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“An inventory of the traces”: Reading anticolonial theory and writing decolonising life narratives

Abstract:

Throughout my teaching on postcolonial theory, I have found life narratives key to revealing diverse worlds and epistemologies. In my classroom, I teach narratives through which we encounter experiential modes of witnessing that are critical to anticolonial politics. For instance, the theoretical work of Frantz Fanon or Edward W. Said, both of whom leveraged their experiences as professional observers of lives (as a psychiatrist, as a literary critic), to write thoughtfully of their own experiences working within racial and colonial structures. Said’s study of Orientalism was “an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals” (1999, p. 25). For Said, Orientalism is not some abstract theory, but rather, a reality of being constituted a particular way. In my pedagogical practice, I invite my students to write short journals to reflect on postcolonial authors like Said, Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Chinua Achebe, and others in relation to their own experiences. Through such activities, reflecting upon their discontinuities in relation to entrenched norms, students facilitate critical perspectives. This paper explores the contribution of life narrative to theory, theory to life writing, and insights into what, to paraphrase Said, we might call an inventory of the “traces” on bodies and lives.

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Introduction

In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks writes of the power of critical theory and its capacity to heal. She writes, "I came to theory because I was hurting – the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living" (p. 59). hooks finds a "place of sanctuary in 'theorising'" as a way to make comprehensible what she was experiencing (p. 61). "This 'lived' experience of critical thinking, of reflection and analysis," she writes, "became a place where I worked at explaining the hurt and making it go away" (p. 61). As a scholar of postcolonial theory and human rights literary studies, hooks's words resonate with me in the way she perceives theory as interrelated to her life experience. For her, theory is not a reified phenomenon nor an academic abstraction; it is instead dynamic and productive, provoked by real, lived experiences and "linked to processes of self-recovery, of collective liberation" (p. 61). In my teaching, I have been long interested in how anticolonial and postcolonial theories similarly incorporate life writing in ways that speak to hooks' sense that life writing and theory closely intersect and enable one another. As a scholar based in Canada, I have wondered how my students think about anticolonial theory in relation to their own lives in a settler-colonial society, with its own history of violence. Often, I hear students speak of their encounter with theory as difficult. Theory feels distant from their own lives.

In this article, I reflect on my practice teaching anticolonial and postcolonial theories that use life narratives as a critical resource. I examine how, for anticolonial theorists, life writing and an emphasis on their personal story provides the material resources for formulating decolonial thought. In the second half of the paper, I explore how my students respond to these anticolonial theories in their journal assignments, where I encourage them to similarly draw on their own life experiences to think and theorise in relation to the theories they are reading. As part of their coursework, I invite students to write personal journals in order to explore how their embodied experiences – such as queerness, racialisation, class position, disability, and gender – can animate modes of political consciousness. In their efforts to practice modes of life writing and self-reflexivity, my students are guided into the productivity of personal writing, which can draw out new perspectives on social structures, ideologies, and their violences, as well as their own implication within those structures. In other words, by reading theory that incorporates life narrative, and then utilising life writing through journaling, my students have a conduit to see theory as both accessible and relevant.

The self in anticolonial and postcolonial theory

I have often found life narratives and non-fiction accounts are key to revealing diverse worlds and epistemologies, alongside experiences of injustice. In my classes, I choose narratives that speak to "subjugated knowledges" and the histories of how that knowledge was discounted or suppressed (see Foucault, 1980, p. 82). In reading these texts, we encounter experiential modes of witnessing that are critical to forms of anti-colonial and decolonial politics. Life narratives call attention to the self as a subject that has been shaped and traumatised by colonialism and enable readers to engage more deeply with the realities faced by colonial subjects. When life writing is a part of the theory, I find that my students are provoked to respond differently. In my experience, they appear to connect better to personal accounts, which they often find more

evocative than non-personal accounts. The theorist is no longer some remote academic, but instead is situated as a person whose critical reflections simultaneously relate their lived experiences and vulnerability. This helps the students to think more carefully about their responsibility as a reader of those lives, and even to consider themselves as potential theorists.

However, there are pitfalls, and some students are reluctant to draw on their own life experiences as a form of academic knowledge production. As a teacher at a large university in a large Canadian city, my students are very diverse: many are the children of immigrants; others are indigenous; and more still are racialised in ways that have made the academy an unnatural space to inhabit. My students have often questioned how their experience can matter in relation to theory, which they consider polished or refined. Life experiences, for them, are sometimes considered too raw to be a part of theory. Because of these issues, postcolonial theory provides a critical pedagogical tool that can help demystify academic authority and illuminate the interconnections between self-reflexive writing, analysis, and subjectivity.

This article draws on my experience of a senior undergraduate English class in which I teach theories of Empire and the Postcolonial at the University of Alberta in Canada. This class is part of an English undergraduate curriculum and its objective is to teach postcolonial theory, not Life Narrative. The students tend to be Arts majors, mostly in English, as well as fields like History, Philosophy, Sociology, and Political Science. While this is a theory class, I include primary sources in the form of life narratives, alongside colonial fiction, as well as academic scholarship in anticolonial and postcolonial theory. I cover a range of anticolonial thinkers from Martinique poet and theorist Aimé Césaire to Indigenous Dene scholar Glen Coulthard. In particular, I utilise anticolonial theories which have an autobiographical dimension, and which offer an analytical lens on the self. For example, I use Frantz Fanon's 1952 *Black Skin, White Masks*, Chinua Achebe's 1975 essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," Edward W. Said's 1978 text, *Orientalism*, alongside the more explicitly autobiographical essays by Jamaica Kincaid written in the late 1980s and early 90s. In many ways, all these theories and essays are stories of the self, but some of the texts do not signal to students that they incorporate life writing or autoethnography. Many of them place the lived racialised experience at the heart of their critical anticolonial thought.

The most famous of these theorists is Frantz Fanon, who leveraged his experiences as a psychiatrist, a professional observer of lives, to write thoughtfully of his own experiences working and living within racial and colonial structures. Bart Moore-Gilbert, for instance, argues that Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* is a "theorisation of postcolonial subjectivity ... [where] the appropriate response to the psychic disintegration inflicted on so many colonial subjects is to resist it through a strategy of self-reconstitution as a whole being" (2009, p. 2). In his study of postcolonial life writing, Moore-Gilbert returns to Fanon multiple times as a "template ... in relation to theme and form" (p. xxiv). He views it as the benchmark by which to assess the life writing strategies of other postcolonial writers (see also his repeated references to Fanon on pages 2; 31; 36; 112; 128, etc.). A transgressive text, *Black Skin, White Masks* is a hybrid and experimental text about the self and is considered by many to be an autoethnography. In its synthesis of different genres, it offers a way to theorise colonial oppression

and anticolonial subjectivity by foregrounding the voice of the colonised. It celebrates the Négritude movement, by drawing on Black creative writing and thought. The standout chapter of Fanon's text, translated as "The Fact of Blackness" was originally titled in French as "L'expérience vécue du noir," emphasising the narration of that lived experience, the personal experience of living as a Black man in a white supremacist world. Viewed by scholars as the most powerful section in his book, Fanon famously theorises the intense, racist, deeply alienating, and embodied encounter with anti-Black racism expressed by a white child on a train. In this encounter, Fanon observes the child's palpable terror of him as a Black man, expressed by a loud cry to his mother. Fanon attempts to dismiss the child's fearful reaction: "I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (2008, p. 84). He is overcome by the realisation that by simply *existing* as a Black man, he is trapped in negative stereotypes, scripted through the anti-Black imagination, which negates him and alienates him.

In animating an anticolonial consciousness in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon takes his readers to the centrality of life experience and the affective self in anticolonial writing. In our readings of Fanon's text, I lead my students to grasp how writing about personal experiences transforms into anticolonial theory, in terms of foregrounding an account of the embodied and experiential self. Rather than separating the personal from the domain of 'academia' (which students frequently hold up as a lofty ideal), Fanon's text reveals how self-narration can be fundamentally inherent to the production of critical knowledge and decolonial strategies.

Taking cue from Fanon, I invite students to write short journal entries (800–1000 words) reflecting on their lives in relation to the anticolonial theory we are reading. I tell the students that their lived experiences are resources for working through their ideas. I ask them to consider their own subjectivity and life encounters as a potential archive for critical thinking. In total, students write two journal entries, together worth 20% of the course. They write them outside of class, and my assessment relies on their level of engagement with the assigned text; their ability to articulate how their experience of the text connects with or illuminates something of their own lived experience; and their overall prose style. While I have taught this course six times, this is only the second time I have invited students to journal, as a way to connect students more closely to the academic work we are reading in the course.

Another text that takes on a special significance is by Edward W. Said, whose seminal text *Orientalism* we also read in this class. Students are often surprised by the interjection of the first-person narrative in Said's study. Said's writing style in *Orientalism* can be characterised as authoritative and formally academic; the text is not personal or an autobiography. And yet, Said alerts his reader a number of times about his personal life, and the lived realities that shaped him as an individual, albeit only in the introduction to his text. He writes:

Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental" as a child growing up in two British colonies. All of my education, in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an

attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals. ... I [have never] lost hold of the cultural reality of, the personal involvement in having been constituted as, “an Oriental”. (1999, pp. 25–26)

In class, I call attention to this autobiographical information because students typically overlook it. I ask students why they think Said inserts his personal revelations so early into his study of Orientalism. As with Fanon, Said’s inclusion of a personal and deeply felt experience signifies the value of that subjective sense of knowing. Said goes on to explain the need for this personal interjection. He writes:

My own experiences of these matters are in part what made me write this book. The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West ... is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist ... The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanising ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed. (1999, p. 27)

For many students and especially those coming from racialised or immigrant backgrounds, that first person, lived experience, which is narrated in Said’s work of theory comes as a surprise. I highlight the significance of Said’s autobiographical observations and how his knowledge of imperialism is something that he has long felt in both a bodily and intellectual sense. In other words, Said’s reflections validate the way that personal experiences are a part of knowledge constitution. Here, Said’s personal reflections on what it means to be an Arab Palestinian in the US connects with the way academic theory and real life cross over. For Said, the personal experience of being subject to what he terms “dehumanising ideology” (p. 27) is the impetus for his research. The idea that Orientalist ideology is felt in and affects real lives is of course consistent with Said’s theory, where, in *Orientalism*, he reminds his readers that academic research is neither impartial nor neutral, but all too human and shaped by the ideology du jour. The effects of ‘theoretical’ studies of the Orient by Orientalist scholars were real enough for those subjects interpellated by it.

Rethinking academic writing

Yet, as scholars of Life Narrative have long observed, the personal voice is not often present in academic discourse. Scholars like Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle, Kate Douglas, Kylie Cardell, and others have called attention to the rise in interest in autotheoretical and auto-ethnographic narratives in academia. Ortiz-Vilarelle observes how these narratives reposition academics as “self-aware subjects negotiating frameworks for writing and reviewing” in their research and career work (2023, p. 1). This self-reflexivity is key to interrogating academic subjectivity and the authorising genres of scholarship. Education scholar Joanne Yoo also critiques academic discourse as a rigid form of writing, which traditionally “meant adopting an impersonal and objective style of unyielding structures” (2025, p. 1). For Yoo, academic writing signifies an approach that refuses to “assert our presence and to affirm our own perceptions” as embodied subjects (p. 2). Yoo, whose recent study explores how creating writing can catalyse qualitative research inquiry, examines what she calls a “journey of unlearning formal academic writing conventions” (p. 1). She argues that there is a need to integrate a writer’s unique, personal voice

and their lived experiences into academic work. In her study, Yoo reveals how the formalism of academic writing had alienated her early on in her career and she describes how academic discourse risked sounding inauthentic and discouraged, or disengaged readers like herself who found such writing negated their own lived experiences. She advocates for what she calls “evocative inquiry” (p. 2) which reformulates traditional modes of academic discourse through the personal experience of the self, what she calls “the writer’s selfhood” (p. 5). Foregrounding selfhood, for Yoo, provides “a way of *coming into* knowing, rather than simply being a means to an end” (pp. 2–3, original emphasis).

Yoo’s ideas elicit the writing of bell hooks, whose critiques have taken aim at mainstream academic discourse and dominant modes of learning. Thinking back to her experience of education in a desegregated racist school system as well as during her undergraduate and graduate studies, hooks recalls how knowledge was constructed as discrete information, which bore “no relation to how one lived, [or] behaved” (1994, p. 3). hooks’s educational experience was oppressive and elitist across her undergraduate and graduate studies. She portrays her undergraduate education as cultivating “obedience to authority,” whereas the graduate “classroom” was worse still, a place of “punishment and confinement” (p. 4). In contrast to this, hooks builds her liberatory feminist theory on what she calls the “fertile ground” of “personal testimony, personal experience” (p. 70). Consequently, thinkers like hooks and Yoo call attention to how writing about personal experiences becomes an empowering methodology. They elevate life writing as a form that can mobilise and inspire, as well as humanise both theory and academia for students. By challenging the normative and hierarchical structures of academic writing, these theorists usefully open new perspectives for students and encourage them to see the validity of their individual experiences. Moreover, centring human experience through life writing in the classroom, as hooks suggests, can lead not only to a better education, but also to critical thinking and collective praxis.

Student responses

In my classroom, however, students have expressed uncertainty about using their own life stories; some worry about using the first-person pronoun in their academic work. Many view the academic voice as antithetical to the personal voice; moreover, others dismiss their lived experiences out of hand as irrelevant. One of my students, K., a student of colour who immigrated to Canada with his family as a young child, writes in his journal for class: “I am not qualified nor knowledgeable enough to refer to myself as an ‘intellectual’”. Reading Fanon, however, facilitates a way forward for this student. Comparing himself to the “colonized intellectual” that Fanon critiques in *The Wretched of the Earth*, my student contemplates the ways he has exoticised himself for others (such as pretending to be familiar with traditional local food from his family’s origins, when in fact, he discloses in his journal, he had searched those dishes on the Internet). As K. continues in his journal: “reading Fanon has allowed me a great deal of introspection. At the very least, Fanon has given me a way to confront myself”. In other words, in his journal, K. finds that Fanon’s writing provides him with a model to explore new and more creative forms of self-understanding and self-reflexivity on modes of authentic and inauthentic ways of being.

The lack of comfort students have with the autobiographical genre and with writing personal essays is a topic that often comes up in the student journals. Another student, E., writes in her journal about how Said's introduction to *Orientalism* initially worried her because, as she puts it: "too much personality and 'I' statements turns [sic] what is meant to be fact into opinion". This student worries that "too much writing from the 'I' perspective introduces biases into the work". Here, she rehearses a view of how academic texts are authorised and she reveals her presumptions about academic discourse as neutral and objective. This is something Said explicitly critiques when he notes that ideology always enters the research interests of the individual scholar. Pondering on Said's personal reflections in her journal, E. begins to shift her view of academic knowledge. She writes: "I'm likely not the first to realise that for a long time, Said had to remove his voice from his writing". In other words, Said's personal observations actually helped my student work through her assumptions and denaturalise the authority of academic discourse. Through her engagement with Said's writing, E. notes the interplay between power and academic knowledge. This is a recurring theme in postcolonial studies, that is, the effort to expose the epistemic violence of a particular discourse, what Gayatri Spivak called the "disqualified knowledges," the erasure of particular voices and entire life experiences (1993, p. 76).

I ask students to think about Said's self-construction in his work, and how his first-person observations are both carefully shaped and diplomatically expressed. This becomes more evident to students once we read Antiguan-American writer Jamaica Kincaid's non-fiction essays. Where Said writes of the persistence of a "deep early awareness" of Orientalist prejudice towards him, the personal details of his experience, of that dehumanisation and racism are missing (1999, p. 25); in contrast, Kincaid enacts a refusal to speak diplomatically and she directly calls out the anti-Black racism that she experienced in her childhood. In class, we examine Kincaid's 1988 non-fiction text, *A Small Place* and her 1991 personal essay, "On Seeing England for the First Time". In *A Small Place*, Kincaid writes that growing up in Antigua as a Black girl, she and her friends were told "to stop behaving as if they were monkeys just out of trees" by her white headmistress (2000, p. 29). At medical appointments as a child, she describes being inspected for "bad smells" and "dirt" by the white doctor's wife, before being allowed in to see the doctor (p. 28). Throughout this text, Kincaid exposes and excoriates the racism and colonial ideology she was subjected in colonial Antigua. She writes: "nothing can erase my rage ... for this wrong can never be made right" (p. 32). In "On Seeing England," she observes how her education in Antigua privileged British culture and history, with England as "our source of myth and the source from which we got our sense of reality" (1991, p. 32). As an adult, Kincaid grasps that the "reality of [her] life was conquests, subjugation, humiliation, enforced amnesia" (p. 36). When she finally visits England as an adult, she finds it to be a pathetic contrast to the *idea* of England, as taught in her Antigua school; the realisation unleashes a visceral fury. She writes:

the space between the idea of [England] and its reality had become filled with hatred, and so when at last I saw it I wanted to take it into my hands and tear it into little pieces and then crumble it up as if it were clay, child's clay. (p. 37)

Kincaid's autobiographical self is constituted through her affect and anger about colonialism. Throughout her essay, Kincaid places emphasis on the legacies of colonialism, which she encountered in everyday life, from the heavy British breakfast she eats, unsuitable for the hot climate of the Caribbean, to the British poems she is made to learn in school about the white cliffs of Dover that she has never seen. That lived experience, expressed in Kincaid's personal knowledge of everyday dissonance and racist humiliation asserts her voice as a witness. Kincaid's rhetoric here – blunt, unapologetic, acerbic, fierce – authorises her ability to speak truth to power and demand accountability for the colonial past, while challenging nostalgic views of British history.

Many of my students are struck by Kincaid's writing and excited by her candour. Inspired by her direct style, some turn to it as a model for their own work. Kincaid's essays have moreover been helpful to students in terms of thinking through their implication as white subjects, whether as Canadian settlers or tourists within (post or neo)colonial structures. One student, J., looks to Kincaid as a springboard in her journal to rethink her past vacations to the Caribbean, and to re-assess the neo-colonial relations between (white) tourist and (Black) locals that she was oblivious to at the time. In an echo of this, another student re-examines white normativity in her journal, through her memories of small town racism on the Canadian prairie where she grew up. This student, Z., ponders Chinua Achebe's essay, "An Image of Africa" which describes the pervasive racism and stereotyping about Africa he experienced while teaching at the University of Massachusetts in 1974. In her journal, Z. reflects on how entrenched white normative views consolidated her sense of power over others. She examines how her white privilege made that racism seem like "a comfort," "a comfort of discrimination," (to cite the phrase Z. uses), a learned behaviour with "no correction". She both highlights and draws this terminology from Achebe's criticism of Joseph Conrad as "the purveyor of comforting myths" (1977, p. 16), where old racisms are asserted, rather than challenged. Z.'s journal explores the way discomfort becomes a necessary task for challenging white supremacy and the dehumanisation of others. In one personal memory, Z. describes being scolded as a child when asking her parent about a Sikh man's turban. She writes, "Instead of teaching me that the man was wearing a turban for religious reasons, my mother shushed me" and she draws a connection between this incident and her later "prejudice against people wearing turbans because that is what I was taught". When I read this, I interpreted Z.'s journal as a way of working through the conscious and unconscious behaviours that prioritised her white perspective and normativity. Equally, I could see how the student herself was working through some of her own anxieties of being a student from a rural prairie town, now studying in an advanced English course in a major metropolitan space. Through critical reflections, her journal makes legible the steps that challenge white innocence and re-make the self into a decolonial thinker.

Conclusion

These stories of my students's journals are snippets of how life narratives in theory can produce rewarding and creative results for students as they reevaluate their own lives and ideas in relation to the anticolonial thinkers we are engaging with in class. Their personal journals are

often stories of learning and new insights, acknowledging vulnerability and openness to critical and challenging reflection. I have cited fragments of these journals, yet some of these journals are fragmentary throughout, as students scrutinise theory, work through ideas and forms of responsibility, and experiment with writing styles in their attention to their personal lives and feelings. This kind of journal writing offers much to students, intellectually and creatively, as they reconsider critical theory in relation to their own lives. In their engagement with postcolonial theory, students show themselves to be capable practitioners and scholars of life writing; most importantly, their personal reflections demonstrate how life writing offers both a process and a methodology that is rich, generative, and even transformative in its contribution to decolonial knowledge production.

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