what life and people are like in the Gulf. Likewise, I am able to translate tattoos, drinking culture, "leaving the nest" and so many other Western or Canadian practices to Omani students. Teachers who leave the profession and return "home" can become bridge figures between the cultures in which they have taught and their Western communities. Those who are currently working in other nations must be bridge figures if they are to teach in a post-colonial way. To cultivate global citizens requires explicit attention be paid to cultural difference (and sameness).

It was never my intention to perpetuate neo-colonialist Euro-centric ideas on language and cultural differences, although I am certain that it happened. Some of this responsibility is mine because I was under-prepared theoretically for the educational world I was about to enter,

and too committed to a feminism that was not locally grounded. Some of the responsibility was with my administration for the restrictions they placed on their teachers and the expectations for lesson content and delivery that were not optional. Some of the responsibility was with my students for entering class with preconceived ideas of what a language classroom should be like and forcing it to fulfill those expectations (including gendered expectations of me). When I now reflect on my conversation with the student who asked me if I approved of his “third mother” and her life within the confines of her assigned space on the ground floor, I know that my reaction now would be very different. Jaggar (1998) concisely states how I would describe my current cross-cultural politics: “For feminism to become global does not mean that Western feminists should think of themselves as missionaries carrying civilization to primitive and barbarous lands, but neither does it mean that people concerned about the subordination of women in their own culture may dismiss the plight of women in others” (p. 21).

Through this writing process, I have been able to fully contemplate the value of reflective research and practice as a teacher and feminist. The experiences I recount in this thesis were deeply troubling and impossible for me to deconstruct without the engagement made possible by higher education. This is indicative of not only the benefits of reflective practice but also of a liberal education. While feminist theory was the source of the problem in many ways, it also became part of the solution. Such critical thinking on my part was only possible because of my training through a liberal education. Anecdotally, other teachers choose to disengage from a similar reflective practice, conceptualized their own practices through their own perspectives and locations, or have yet to fully examine their own ethnographic experiences. I am not familiar enough with specific educational histories of my colleagues to comment on whether or not there are connections between those with specific backgrounds and those who were more or less engaged in a similar self-reflective process in situ or afterward. This points to the possibility for

future research, possibly in other contexts: to what extent are Canadian English language teachers engaged with reflective pedagogies? In what ways are their politics communicated through their teaching? Can it be generalized that Canadian teachers are cognizant of the possibility for them to act as social change-makers? Are there connections (or disconnects) between specific educational backgrounds and socially-conscious pedagogies? How does this impact women specifically in classrooms? Specific to Canadian teaches, in what ways does a Canadian national identity influence these processes? In a global market which reaches beyond any political boundaries, this research could serve to influence teacher training and educational resources and materials.

For the third mother in the basement, I can say now that I think her situation is not acceptable, not justifiable, not ethical, and not a cultural institution that is approved of by an Omani audience and needing to be translated. It would not have been appropriate to state my opinion so bluntly to that student, but it would have been appropriate to ask questions of the student in such a way as to lead him into a discussion rather than remaining silent. That student had a clear opinion of the situation and was courageous enough to share it with me, even though I was not courageous enough to share mine. As I mentioned, I have returned to other Gulf countries to teach, including the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, since starting this research. The stories and questions I heard from students and the conversations I had, even though they were with different demographics of students, were very much the same. I was asked the same questions, faced with the same professional contradictions, but personally and politically I had a much deeper understanding of the complexities of what was going on around me. Of course, this is to be expected because with experience, hopefully, comes more wisdom. It has made me a better teacher and a better feminist.

To the student whose thought provoking and brave question was the catalyst for this auto-ethnography, I would like to ask him why he thinks polygamy as he described it would not be acceptable in Canada. I would ask him to tell me what he thinks the differences are in the lives of Omani and Canadian women. I would also ask what he thinks is similar. I would ask if he thinks his third mother chose such a life and if she did, why. Perhaps more importantly, I would ask him how his opinions might affect him personally in the future. How would he explain the situation to another teacher who was learning about his culture? If he had the chance to discuss the situation with his father, would he want the chance and what would he say? Does he think the problem is polygamy or how polygamy is practiced? These would be questions to encourage critical thinking and raise debate about cultural practices but not to condemn it. They would permit space for conversation in a forthright and supportive manner. I would not make value judgments about his father's choices, or his culture, or even the practice: I would need a lot more information to take such a position and I was never going to have access to that kind of information. Even if I did, our student/teacher relationship dictates that my role is to prioritize the student's exploration over my own. However, my purpose as a post-colonial feminist teacher must be to uphold women's rights and examine transgressions of those rights in collaboration with those who are part of the practice. It must never be silence: "In the context of an interwoven world with clear directionalities of power and domination, cultural relativism serves as an apology for the exercise of power" (Mohanty, 2003, p. 242). This apology does nothing to support change. In this exchange, I was relativist in my refusal to challenge entrenched ideas about culture-my ideas about his third mother's life, his ideas about his own culture, as well as our shared sense of the dangers inherent in sensitive cross-cultural conversations. Clearly we were both unsure of how to proceed in a discussion in which I, as a teacher and feminist, should

have been a leader. Thankfully, my student was willing to take a risk and now, I am willing to take that risk, too.

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