

LOCATING THE INNER WORLD OF TEACHING:
NOTES ON APARNA MISHRA TARC'S *LITERACY OF THE OTHER*

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Literacy of the Other: Renarrating Humanity

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In "Fictive Readings," an early chapter of the remarkable book *Literacy of the Other*, Aparna Mishra Tarc (2015) characterizes her "creative intervention" (p. 24) with a primary school student, Nelson, who, from his very troubled place in the world, troubled his peers and teachers with "unfathomable rage and grief" (p. 21).¹ "From birth Nelson had suffered," Mishra Tarc explains, "numerous losses of primary attachment to people and places," having been "born into historical conditions of civil war and conflict in a small nation in the global South . . . [o]rphaned at birth . . . [and] adopted by Westerners" (pp. 21-22). Concerned about his wellbeing, Nelson's new family, school, and community nonetheless largely obscured the difficult conditions of his early life and the experience of racial difference and alienation that he suffered in his new home.² As a result, Nelson's anger and anxiety found little world of understanding. Mishra Tarc recalls the fraught work with Nelson, when, as a beginning teacher, she became immersed in the emotional and symbolic maelstrom of Nelson's revolt against the promise and seeming impossibility of relating with others. Mishra Tarc writes of Nelson:

Communication of his deepest frustrations curiously paralleled his strategic use of offensive verbal expressions. His rabid verbiage consisted of a surprising yet necessary defense of himself. Nelson's jarring speech, deemed inappropriate by his guardians and teachers, had the effect of barring those who might help him. His cries for help were drowned out by his brazen and rude use of language. Through the language warfare he enacted, Nelson

successfully managed to repel anyone coming remotely close to his stealthily protected insides. (p. 23)

Concerned with “containing Nelson’s uncontrollable outbursts in the classroom,” his “language warfare,” the school coordinated team meetings largely centered on fortifying Mishra Tarc with “decontextualized labels and strategies” to address Nelson’s psychological disturbances. Mishra Tarc’s professional training compelled her to seek broader understanding of Nelson’s experience and to expand, rather than narrow, his opportunities for communicating and learning. As Nelson’s teacher, however, Mishra Tarc too was subject to the circuits of institutional authority and social demand mobilized to order and organize Nelson’s behavior, emotional life, and being. Therefore, as Nelson’s existential and emotional predicament came to mark, in the eyes of his parents, Mishra Tarc’s “failure as a teacher” (p. 23), she retreated from professional community, seeking, in her private experience and the insight of her literary education, a workable, indeed a livable, pedagogic relation.

Mishra Tarc’s “creative intervention” with Nelson emerged then from her autobiography—in the sense that many scholars use the term in the field of curriculum studies (e.g., Casemore, 2008; Grumet, 1990; Miller, 2005; Pinar, 2012; Salvio, 2007)—not as a storehouse of storied personal truth, but as intellectual and emotional labor conducted to disclose and explore individual subjective experience in particular engagements with otherness. In her withdrawal from professional association, Mishra Tarc (2015) tells us, she confronted herself as another, as a child, first attempting “to speak of an inner existence maligned and liberated by language” (p. 1). She narrates the movement away from institutional authority, where a demand for compliance exceeded an interest in meaning, to her inner world, where meaning is forged from thoughts and things, words and affects, abundant and resonant but agonizing and out of scale. Mishra Tarc writes:

Self-exiled from the school community and my colleagues, I retreated inside myself and away from my teacher training. There, I rediscovered a slew of memories of another, less violently displaced child. This verbally precocious child of melancholic immigrant South Asians learned to navigate inhospitable territory with her father’s thick *Webster’s Dictionary* in hand. Into my deeply affected response to Nelson’s emotional turmoil, I transferred my father’s imperative to exploit English, hoping to turn it to Nelson’s advantage. I began fashioning spectacular narratives to soothe his

conflict waged with words. Through these words, of displacement, journey, estrangement, and belonging, he began to puzzle together a story that plausibly represented his inconsolable losses of formative places and people. (p. 23)

In Mishra Tarc's psychical retreat, Nelson's defensive, tumultuous speech resonated, his inarticulate torment compelling her to pick up the thread of his story in her own. What Nelson could not say, the experience of movement between worlds that he could not speak, experience silenced but demanding symbolization, reached Mishra Tarc beyond the capacity and order of the school—in her own situation of “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998), in the memory of her family's immigrant experience, in the “rough linguistic terrain” of her childhood (Mishra Tarc, 2015, p. 2), where her literacy in English was troubled and animated by the loss and fragmentation of her mother tongue.

Like Nelson, Mishra Tarc (2015) had an experience of family, place, and displacement structured by the global North-South divide, a life shaped in particular ways by historical and macrosocial forces of colonization.³ *Literacy of the Other* proceeds through a careful engagement with postcolonial literature and scholarship that reveals “the power of English language and literacy in colonizing projects of human oppression” (p. 11), and the political insight certainly infuses the account of Mishra Tarc's relationship with Nelson. As such, the elaboration of her pedagogy exemplifies, perhaps, “everyday school-life studies” that disclose the circuits, ruptures, and limits of the “coloniality of knowledge” (Oliveira, 2017, pp. 2-3).

Mishra Tarc (2015) shares her pedagogical narrative in the understanding that “literacy and education might reckon with unbearable colonial processes that find their roots in the modern human family story” (p. 50). In this context, she insists that “a hospitable pedagogy of literacy might help soften the blow that the symbolic world wages on the child's unique sense of herself,” arguing that “reorienting literacy in our felt response to others” —a reorienting we witness in her relationship with Nelson— “can serve to alter dominant forms and usages of language that diminish sentient life” (p. 11). Following postcolonial writers such as Homi Bhabha, Mishra Tarc turns to psychoanalysis, taking seriously the consequences of the colonial projects of education and assimilation for the inner world (p. 50). *Literacy of the Other*, then, significantly engages psychoanalytic thought in curriculum studies (Britzman, 2003, 2006, 2009; Grumet, 1988; Gilbert, 2007; Farley, 2012; Lewkovich, 2012), expanding the significance of psychoanalysis for social and historical critique

in education (Britzman, 2000; Pinar, 1991; Salvio, 2007; Taubman, 2012), as Mishra Tarc makes a compelling and unique contribution to psychoanalytic scholarship in the field.⁴ However, having lacked professional training in psychoanalysis for her work with Nelson, she characterizes her pedagogy as “faltering” and “not quite psychoanalytic” (p. 28). This incomplete alignment of her teaching with psychoanalysis, therefore, invites reflection on Mishra Tarc’s particular elucidation of the psychical terrain of education.

Mishra Tarc’s (2015) new pedagogic relation with Nelson, cultivated through her self-analysis, “hinged on his off-putting expressions of existence” (p. 24). If Mishra Tarc’s narrative were a psychoanalytic account—that is, a narrative from the clinic—we might describe or speculate about the quality of attention, evenly suspended or otherwise, that Mishra Tarc employed to establish an analytic frame, to situate her subjectivity in the reception of Nelson’s raw sense impressions: words so, seemingly, stripped of significance, symbolic constructions so repellent in their uncanny conveyance of suffering, as to be felt as concrete things. “He gnawed on his fingers and pencil,” Mishra Tarc tells us. “He shouted at ghosts inside and outside of the classroom. He pleaded with fantasized demons to ‘get off him’” (p. 24). If this were psychoanalytic case material, we might consider the theory of free association or symbolic play that situated Mishra Tarc in the analytic work with Nelson—and, therefore, the particular forms of expression that were available for interpretation toward the therapeutic task. From her pedagogical position, Mishra Tarc did indeed interpret “Nelson’s powerful and precocious use of English as the sole means by which he resiliently and quite brilliantly expressed a semblance of his incomprehensive beginnings” (p. 24). If this were psychoanalysis, we would begin with a discussion of the analyst’s role, task, and boundary—describing the analytic conditions by which Nelson might re-symbolize phantasy and object relations, develop self-insight, mourn the losses rending the self, and work through his difficult experience. But this is not an account from the psychoanalytic clinic. This is the story of a teacher. This is the story of a teacher teaching *as if her life depended on it*.⁵

This is a literacy education that follows the contours of the inner world. This is a life in language meeting another in a pedagogical relation. This is a student in a school undergoing a curriculum, a teacher daring to consider the child’s enigmatic insides and complex social situation as central to his life of study. This is learning to read and write with a teacher who understands that language, teeming with unsymbolized and unsymbolizable experience, is the key to survival. This is a

teacher engaged in autobiography, who knows “how knowing thy self can go terribly wrong” (p. 49), who nonetheless takes up that intrapsychic labor to make room for another, a student, in a literacy of the other, understood as “a felt labor of the meaning of words, an emotional search of untold meanings contained by a word” (p. 45).

Embroided in her own literacy education, mourning, still, the loss of her own mother tongue, turning its mysterious trace into linguistic power and delight, its unique cadence into another voice, having become “well versed in a silenced litany of [her family’s] origins ... reinvented in the torn fabric of immigrant life” (p. 3), Mishra Tarc met Nelson in the clearing of his existence—a clearing of being and relating made perceptible, not by the psychoanalytic frame, but rather by pedagogy. She writes:

I latched onto his forms of speech, and, together, we began to imaginatively unravel each detail of his shocking symbolic constructions. I viewed these strange expressions as Nelson’s psychological literacy: his unique idiom, accent, and incredible inner means of formally structuring fragments of thought in strange poetic form. (p. 24)

Mishra Tarc’s theory of literacy education is deeply rooted in psychoanalytic thought. She draws specifically on the writings of Melanie Klein—and Klein’s work in child psychoanalysis—to describe the process of symbolization by which the child “attempt[s] to put words to a felt existence” (p. 43). Kleinian psychoanalysis—and the larger field of object relations theory—orients Mishra Tarc to the profound significance of the bond between mother and child and the child’s phantasy life. From this particular psychoanalytic point of view, she advances the idea that phantasy—an amalgam of thought, image, and feeling—emerges from a child’s earliest relating with a “formative, caregiving other” (p. 135) and contains the psychic imprint of the other: the other’s enigmatic presence, drive, and desire. As a fundamental mental process, nascent at birth and increasing in complexity through experience, phantasy—this imprint of otherness—is an ineradicable subjective frame on reality, internal and external. Elaborating on one of Melanie Klein’s earliest cases of child analysis, Mishra Tarc writes:

In infancy, phantasy consists of warring mental impressions of reality that the baby sensorially experiences of an other. This

incredible mental capacity to visually image the other's lived reality evolves into its symbolic forms as the child grows. (p. 43)

Attending to the maternal relation, a child's earliest experiences of attachment and care, Mishra Tarc turns, as well, to the work of Donald Winnicott, to argue that "the mother holds and bears witness to the child's infancy, a time that is fleeting and forgettable and, at times, deeply hated by all" (p. 49). Calling us to a "literacy of the other," a literacy that cannot know its origins, Mishra Tarc illuminates the significance of infancy—life before speech—in the creation of meaning. "Lost quickly to consciousness," she explains, "infancy remains stirring in our symbolic efforts to say anything at all about the world in which we live" (p. 49).

Mishra Tarc's "literacy of the other," therefore, does indeed emerge from her substantial engagement with psychoanalytic theory. The book is steeped in psychoanalysis and therefore invites elaboration on its psychoanalytic significance. Reflecting on Mishra Tarc's work with Nelson, we can say, in psychoanalytic terms, for example, that through an analysis of her countertransference—that is, through capacious attention to the inner experience Nelson provoked in her—Mishra Tarc cultivated, in Grotstein's (2005) words, "a state of empathic resonance" that included her "partial identification" with Nelson's projections, a kind of "trial identification" that allowed the memory of her own agonistic relationship with language to emerge (p. 1064).

Also, and importantly, her empathic stance afforded sufficient reflective distance from the identification—a sense of uncertainty about the meaning of Nelson's fraught speech—such that she could hold Nelson's emotions and troubled language in mind toward their shared re-symbolization of his experience. Psychoanalysis is useful, as well, in thinking about the empirical character of the psychical events in Mishra Tarc's narrative of teaching. Relevant here is Edna O'Shaughnessy's (1994) elaboration on a "clinical fact" as subjective and intersubjective force and meaning—clinical facts, in her terms, being "lived facts of the shifting object relations between [the analyst] and [the] patient" (p. 994). Mishra Tarc's narrative certainly reveals the substantial effects of immaterial, internal reality.

However, what Mishra Tarc offers us is not, in a strict sense, a psychoanalytic pedagogy. She does not instrumentally translate psychoanalytic method and insight from the clinic into the sphere and practice of education. Such a translation is nonetheless appealing. Given that, as O'Shaughnessy (1994) argues, "under the

unusual conditions of an analytic hour an analyst gains privileged access to a patient's *interiority*" (p. 994), an education oriented to the inner lives of students and teachers certainly invites thought about rendering pedagogy psychoanalytic in nature. Where education, in the throes of standardization and quantification, becomes a soul deadening experience, it demands concern for the fundamental experience of aliveness, for a recovery of the inner world—leading us, with good reason, to the particular conditions of psychoanalysis, where, O'Shaughnessy continues, "inner life emerges with a detail and depth not elsewhere accessible" (p. 944). Where institutional education diminishes, indeed destroys, the conditions necessary for subjective vibrancy and self-understanding, we rightly seek insight from psychoanalysis in its thoroughgoing commitment to meaningful, capacious, and creative self-formation. Translating psychoanalysis into education, therefore, seems a promising endeavor.

However, Mishra Tarc's commitment to the significance of the teacher, her unflinching and unabashed attention to interiority in pedagogical relationships, and her brilliant study of the pedagogic dimensions of literature—"pedagogic" being the word she uses "to describe the inner communion of inner meaningful exchange between two people" (p. 39)—these elements of Mishra Tarc's work, along with her use of autobiography to examine the inner world of teaching, have upended my sense that there is any translating *from* psychoanalysis to be undertaken. Mishra Tarc calls us instead to the specification of pedagogy as professional labor, as mode of human engagement, as dynamic of literary and aesthetic encounter, with its own frame for the inner world, with its own interior condition, with its own wrangle with otherness—with the problem of psychical literacy, "the internal situation waiting to be symbolically expressed" (p. 28), at its core.

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Notes

- ¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented in the “Provoking Dialogue” series at the 38th Annual Meeting of the Bergamo Conference on Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice in Dayton, Ohio, October 2017.
- ² Mishra Tarc (2015) notes that in school, “the fact of Nelson’s ‘foreign’ racial and ethnic status” was ignored, as the school support team “bracketed out” this area of significance, focusing instead on managing Nelson’s behavior (p. 22). In *Literacy of the Other*, Mishra Tarc does not elaborate further on Nelson’s experience of racial and ethnic difference. In her article “Race Moves,” however, Mishra Tarc explores relevant context, specifically the influence of global forces on psychic and social dynamics of race in intimate spaces of family, community, culture, and school. Her analysis in the article can provide insight into the difficulty of Nelson’s immigration through adoption, inviting us to consider the complex effects of racism that likely structured his movement from the global South to the global North. The article reveals, as well, the substantial scope and complexity of Mishra Tarc’s scholarship. In “Race Moves,” drawing on postcolonial and psychoanalytic thought, Mishra Tarc (2013) characterizes and calls for further investigation of “the persistent psychical effects of racism on the psychosocial development of individuals and collectives [that] are often both intangible and persistent” (p. 370).
- ³ For further consideration of global North-South issues in curriculum studies, including the coloniality of knowledge and linguistic imperialism, see the “Multivocal Response and Discussion” about João Parakeva’s contributions to the field in the *Journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies* (Jupp, 2017a, 2017b).
- ⁴ In *Disavowed Knowledge: Psychoanalysis, Education, and Teaching*, Peter Taubman (2012) provides a substantial exploration of the complex historical relationship between education and psychoanalysis. Taking account of this relationship from 1968 to the present, Taubman characterizes specifically the significant role of psychoanalysis in the reconceptualization of curriculum studies and the contemporary field (pp. 178-180)
- ⁵ Mishra Tarc (2015) begins *Literacy of the Other* with reflection on the “affective force” (p. 1) of a statement made by Adrienne Rich (1993): “You must write, and read, as if your life depended upon it. That is not generally taught in school” (p. 33).