

Sanjay Sharma’s ‘Multicultural encounters’

Posted on May 30, 2023 by Claire French
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]The third chapter of Sanjay Sharma’s *Multicultural Encounters* (2006), ‘Teaching Difference: Representations and Rhizomes’, proposes media-based contemporary culture as pedagogical practices for students to discursively shape and make their everyday identities. By analysing the signification of complex characters with multiple and processual identities, students can negotiate anxieties related to their diaspora when engaging institutionalised educational interactions.

In reading Sharma’s chapter, I was reminded of popular media culture nurturing my complex nexus of identities as a catalyst for learning. The below excerpt of Episode 6 in the first season of the Netflix series *Jack Ryan* (2018) features Tony Ahmet Demir (played by Numan Acar) discussing his perspective of privilege. I was drawn to this character because of how he resonated with my connection to rule breakers and generally ‘dodgy’ types in narrative fiction. My dad uses this word ‘dodgy’ to describe the best parts of himself, those that challenge Australian

colonial institutional structures, and those that identify him as an Irishman. I have borrowed these positive associations with the word, calling myself dodgy, embarrassingly even the 'loophole queen'. Sharma's discussions of media culture as a resource for 'the pedagogy of the everyday', brought me to call on these multiple aspects of myself, identities that I don't necessarily introduce to institutional interactions. In so doing, my reading of Sharma's discussion saw me simultaneously embody the 'knowledges and practices that circulate in the sites of media culture which structure students' points of belonging, and play a significant role in the formation of their identities' (2006, 62). My family, my migrant heritage, my push against Australian coloniality, my at-home life with my partner while watching Netflix on the couch, were all welcomed into the learning process to dialogue with Sharma's theorisation.[/vc_column_text][vc_column_text]

> @tv.shows.watchers Geography is Destiny My Friend #jackryan #amazonprime #trending #trend #Tvshow #series #tiktok #viral #hd #tvshows ♬ original sound – TV Shows Watchers

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> "Maybe you are right, but maybe, if I was born in a nice city in America, like Cincinatti, I could be the good guy too. Geography is destiny my friend. The world is the kiln, we are the clay"

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My experience outlined here echoes Sharma's descriptions of Phil Cohen's positive images that explore the 'anti-heroic' trickster figure of 'Anansi the Spiderman' or the 'cowgirl warrior'. He suggests these as a weak psychoanalytic model for exploring the multiplicity of student identities. Similarly, Tony Ahmet Demir provided a weak psychoanalytic model for my learning process through the embodiment of a fractured and misunderstood character. As Sharma's pupil, my subjectivities were situated and discursively reconstructed as a starting point for dismantling the unconscious process of representation impacting pedagogical practices. It seems few academic texts are able to connect with the reader in this way.

I look forward to hearing responses to this chapter that parallel and challenge these reflections. Do join us for the upcoming reading group, chaired by Professor Les Back on Wednesday June 7th.

[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true" css=""]**Date:** 7th June 2023
Title: Multicultural Encounters
Speaker: Sanjay Sharma
Chair: Les Back
Minutes: Nadeen Dakkak[/vc_toggle]

Dr Sanjay Sharma & Prof. Les Back @ IAS Warwick. Photo by Abdullah Safir.

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> "Sanjay's PhD project was very much about pedagogy and teaching, on the space of the classroom and how to think of multicultural encounters within that." – Les

Les began the discussion by mentioning how important their earlier conversations were and by asking Sanjay about what these questions of pedagogy and multicultural encounters meant in the context of the 1990s.

> "Yes, this book was written more than 15 years ago, and this makes it important to subject it to a decolonial review because so much has happened since then." – Sanjay

Although Sanjay said that he was initially apprehensive about today's discussion, the book was about experimentation and taking risks, and thus he is open to re-evaluation and exchange.

Sanjay emphasized that what we do in the classroom is so loaded and charged that we need to think of our pedagogy in what we see as the safe space of the classroom.

For a long time, teachers didn't really think of inclusivity in the classroom, but this idea of inclusive pedagogy, of wanting to include difference and diversity that is central to his book was influenced in the 1990s by Judith Butler's work.

His whole project tried to challenge epistemic violence, which is not easy, but we always have to engage with it. This is even more pertinent in the present moment, which is more complex than when the book was written and published.

Amongst what Sanjay argued in the book was that any pedagogy that deals with difference has to be situated, it has to think about context and how that works. Whatever we do in the classroom is overdetermined by so many discourses from outside. So how do we make any meaningful change with that?

> "Can you tell us more about the classrooms that the project emerged?" – Les
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> "One experience that fed into the project is teaching mixed classes at the University of East London where I didn't know where students were from and learned not to make assumptions." – Sanjay

Sanjay said that while he was trying to undo assumptions, stereotypes were already part of the frame. Sometimes students mimicked what they thought he wanted to hear.

There is this idea of a liberation discourse that we want our students to echo back, but in reality, and particularly when it comes to race the subject positions of students are way more complex than we think.

When he was teaching in the 1990s, it took him a while to realize how complicated the teaching space was and how students were conforming to particular power relations far more than he thought. Maybe this has changed now with student voices becoming stronger.

> "I am interested in hearing about the difference that Sanjay highlighted between the idea of fixity and anti-racist education. This reminded me of Walter Mignolo's critique of postcolonialism as opposed to decoloniality, the former replacing one hegemonic discourse with another. This makes fixity a feature of postcolonialism, hence decoloniality as an alternative. Have you read and thought of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which has circulated much since the 1970s but was not mentioned in your book?" – Reader

> "I was very aware of Freire's work but didn't engage with it directly." – Sanjay

Sanjay said it was relevant because critical to his project was the idea of which position you need to take when you encounter alterity. Freire's work hasn't gone away, and in retrospect, he may be able to return to it now with all the work we're doing in relation to the decolonial. These antecedents of decoloniality thinking were there in earlier years.

> "Can you reflect on the importance of not looking away from embodied experiences in the classroom, the idea of an embodied teaching environment?" – Les

> "I had thought a great deal about the embodied lecturer, especially through bell hooks' work, but struggled with its final placement in the book" – Sanjay

Sanjay emphasised that because of his position as a racialized lecturer, he didn't want to overstate what he was trying to do. He wanted to focus on the texts themselves and their loaded nature. The texts displaced him, and he let them do the pedagogy.

> "This was quite brave 20 years ago." – Les

> "We need to talk about failure in pedagogy and teaching." – Sanjay

Sanjay continued with there always being unknowns, things we cannot measure. We must open-up spaces to deal with contingencies, to do less in advance and put ourselves at more risk.

> "I always find myself in an embodied space of displacement in order to protect myself and my authority"- Reader

> "The racialized teacher may be in this position." – Sanjay

Sanjay said that we need to know what our authority is, we need to learn how to use it to develop our teaching and protect ourselves. That is not a bad thing.

> "There was a point in time when tuition fees were raised. How is that dynamic of the teacher and pupil undermined by the sheer expense of going to university and the level of entitlement that students have? This is different from when the book was published." – Reader

> "This neo-liberalization of education and how students are treated as customers does change things. Once you locate an instrumental end, like employability and so on, what happens to the classroom?" – Sanjay

Sanjay continued with assessment orientation in education as an example. It makes teaching harder but that's the condition we are in, and we are all complicit in one way or another. We can still find ways of subversion and ways of engaging students in creative ways, even with all the assessments and other things that are part of the job.

> "We make the university every day. We don't make it under conditions of our choosing, but we have the capacity for agency in this uncertain space, and that's what we see in the book, which does not suppress the difficulty of processes of learning and thinking together." – Les

> "How do we connect effectively and emotionally with students?" – Sanjay

Sanjay returned to the idea of the embodied teacher and one piece of feedback he got from a student on how he was always being too serious. He realized that he needed to be himself and gradually he reached a point

in the seminars where he could be with the students, approaching difficult questions together. An important point here is making himself vulnerable in the classroom. He wasn't just an abstract and rational teacher but talked about his own experience. Of course, that takes time to develop.

Think of the massive amount of agency that we have, it's just that we don't always know how to make use of it.

> "What about the situation of diversity hires, being hired because of how we look, or because we tick a box? How do we infuse that in the curriculum?" – Reader
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> "You have to know your limits. There is a certain degree of vulnerability and being open that is needed." – Sanjay
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> "Sometimes pursuing a pedagogy that allies with the student may not align with the institution, which I am fine with, but it may also disagree with colleagues whose work is more aligned with the institution. What are ways of navigating that?" – Reader
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> "This gets us to talk about pedagogy in our departments and how it filters into the classroom." – Sanjay

Sanjay went on to discuss how given how much time it takes to prepare, you can't do everything on your own and you need to find allies within colleagues to try to change the department culture. This is being eroded every year.

> "For universities, there is a market logic of diversifying the staff because diversity means profitability" – Les

This is today much more acceptable than it was two decades ago when the book was published in the context of liberal multiculturalism. Les noted how this is a moment in time which even conservative politicians talk about critical race theory, so diversity is not just about the classroom.

> "Students bring to the classroom the different racial logics that they are confronted with every day" – Sanjay

Sanjay said that we come into the classroom, it's almost like we try to freeze the moment. In the every day, that moment flows, critical distance has collapsed, and we don't have the gap to be able to look at something, understand it and reflect on it, so we react instead of reflecting. We scroll and flick-screen rather than read. And our teaching environments are not always prepared for that constant reactivity.

> "How is the teacher also an actor, or is the classroom also a theatre? What do you think of this position of the lecturer as a performer?" – Reader
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> "All teaching is performative to some extent" – Sanjay

Sanjay continued by discussing Stuart Hall and his incredible capacity to generate an affective environment that captures attention. Having this performativity is part of being a good lecturer, not in a manipulative sense, but as a form of engagement. So, it's impossible in some educational contexts not to use slides, for example. What we use in the classroom space really changes the space and the encounter. Whether slides, music, a clip, etc., it all needs careful thinking and has the effect of changing the space.

> "How do we handle the legacy of racism in texts?" – Les

Les continued with: How do we treat the voice and representation of explicit racism in texts that we teach? Close analysis has been suggested by colleagues, but that has been resisted by some students.

> "I have struggled with this for years and I haven't yet come up with an answer" – Sanjay

Sanjay suggested that when he's done it, it's a contingent act. He reads the room to see what would work in the classroom. He doesn't introduce the text straight away. He might introduce a different text. And that's what he called 'situated pedagogy' in the book, how we co-create the learning space with our students.

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Sanjay and Les joined us for our first reading group since being collectively organised as *Reading Decoloniality*.

Les chaired the discussion with warmth and a deep sense of integrity, making connections between the time that the text was written (2006) and the present moment (2023). He inflected the conversation with notes on their relationship, the challenges of teaching race and the changing political climate that makes 'critical race theory' into a catchphrase.

Sanjay emphasised the practical, realistic and imaginative starting points for pedagogies that reflect, and sit in dialogue with, a multiplicity of identities of learners and teachers. This final identity-based focus helped us return to the insights of his third chapter. He drew from his vast experience since writing *Multicultural Encounters* including his move from education to race studies.

By choosing Sanjay's text for reading in our current decolonial era, we focused less on the ontological inscriptions of the terms at the centre of the reading, and more on how all terms are used for the neoliberal goals of institutions. The discussion circulated knowledge about how the institutional harnessing of decoloniality can be put to good use with resources, power and agency in the hands of teachers and learners.

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Editor: GIULIA CHAMPION
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