

## Is it English? Several Kinds of Arrogance and Personal Danger

Matthew D. Connolly\*

...they have known, they  
understand this somewhat naive uneasiness  
of the new arrival; it will leave him as a result of  
the tests of colonial life, under a multitude  
of small and pleasant compromises.  
– Albert Memmi

Week 20. I am teaching *Palestine* by Joe Sacco, teaching about Palestine, moreover. I am teaching about colonialism in an English class. I'm teaching this because I owe it to those who have mentored me, and because of lines from people such as Ashis Nandy: "Even from Fanon's impassioned political psychiatry, it becomes obvious that the officer *had* to do within his family – and within himself – what he did to the freedom fighters," or "What the élite culture of England could not tolerate was his blatant deviation from rigidly defined sexual roles in a society which, unknown to the hyper-aesthete Wilde, was working out the political meanings of these definitions in a colony thousands of miles away."<sup>1</sup>

When I had thought up the course it seemed like a good idea. But this is a year of ignorance and arrogance. Lots of that. As a teacher, I am a step or two ahead, looking backward, stumbling forward, falling behind, leaping in front, being put back on my ass. Do I look like I know what I'm doing when I'm on my ass reeling? Should I?

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Week 15. First day of reading *Burmese Days* by George Orwell, an account of a colonial police officer. Classic Imperialism. A man in a position of unwarranted power, torn by it, immiserated by a dim awareness of his superior position, hoping that a white woman will seal up all the cracks for him.

Student: Why do the Burmese refer to the Europeans as gods?

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in British India,' *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983: 31, 44-45.

Student: I think it's cultural. They see in the European might a reflection of godliness. Power is holy.

They believe them to really be gods? (Is this where we are with our others?) Where's the proof of this in the text? Let's use the text.

Another: Is Burma a part of India? Because he's talking as if it is, referring to it as India. But Burma - Myanmar - is not a part of India.

Vague recollections of a map. British Imperialism. Partition - I want to say - it's a result of the partition. I am sure, but his certainty un-sures me. (It's not a part of India? Why didn't I look this up?) Instead, I offer: We're not reading this as a history text. Don't ask me about history. I'm reading this as a piece of literature. (That doesn't sound right. But I'm out here now.)

There is a difference, between reading-English and reading-History. I am sure of this. But now that I'm here... What am I saying again? Not about facts... (Why are you asking me about facts? You know *I'm* just going to look on Wikipedia). It's about vision? desire? ideology? React. That's what I want. Learn how to watch yourself reading and reacting. I don't know how to say this yet. Silence. I know they don't know what I mean. Silence. Someone picks up another ball and starts running with it. We go with that.

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In April, I found out I would be teaching, flying solo. I put together a stack of books and began combing through them, curating for the coming semester. My question was what could I teach? I gathered what I love, that is, little hits, things that stuck. I guessed that this was rhetoric, things that moved me, moved in me and wouldn't come out. I was starting from scratch, building up a form.

A month later I look up from the heaps of books to learn that I would be teaching an assigned textbook from a mandated common syllabus.

I despond for several more months and arrive in my new city for three days of training on how to be a teacher. Our composition director is toweringly large. He's affable, but his eyes stare out a bit too wide open and give to him a quiet, hollow look. He instructs us, quite literally, in how to go through the motions. In a conversation about leading discussions he waves his hand in front of an imaginary chalkboard:

See what I'm doing, I'm writing down what you say, well I'm not actually right now, but if this was a real class I would be. This makes you think that what you're saying is important to me.

This gets a laugh. It shouldn't.

I start writing down things he says as rebuttal, against the future when the department lines me up in front of a firing squad: 'The assignments are only a suggestion'... 'You can supplement the

readings in the text book.’

That weekend I contact my war council, a former professor and a graduate student who led me on a tour and said that subverting the common syllabus was a ‘rite of passage.’ I asked them: ‘I want to go off the rails, can I?’

Both: Yes.

My professor: Do it.

I bring the mandated textbook to my first class, the first class I’ve ever taught, symbolically throw it away. ‘See this? I don’t want to read this.’ Here we go. I live like a fugitive for the next 14 weeks, sure that there is some surveillance apparatus in place that will catch me out, not sure how I am going to submit 21 digital portfolios at the end of the semester without someone realizing what I’ve done. The anxiety creeps into me, into everything I do and I begin to *hate* the composition director with pathological intensity. I draw a portrait combination Malcolm X and Judge Dredd, tack it above my desk. Give me strength.

But: In 14 weeks one of my students will call my first move – discarding the textbook – ‘pretty bad ass’ (my epitaph, I think). I listen to my cohort complain about students like they’re a different species: dull students who don’t do the reading, dull readings, bad lectures, bad discussions. But this is not happening to me. Observers come in: how do you get your students to contribute to discussion? I don’t do anything really, I think. There’s the suggestion formed by the circle of chairs and, then, I wait in the often-painful silence of something like a Quaker prayer meeting, hoping for the spirit to move someone to speech. We work from there. I feel deliciously guilty in front of my peers, as if trusting my students is cheating the system. I work less, get more.

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Week 18. Saidiya Hartman’s ‘Fugitive Histories.’ An African American scholar bringing slavery into the present, not as a matter of a shameful past, not as a matter of ongoing legacy, but as something that continues to deform relations now. An African American scholar on the outside of a group of African scholars, searching for the signs of the enslaved, searching for some sign of remembering, mourning, looking for or to the lost. And her pain, which is strange even to her (Why do I feel this?), is a joke and a burden to those who would be her comrades.

Student: [Bam. First thing.] This was boring.

Me: Boring. (Should I entertain? Do I... What? God.) Explain. What was boring about it?

Another: We should care because it could happen to anyone.

Etc.: We should care because it did happen, and we can’t allow it to be repeated.

Etc.: We should care because it might still be happening.

What about Hartman and what she's saying? This isn't speculative. What about the disconnect and the sadness that she is trying to convey? Does someone's pain need to be entertaining for us to care about it? Dumb question, but I mean it sincerely. Unfair. Yes, of course it does.

I feel like my brain has boiled over and there's a thin layer of steam between it and my skull, making my hair sweat. I'm ready to throw something. Ok, a pencil. Several inches across the desk. When everyone has left. And it's more like a letting go.

But I let them have it in an email later, really lay it on thick:

I'll be honest, for the first time this semester I was disappointed with the conversation. Unexamined statements of your boredom don't interest me. They reveal nothing about the text, and they seem to suggest that it's my job as a teacher to entertain.

[I've brought shame into things]

This seems to be a particular problem for the English or Writing teacher, which the biology teacher does not have.

[A kind of moral blackmail now]

I don't know why that is, except that biology is regarded as serious work and English is something frivolous.

[Try now to bring it around. Show firmness, yet be gentle]

Though our conversations can be fun or passionate, I have never regarded them as not serious. Perhaps they are seriously playful. As I said earlier in the year, if your initial reaction to a text makes it difficult to continue to read the text, then I expect you to think more critically, not less. The subject of your analysis becomes not the text, but your reaction to it.

[French Marxists infiltrate the text]

One of the lines that Situationists painted on building walls in the Paris uprising of May 1968 was, 'Boredom is counterrevolutionary'.

[Very good, now they're reactionaries]

The point being, what if even our emotions are the effects of politics? What subjects are we predisposed to find boring, what turns us off, what makes us sick, what do we just not have time for?

A burst comes out on the class blog from the same student who had led off the discussion with

her boredom:

I think that i am becoming more retrospective because of the reading we are doing, for example that piece that we all thought was boring, doesn't necessarily mean that it was a bad piece. It just means it didn't interest us but we still learned something from it. I think saying that it's boring IS learning something from it. We ourselves as readers have to know what we think is interesting as well as what we don't. I think thats something that a lot of people don't learn.

Okay. Things continue on as before.

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Week 15. At the end of the first term a meeting is called of all the teaching assistants, nearly eighty of us in a room munching on bagels. We're told that the digital portfolios will become a permanent part of the composition curriculum. The technology is presented as a means to something; the ends are never disclosed to us. The institution seems to have an unsettling, insistent faith in its technology, as if just using a digital tool is evidence of some great educational achievement. Then it clicks that the students are 'natives.' More than five hundred years of colonial bureaucrats, and we've never needed to know why the natives should use our tools.

I'm told that the course we are teaching has been renamed 'Communication Literacy'. The change will have no impact on the curriculum. Perfunctory, isolated offense is taken among the rank-and-file. I learn that department funding is tied to enrollment numbers, that full-time faculty teach electives and not the general education requirements like composition. I wonder if this structure was designed intentionally, or if it just settled into this pattern, so that we, the point of least resistance, will simply act out our orders.

I look around again at the room, and I see – We're all white, almost all of the people in the room are white. How is that, statistically, even possible? Paranoia ramps up. What's going on here? What's wrong with this department?

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Week 19. Minnie Bruce Pratt, 'Identity: Skin Blood Heart.' I'm convinced this will not go well. It's a long reading. I've broken it over two days. It might help with digestion, but I doubt it will help to understand her argument. Not only that, but I think they won't read it well; they'll read half-heartedly, latch on to one thing and give up the rest to interpretation. My confidence has been shaken by a series of discussions, some up, some down, over texts that refuse to give up their meaning with a sentence: 'This is what I want you to believe.' The wager: the absence of an explicit argument will frustrate my students, put pressure on them to think and theorize on their own, and spontaneous organizations of thought will emerge. The reality looks more like weariness, abetted by four weeks of sub-zero temperatures, a leadenness of head and heart. I subsume it all as my fault because the alternative, to blame them, seems useless. How do I dig out from this?

The night before I decide on something different. I'd been sitting at my desk. I'd been posing

questions, trying to pit people against each other so that some sparks might fly. But the bait isn't always taken. They don't want conflict, and they'll back down before pressing a point. It's too comfortable, too easy to talk and too easy not to. There is nothing at stake in their words, and they don't yet know that I have greater expectations of them. So I stay up late, I pull out quotes. Battle, that's what I think. Tomorrow is battle.

I begin with a Trojan horse. I've brought them coffee, and we all chat comfortably for a few moments. Then I start in earnest, standing not sitting, ready to pounce: I want to go through the text section by section. This first section Pratt is walking down a 'corridor' in DC, a place that people don't want to be, gauging her reactions to the people she does and does not greet, speculating about the history behind these greetings and non-greetings...

What is she doing here?

'When we meet in the hall or on the elevator, even though I may have just heard him speaking in his own voice to another man, he 'yes-ma'ams' me in a sing-song; I hear my voice replying in the horrid cheerful accents of a white lady. And I hate my white womanhood that drags between us the long bitter history of our region.'<sup>2</sup>

No one answers. What is she doing here?

Student: She's driving herself crazy.

Hope. Why would she do that?

She's trying to be too perfect, too aware.

Dashed. So she's crazy?

My tone has changed. I read forcefully. I throw the text up in its own defense. I quote passages at oblique angles to student comments. Am I responding to what you said specifically? Am I endorsing or rebutting? Am I paying any attention at all, or am I marching forward? Pratt is my bayonet. I need to tear through to them. I need the defenses to come down. I need something to happen in this room that can't be contained by everything they already knew. If Pratt will wrestle with the cost of paying for safety as a woman in the arms of patriarchy, of security against crime and poverty through white supremacy, maybe I need someone here to say that they would risk comfort for a little of Pratt's insanity.

Eventually, the expected turn comes.

Student [young man]: I feel like she's putting men in a box. I feel like she's being unfair to men –

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<sup>2</sup> Minnie Bruce Pratt, 'Identity: Skin Blood Heart,' In *Rebellion: Essays 1980-1991*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1991: 28.

I'm leaning against the wall farthest from the student, coiled for precisely this moment. I always let them speak. I never interrupt. I question. I delve, but I don't cut someone off. There are no wrong answers here. This is a safe space. But today I'm on this guy before he finishes. My hand cuts –

Ok, not all men. On my feet now, I turn pointedly away from him and toward the class. Getting back to where we were...

The room falls over. Silence. Someone says, 'Whoa shit.' They're excited. They don't know what to do now. The student who spoke, semi-smiling, nervous, is unsure of where to place his gaze. I'm dangerous. I smile slyly to the room.

Let's unpack what you're saying.

It's enough. I've shown them a glimpse of something judgmental and violent in me, but it's still play. I'm not telling them to stop. I want something from them, demanding more. It doesn't shut them down. It opens something up. For the rest of the class, they're lining up to get a turn.

At the end of the class I ask quickly for reactions to my confrontational style of teaching. A student says, I felt checkmated, but I think in a good way. It was like combat, another says. Checkmated is a good word for it, another agrees. It was exhilarating.

But was it good? Checkmated, like I'd progressively trapped them in a corner and killed their king. I've never felt more like a sadist. I affect an attitude and I can destroy their confidence in what they think to be going on in the text. They think they have Pratt figured out, that they are not her and that they could never be. Behind the confidence, though, they're running from her. My aggression broke down the strategies they had been using to handle Pratt's words, strategies that let them talk about the text without really dealing with what it offered. I think of the students who responded to this kind of display, though. Mostly young men. The women were quieter today. I wonder what they were thinking, if they were identifying with anyone during this exchange.

I start standing at the front of the room.

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Week 16. In the second term I am free to design my own course and submit the syllabus for review by the department. I think I know what I'm doing. It's on colonialism. My first class is on Monday. The Friday before class, a departmental administrator, a person I've never met or spoken with rejects parts of my syllabus. I make the necessary changes for her. I get approval Sunday night while I'm preparing my introductory remarks for the next morning. Glad you liked it.

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Week 22.

Student: I read this and I was disgusted. I felt sick. And then I got to the line ‘suspected Islamic terrorist’ connected to 9/11, and I thought, ‘Well, good. If he was waterboarded 3,000 times it wouldn’t be enough.’

This scares me. We’re reading an abstract of the report on post-9/11 CIA torture techniques.

Student: Yeah, I agree.

Halfway through the second semester and the emergence of hatred. I didn’t see it coming. The cliff I was standing on starts to erode. There’s nothing in the article that deals with politics, relations of force, history.

I try to find a handhold, but everything is being rewritten. These people were – what? – four years old when the US’s September 11 happened (well, I guess the one in Chile was the US’s too). I bring up the chapter we read about CIA operations in Latin America, but that was about communism, which in today’s class is seen an inherently ridiculous reason to torture someone. Terrorism, of course, is different. I bring up the forms of warfare used by the French in Algeria that Frantz Fanon describes. This seems only to suggest that every one is capable of barbarism. I’m spiraling. Chaos, and I’m not doing well in it. Finally, I grab at something from within the text. Victims of CIA torture had been sexually abused as a way to dominate them, mentally, physically, to destroy them completely. I pose the question, then:

Is there... a limit for you? Is there something... that one shouldn’t do...

I’ve turned the material into a question of ethics, something speculative and philosophical, but it’s too late to take another direction. Where do I go with this?

Another student: I read somewhere that a number of megatons equal to the force of September 11 is dropped on Iraq every, I forget exactly, every couple of days.

Student: I don’t know what that means... megatons...

How about this:

If 3,000 people killed in the United States by, let’s say, unconventional means justifies this kind of behavior to us [I’m in the middle of this sentence when I realize that it may be the kind of thing that is reported to my superior before I lose my scholarship, and it’s just some cobbled together liberal point. ‘Us’? What did I mean by that?] – justifies torture – then what does 100,000 dead or more, at least 100,000, justify to an Iraqi?

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Week 26. It’s the end of April, not much time left and an ROTC student tells me he missed my class because of an astronomy exam. I have to do a double take. What? He had to make up the exam when he missed astronomy for an ROTC training. You couldn’t have made up the exam at



another time? No, this is the only time his astronomy professor would let him take it. He's got the documents to prove it. He's a good student. He's missed some of my classes, but we've talked about his training, his family, the grandmother he takes to physical therapy, we're getting him back on track. He forwards me the email interaction with his professor. There's room for miscommunication, but I ignore it. My blood's up. I've made it through twenty-six weeks as a teacher without help from anyone at this damn school. I barely look older than my students, and the only thing telling them that this mandatory English class is important is whatever force or mystique of charisma I've managed to pull over on them. This professor should have contacted me if the student needed to miss my class. It's unprofessional. It's not collegial. I tell him as much in an email. I shake with anger the rest of the day.

This professor goes right over my head to my department chair. I need to fix my attitude. I need to support the troops. I need to recognize the good professors who support the troops. He made the move I couldn't have anticipated: by force and superiority he had made himself right.

I wait for word from my chair. My bristling email might cost me everything, a nobly stupid act or just a stupid one. Fear shames me. All the confidence that my anger had built up has withered. My shame floods me, tells me that I was only pretending to have dignity. Faced by the threat of reprimand from a superior, I realize I must have been crazy. I realize how deeply my body responds to the institution, how much of me is invested in it, how I'd like to be able to stand up and how I can't.

My department chair tells me I shouldn't have sent the email but doesn't care otherwise. I thank him for his support without irony. It's important that I thanked him without irony.

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Week 22. It's the next class after our discussion of CIA torture. We are about to talk about rape as a tool of genocide and about the rape of women and children at Abu Ghraib. I'm stuck in the last class, stuck on that kernel of emotion that I had never seen before, their anger, my fear. The whole intervening weekend I spent thinking about what had been spilled in that class. I was afraid. Each week I read aloud from journals students had written. As they write to me, I decided to write to them, to make myself weak for them. I read the statement aloud in class.

I want to put something of mine out there. Two points.

Point 1

At Ithaca College we had the Rape Trail. A path through the woods that students would take to get from one part of campus to another, dark at night as they, we, would return from parties and friends' apartments in the late night.

I don't know who named it this, the Rape Trail. I don't know if it was as a joke or if for a woman it was some kind of totemic attempt to ward off the real thing. Its name was not on the official literature, but it was known to every student, eventually. As far as I know,

no rape occurred there during my time at Ithaca, as far as I know. But that was the name and it was part of our landscape. We walked to class on the Rape Trail.

## Point 2

I was a freshman, dumb in that particular bright-eyed and righteous way, sitting in a class with a half-dozen writers. I didn't know the conversation that preceded it. Logically in retrospect it must have been on the subject of sexual assault. It was early, and I was elsewhere. But I remember the teacher asking a young woman in the class, 'Are you afraid?'

It was the same question, incidentally or not, that I had heard years before from one middle-school teacher to another on the morning of September 11, 2001, before the TV was turned on and 30 seventh-graders sat in confusion for the next two hours watching one and then another building fall in scenes that made no sense of scale or proportion.

It was a question that struck me as a freshman as it struck me in seventh grade as what must be a joke. The kind of thing so bold, demanding such honesty, that it must not be meant seriously.

The student in my college course would respond with the same words used by my middle-school teacher, 'Yes, I am.'

At the time I was not the kind of person to speak my reaction out loud, and perhaps the jostling of my perception by the joke disrupted by a non-joke, perhaps that disjunction was enough to force me to stop and think. I didn't, but I wanted to say something.

What she said hurt me. It felt like an offense to me, directed indirectly to me. And I wanted to respond by saying that such a fear was groundless paranoia and unreasonable. I wanted to defend men.

I didn't and I'm thankful in retrospect that I didn't, and yet there is a ghost of that initial impulse. Instead, I went away from the class and I looked into what she said and found something like the statistic that 1 in 6 women [note: it's more] are the victims of sexual assault in their lifetimes. I found out that most victims knew their attacker.

I thought about my own trips late at night returning from a friend's place down a dark path in the woods, and what it would be to see a stranger. Should I smile? Should I look away? Or to be a woman and to try to parse the meaning in someone's half-smile, faint greeting, or the lack thereof. How doubt might figure in the mental calculation for one's safety. To do this every night.

In that impulse to defend a gender which I conspicuously belonged to, I wonder what identification I would have been speaking: that I could more easily rush to solidarity with abstract men than someone talking about her fear, there, in front of me. So she was speaking about me, and she wasn't. It depended on how I wanted to hear her words.

I'm reminded of the passage from Minnie Bruce Pratt that we read: 'Yes, that fear is there, but I will try to be at the edge between my fear and the outside, on the edge at my skin, listening, asking what new thing will I hear, will I see, will I let myself feel, beyond the fear.'

So I say this because we have some difficult work ahead of us. On Friday we saw something of this in the anger, the sense of righteousness and the chance to take a side. On Monday, anger, tinged though with something else, is hatred too strong a word? Something between justice and revenge. I want to continue to go to that place. It's a tender spot. We should go to where it's difficult.

But with all that there are two things that can happen. One of them, very simply, is nothing. We might not read the text, we might not come to class, we might not speak to each other or listen, we might not pay attention. All versions of nothing, but there is a version of nothing where we do read and participate and speak and exchange words. Paulo Freire calls this mere conversation. We don't let other people reach us.

The other thing that can happen is some kind of encounter. Between you and the reading, between you and me, or between you and each other. We allow someone to have an effect on us that we don't fully understand. I don't know how to plan for that.

It is quiet. I feel the density of my monologue, the time I've taken from them with it. It occurs to me that on the pretense of trying to make myself vulnerable to my students with a story of my embarrassment, I've managed to tell a story about 9/11. I'm back within the national community. I've taken a step back from the ledge, convinced I was jumping off it.

A young woman speaks. She is not the silent type, but she has always spoken like she knows it is expected of her. Whenever I have pressed her on a point, she crumbles into half-seriousness. Now she sits forward. She talks about her disgust when reading Andrea Smith's article on indigenous women rendered 'rapable' as a function of colonial genocide.

It's not what she says, but the light in her eyes. She looks at me: 'It's like you said in your journal. I didn't really get it. I knew it was important, but it never bothered me before.'

I fucked up in one direction or another. I'm sure of it, but I hold this thought against the way this student has just said 'bothered,' and the way she's jumping in to respond whenever anyone else speaks.

In a month's time she turns in ten pages about the mug shot she received in the mail of a sex offender that lived around the block, the third grader that called her home and wanted to 'fuck her,' the boy next store who stared into her bedroom window. She writes, 'I was threatened by the possibility that his actions held deeper, more terrifying meaning than just innocent acts of annoyance.' Little unannounced fears coalesce, receive names. That's it.

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By semester's end I've not only reached the limit of the notion that I know something about colonialism, but it's been dragging exhausted behind me for over a month. My desperate desire to communicate that there is something in you, in me, connected to the violence of imperialism, our imperialism, that in some essential way we have been colonized – all this collapses in the weight of term's end, in my weight, in my need to connect. I see finally that what I wanted to impress is that the will to colonize is in the eyes that graze over the text, its most immanent and most abstract aspects coincide in the classroom, where I stand. Maybe this is the only thing that English can do. I try to conjure that, me, little university functionary, little emissary of this thing that doesn't need to understand its own purpose but furies on nonetheless.