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PhD revisited: How students in Eritrea and Norway make sense of literature¹

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ABSTRACT This chapter summarises a doctoral study (Munden, 2010) that describes, compares and explains how student teachers make sense of literature. The twenty-two participants were student teachers of English in either Norway or Eritrea. They first wrote answers to a questionnaire and then to assignments based on three literary texts. How and what they wrote provides insight into their cultural and academic expectations and socialisation, both as members of an interpretive community and as individuals. These insights can contribute to raising English teachers' awareness of how differently learners make sense of texts in their own classrooms.

KEYWORDS Norway | Eritrea | English-language literature | reader response

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1. The chapter presents the main findings of a doctoral study (Munden, 2010) from the University of Oslo. The thesis in its entirety – with theoretical, methodological and empirical details – can be found here: <https://brage.bibsys.no/xmlui/handle/11250/132010>.

INTRODUCTION

The anthropologist Fredrik Barth once wrote:

If we want to understand something of other people's lives, we have to accept *their* perceptions of what is important in life; we must listen to them and their priorities. [...] about justice and belief and love and death and violence, on freedom and what they count as personal fulfilment. (1991, p. 8, my translation, original italics)

The premise of the research presented in this chapter is that literature can help us “understand something of other people's lives”, because how readers respond to literature tells us a great deal about the values, attitudes and experiences of their everyday lives. The empirical data comprised a questionnaire and student teachers' texts written in response to three literary works. It was collected from students at two institutions offering teacher education, one in Norway and one in Eritrea. Furthermore, a review of the cultural, social, and educational contexts in which these two groups of students were embedded was undertaken in order to offer an answer to the question

How is Eritrean literature in English read in Norway and Eritrea?

The differences between the two sets can be discussed in relation to many factors. One of the more important of these is the conventions and preoccupations of the media in Eritrea and Norway. Newspapers, television and radio in Eritrea, all of which are state-run, are adulatory of the nation and of the president, and news coverage is predominantly made up of success stories. Problems, if mentioned at all, are consistently dismissed as misinformation or foreign propaganda. In Norway, national and local public media tend to be problem-oriented, contributing to a perception of the world as somewhere where individual and collective agency is often overtaken by events beyond popular control. This mediated world view necessarily contributes to the interpretive strategies available to Eritrean and Norwegian readers.

By exploring the role and functions of culture and context, this study ventures not only to describe, but also to *explain* how people understand the world. By comparing the texts of the Norwegian and the Eritrean respondents, a researcher resident in Norway can establish a distance to the world of the Norwegian students, identifying values and assumptions that are otherwise so familiar as to be taken for granted. It also allows for the exploration of values and assumptions in

a less familiar cultural and national setting. Particularly in the years following 9/11, people have demanded explanations for alternative systems of collective meaning (Griswold, 2008). In fact, Wendy Griswold reports that the increased research interest in culture and context dates back forty or so years, and can be understood as an aspect of globalisation, which generates a pressing need to understand groups of people who seem to think differently from “us”.

THEORY

In an interdisciplinary study such as this, theory – understood as a way of making sense of complex empirical material – must draw on different fields for different purposes. Theory is needed to develop an understanding of what readers do when they make sense of, or interpret, literary texts. It is also necessary in order to establish a workable definition for the terms “culture” and “nation”, and to understand the implications of talking about individuals as representatives of a group. Finally, literary and discourse theory supply categories for the description of student texts as culturally situated. In what follows I sketch some of these theoretical gatherings.

READERS AND WRITERS

Louise Rosenblatt is credited with launching the claim that a text does not exist without a reader, and that readers are therefore as important as the texts they read (1983, p. xiv). Rosenblatt sees readers as integrated subjects who bring their sensitivities and experience to each reading event. “Every time a reader experiences a work of art, it is in a sense created anew” (1983, p. 113). A literary text, she says, will have “very different meaning and value to us at different times or under different circumstances”.

J. A. Appleyard (1991) describes becoming a reader as a set of developmental stages, where the university student has reached the advanced stage of systematic interpreter. This role in Appleyard’s schema is higher than the role of the adolescent reader, who looks to find a message about how to live his or her life. The first is arguably a more sophisticated reading, but it is not “higher” or better.

Rosenblatt and Appleyard are, in their different ways, concerned with how individual readers make sense of texts. Stanley Fish (1980), on the other hand, is primarily concerned with collective strategies. Although he describes interpreting works of literature as an individual activity, it is, he says, authorised and constrained by the various interpretive communities to which a reader belongs. The

idea of interpretive communities was central to this research project, but so was the nitty-gritty of how these communities were constituted and maintained – something Fish himself had little interest in, beyond acknowledging the central role of ideology.

These various understandings of what it means to be a skilled reader represent competing ideological positions if we understand ideology to be “seemingly coherent representations and explanations of our social practices, and the language by which we describe and thus try to perpetuate them” (McCormick, 1994, p. 74). Kathleen McCormick stresses that both texts and readers are ideologically situated (1994, p. 60). Stuart Hall describes how ideology prescribes the way we can make sense of our social reality. As individuals we “speak through” a particular ideology of which we are often not aware, because we understand the categories that we use to be common sense (Hall, 2006). This matters, because how we talk about things determines how we understand ourselves in relation to everybody else, both locally and globally. Hall offers a way of dealing with ideology in texts by considering how groups share, adapt or resist the ways in which information is presented (Hall, 2001). These positions he calls “dominant”, “negotiated” and “oppositional”, and they provide a framework for the discussion of the students’ response to *The Other War*, the most ideologically loaded of the three literary texts.

Peter Rabinowitz (1987) argues that an author always writes features into a text with the expectation that the reader will find them. For Rabinowitz, this “authorial reader” is an imagined someone who shares the author’s understanding of these features. Very often it will involve an assumption of values and particular historical or cultural knowledge, knowledge that the contemporary reader was assumed to have, but that today’s reader, at some distance of time or space, may lack. The student texts had themselves an authorial reader, and were written in relation to differing traditions of academic socialisation (Lea & Street, 2006). As Ken Hyland explains, “writing is a social act, and every successful text must display its writer’s ability to engage appropriately with his or her audience” (2001, p. 571).

CULTURE AND NATION

“Culture” and “nation” are two hypercomplex terms that had to be beaten into shape and put to work in order to analyse the material in this study. The term “culture” is extremely complex, and can be as misleading as it is helpful. Clifford Geertz usefully describes culture as that which has meaning for a group of people

– attitudes and values that are held in common (1973). Geertz claims that culture is observable as actions in the public domain, and such actions would include the writing of texts. Culture can therefore, he says, be described and studied. This relatively stable definition has been challenged by a more recent emphasis on cultural repertoires. Thinking of culture as a repertoire of possible patterns, perceptions and behaviours allows us to ask not only what someone has in their repertoire, but why they perform some items more frequently than others, and under what circumstances (Swidler, 2001, p. 25). Swidler argues that we are too inclined to regard culture as internalized meanings and practices rather than as people’s knowledge of which cultural repertoires are appropriate in the public domain (2001, p. 180).

The term “nation” also has different connotations in different contexts (Oliphant, 2004). My use of the term acknowledges that both Norway and Eritrea are imagined and constructed as nations, though at different times and in significantly different ways. Norway and Eritrea share the idea of “a deep, horizontal comradeship” as constitutive of their respective national cultures (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). A relatively new nation state such as Eritrea, which gained independence in 1993, will typically seek to create a discontinuity with other nations by underlining some few, clearly contrastive symbols and signs (Barth, 2001, p. 840). This theorisation of what it means to be a nation sees the writing of history as a struggle about who has the resources to represent the past (2001, p. 836), and literature is a key site where this struggle can be played out.

REVIEW OF EARLIER RESEARCH

This review focuses on two areas: studies of how literature has been received in Eritrea and Norway, and studies that compare how the same text is received in two or more different nations.

RECEPTION STUDIES IN ERITREA AND NORWAY

I found only one published article that focussed on the reception of Eritrean literature. It was written in defence of a widely criticised novel (Negash, 2003). The marginal position of reception studies is not particular to Eritrea. In *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory* (Quayson & Olaniyan, 2007), there are 97 articles by scholars of African literature; not one of them addresses how readers respond to literature.

In Norway there were two doctoral theses of particular importance to the present study. Their importance lies both in the questions they ask and answer, and, not least, in their focus on the diversity of the students in their classes. Both deal with the reception of Norwegian literary texts in upper secondary schools, and both follow the pupils over several years. Jon Smidt's (1989) fascination with and empathy for his pupils and his interest in the insights they provided into his own didactic assumptions functioned as a model for my own writing. So too did Rita Hvistendahl's (2000) study, which sensitively investigated the socio-cultural experience and value systems of her immigrant pupils. She argued for the importance of "where" as a didactic category, defining it as "the cultural context in and around the individual classroom" (200, p. 364, my translation). Unlike these two researchers, however, I was interested not in the readers' development, but in the national and cultural contexts to which their responses provided access.

COMPARATIVE STUDIES OF READER-RESPONSE

There are only a handful of qualitative comparative studies of reader response, and this is perhaps because it has been regarded as a challenging research field (Greaney & Neuman, 1990). Two-nation studies include those by Yousef (1986), Ibsen & Wiland (2000), Smith (2000) and Brutscher (2007). There are also several cross-national studies (Kovalala & Vainikkala, 2000; Hirsjärvi, 2006; "Devolving Diasporas", 2008). The studies suggest significant national and gender differences between readers. However, inter-researcher variation in cross-national studies makes it difficult to claim that the findings would be reproduced if the studies were to be replicated. To improve reliability was therefore a central concern of the present study, with a parallel design for the collection of both sets of material, and a stringent reporting of any variations in methodology.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study set out to answer the question "How is Eritrean literature in English read in Norway and Eritrea?" Empirical research in Eritrea must take into account extensive and largely invisible systems of surveillance. The research design had therefore a transparent format: Eritrean and Norwegian student teachers completed a questionnaire about their experiences and attitudes to literature, and then wrote a response to three literary texts, a fable, a short story and a play, in that order. The research design required

- ▶ an understanding of the challenges of comparative qualitative research
- ▶ an awareness of the project's ethical dimensions
- ▶ selecting, finding out about and describing respondents in the two countries
- ▶ choosing suitable literary texts
- ▶ eliciting response to these texts
- ▶ establishing how to analyse and present the material

A challenge in any qualitative, comparative project is that it sets out in the hope of finding similarities and differences. The researcher must therefore be careful not to construct difference on flimsy evidence, nor to fall into the trap of what Edward Said (1978) calls “othering”, taking the culture with which one is most familiar as the norm against which other cultural behaviour is measured.

RESPONDENTS

The respondents are “Norwegian” or “Eritrean” on the basis of attending colleges in Norway or Eritrea. They were recruited from classes to which I already had access (Norway), or to whom I was allowed access (Eritrea). Most of the first group were born in Norway, and spoke Norwegian as their first language. Most of the second group were born in Eritrea, and spoke Tigrinya as their first language. All the same, it is an epistemological, educational and ethical absurdity to construct one group of “ethnic Norwegians” and another of “ethnic Eritreans”. The students are described as Norwegian or Eritrean by virtue of their being educated and encultured in Norway or Eritrea.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Only the twenty-two who completed a full data set were included in the analysis. These student teachers – ten from Norway and twelve from Eritrea – first completed a questionnaire and then, over the course of three or four lessons, wrote a response to each of the three literary texts. These sessions were an intervention in Eritrea negotiated with individual members of the teaching staff. For the Norwegian students, they were an integral part of a course on contemporary African literature. The same classroom procedures for data collection were used in both countries, and approved by the respective authorities.

To draw an accurate picture of the contexts in which the material was collected, an extensive literature review was undertaken, and supplemented by informal and unrecorded conversations in Eritrea over six visits.

QUESTIONNAIRES

The protection of participants' anonymity and the need for a method where a large amount of data could be collected in a limited amount of time were crucial considerations in the choice of method. Dörnyei (2003) contests that the unprecedented efficiency of questionnaires allows the researcher to collect "a huge amount of information in less than an hour" (p. 9). Questionnaires in a classroom setting also increase the likelihood of a high response rate (Bernard, 2002, p. 250).

A four-page questionnaire with closed- and open-ended questions was administered, in slightly different versions, in Norway and in Eritrea. There were three main areas of enquiry:

- ▶ educational and language background
- ▶ experience of literature in and outside formal education
- ▶ attitudes to literature

Both groups wrote in intelligible English and took time, answering the questions with apparent care. The answers were anonymised, transcribed and analysed. The results from Likert scales were represented in simple figures or bar charts. Answers that are deemed socially or academically desirable are sometimes over-represented in self-reporting questionnaires, and a certain caution is in order with regard to the validity of the answers in the present study.

WRITTEN RESPONSES

Table 15.1 provides an overview of how the student texts were elicited.

I made sense of the students' texts in much the same way as the students made sense of the literary texts. Like them I put my culture to work, using the literary repertoire and the interpretive strategies available to me. As Fish (1980) argues, the presuppositions we bring to every new textual encounter are necessary for understanding to happen at all. Taking literature as a socially-constructed category, I focussed on how ideology encoded in each literary text was decoded in the student texts; on the extent to which the students were authorial readers; and on the students' written relationship to the reader of their own texts.

TABLE 15.1. The literary texts and the associated writing assignments.

Literary text	Genre and date of first publication	Form of presentation	Written assignment
“The Monkey and the Crocodile”	fable	written text supplied and read aloud by researcher	a) What is the message of this story? (very short answer) b) <i>Either</i> your thoughts about the story; <i>or</i> a different story with the same message
“Anisino”	short story, 2005	written text supplied and read individually in silence	a) Complete three sentence fragments which begin “This story is about...”. b) If there is anything else you would like to add, please do.
<i>The Other War</i>	5-act play, 1984	written text supplied, and a recorded amateur dramatisation played, one act at a time	A four-part response log written immediately after Acts 1, 2, 3 and 5, each entry initiated with a short prompt

Since the literary texts in this study were written by Eritrean authors and set in Eritrea, assumptions about the authorial reader (Rabinowitz, 1987) provided a productive area of analysis and comparison. Also useful was the concept of “the institutional conditions for the reading of literature” (Westerberg, 1990, p. 91), to explain how a text introduced in a classroom setting is read under the micro and macro conditions prevailing at that particular school.

The analysis moved between the microscopic – examining small details of language – and the telescopic – making far away things apparent. At the linguistic level I looked at particular words and phrases and how they functioned in their immediate co-text. At a discursive level I looked at how textual features were used to express certainty and ambivalence, and to position the writer in relation to their reader. I identified the information that they as writers provided to orientate their readers, and developed the concepts of owning, hosting and visiting literary texts. At an interpretive level, I categorised and explored the messages, themes and ideas that the students identified. Descriptive categories were generated by reading and re-reading their texts over a period of many weeks. The process involved continually revising the identifying features of each category, as well as finding the most apposite name for them. In this chapter, it is this interpretive level which receives most attention.

CHALLENGES TO THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Despite the symmetrical research design at the outset, the realities of working in Eritrea and Norway led to increasing asymmetry as the data collection progressed. This was to a large extent due to factors beyond my control such as whether the students themselves gave informed consent (Norway), or whether it was given on their behalf (Eritrea), how anonymity was perceived and ensured, the supplementary explanations required for the written assignments, the amount of interaction I had with the two groups over and above the data collection sessions, the way the project was understood, facilitated and valued in the two academic contexts, the freedom with which the students could express themselves, and the very different consequences of perceived inappropriate behaviour.

FINDINGS

THE ERITREAN RESPONDENTS AS READERS

The group was made up of ten men and two women, a distribution similar to the overall gender distribution on the campus, where rather less than 20% of the students were women. Eight of the respondents were between twenty-two and twenty-seven years old; two were younger and two were older. Most of these twelve Eritrean student teachers came from farming families where the parents were illiterate. At school their English teachers would not have had textbooks, nor any English books in their homes (cf. Wright, 2001). The students would probably have had little reading material in their schools, none in their home environments, and little opportunity for reading otherwise since decentralised libraries had only developed since about 2005.

Several of the Eritrean students reported that poetry was their literary world until they encountered written literature at university. One wrote, “From my early childhood, I have an interest in literature. In my mother tongue, I compose poems and try, though not perfect, songs and sings before audience”. In defining “literature”, the students often used striking metaphors, such as the following:²

Well when I see the word “literature” I feel like it’s the only key to a house full of words, ideas imaginations ... which no other subject can do. With literature you can go everywhere visit every-body, even the dead, just by sitting in your house and writing. I think this defines the term.

2. All quotations from student texts are reproduced as originally written.

When asked to select a favourite from amongst the literary texts that they had studied, the students referred to canonical British poetry, which they knew, I was told, in a pedagogical version presented by their teacher. Although a few students mentioned that literature provides affective involvement, identification, entertainment and escape, learning was by far the most frequently given reason for valuing literature. Strongly disliked were texts where nothing positive could be learnt. The examples they listed dealt with but did not condemn negative behaviour and anti-Eritrean values such as betrayal, violence and licentiousness.

THE NORWEGIAN RESPONDENTS AS READERS

The student teachers in Norway came from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds. Their tertiary level studies in English were voluntary, something that was probably not the case for all the Eritrean students. The three men and seven women in the Norwegian group reflected the overall gender distribution on the campus. Most of them were between twenty-two and twenty-seven years old; one was younger and two were older. So whilst the gender distribution was very different to that in the Eritrean group, where the majority of student teachers were men, the age distribution was very similar.

When asked to give examples of literature that they had read or seen performed, the Norwegian students mentioned a broad range of works, naming thirty-four different authors. Novels made up the bulk of their reported reading, and only two mentioned poetry. When asked what the term “literature” meant to them, the Norwegian students tended not to use metaphor. Instead, they demonstrated a facility with definition:

Literature to me is a written text, it can be divided into formal and informal categories, but I automatically think of great novels and poems that have made an impression on me personally ...

Literature is tradition, it is culture and it is a way to identify with the author and the context. When it came to works of literature that they had particularly enjoyed, or *not* enjoyed, novels were the dominant genre. Fiction, sometimes with the proviso that it must be “good” fiction, was seen as useful, and the main reason was again because of what one could learn. However it was not the reinforcement of moral or social wisdom, but learning something new that gave value to reading literature. One student wrote:

... it makes us think, sometimes in *new* and different ways than we normally do. It makes us think about *new* themes, personalities and etc. It shows us *new* and interesting point of views and storylines. (italics added)

Let us now turn to the three literary texts, and how the student teachers made sense of them.

“THE MONKEY AND THE CROCODILE”

This story exemplifies a type of fable, familiar from many cultures, that is termed a trickster tale. In the tale, a crocodile offers to carry a monkey across a river, with the intention of stealing its heart, but he is outwitted by the ingenuity of the monkey.

In writing about the story, the students assumed various roles, including those of storyteller, learner of life skills, and literary commentator. The two groups differed significantly in the discursive positions and interpretive strategies they employed. The Eritreans demonstrated a strong degree of ownership. The Norwegian respondents were more inclined to position themselves as interested visitors, expressing their thoughts and personal associations, or commenting on the story at a meta-textual level. The students used a range of discursive strategies to show either interpretive certainty or ambivalence, with the Eritrean respondents demonstrating interpretive certainty to a far greater extent. This finds expression in value-laden language that offers the reader no other position than agreement, as the following example illustrates:

This shows how the monkey is honest towards the crocodile, but the disloyal and dishonest crocodile tells the monkey that his heart will be taken. At the end of the story it is revealed that the honest monkey is very wise and cunning to cheat the false friend.

The Norwegian students, on the other hand, demonstrated an awareness of competing ways of understanding a text and the world, as when one wrote:

I've hear it [the story] different places and every time the message changes a bit. I might be because I change my opinion all the time, but I also like to believe stories like this have different messages.

Respondents in both groups identified a message about friendship. They warned, reminded or taught their reader that friendly behaviour may not be what it seems.

Trust and risk were key concerns when the Norwegian respondents wrote about friendship; honesty and compatibility were key concerns for the Eritrean respondents. A Norwegian student, for example, writes that “trust is fragile, it can easily be broken”. The identification of a message about how important it is to react appropriately in threatening situations, on the other hand, showed a significant difference in distribution. It was a major concern only for the Eritrean respondents, as here:

Both [the monkey and the crocodile] are very cunning, but much more the monkey is cunning [...] So generally from this what we can understand is the one who think evil or cunning is always at lost.

The dilemma for this student is clear: both the good and the bad animal demonstrate cunning. He resolves this dilemma by telling his reader that cunning is only a desirable character trait when in the service of good purposes.

“ANISINO”

The second literary work, “Anisino”, was published in 2005 in a slim volume of prose and poetry called *Some Sweetly Kept Thoughts*. The author, Rahel Asghedom, was born in Eritrea in 1976. During the period of this research she was the only in-country author writing and publishing fiction in English. The very short story is set in the capital city of Asmara, and describes a carefree but intense friendship between the Christian narrator, who was then a thirteen-year-old girl, and a Muslim boy. This friendship, however, was abruptly ended when the boy is sent away to Yemen. Looking back ten years later the narrator reflects that the loss of this first friendship may account for her unwillingness as an adult to make commitments that might end in a similar experience of loss.

The responses were more different than they were similar. Firstly, some Eritreans referred to specific places in the text. This suggests that for them the setting served a dramatic purpose, whereas for the Norwegians it was only a somewhere for a something to happen (cf. Shaw, 1983). Another difference was the way that the respondents completed the sentence fragment, “The story is about...”. All the Norwegians completed the sentence with a noun phrase. The Eritreans tended to write longer sentences that retold part of the story, one of several indicators of differing genre expectations and school writing traditions. A third difference was that when invited to write “anything else”, eight of the ten Norwegian students, but only three of the Eritrean students, did so. This suggests that such invitations were more familiar in Norwegian academic socialisation.

The responses to “Anisino” demonstrate that the story is open to the construction of many meanings. On the basis of how the students completed the opening sentence fragment, seven thematic categories were identified. These categories were “friends”, “innocence”, “together despite difference”, “religious equality”, “occupation”, “disruption” and “loss”. Both Norwegian and Eritrean respondents contributed to all the thematic categories, with the exception of the Norwegian-only category about religious equality, and the Eritrean-only category about occupation. The distribution of the categories, however, varied considerably between the groups. The Eritrean respondents tended to write more about positive themes from the beginning of the literary text – friendship, innocence, and especially the way friendship can develop despite differences in religious background. Though what the Eritrean students wrote may properly reflect their response, it is also a politically appropriate way of negotiating the texts and acknowledging that religious differences do exist and that they have significance. The Norwegian respondents were more concerned with the divisive and damaging uses to which religion and social convention can be put, and the psychological effects of loss.

THE OTHER WAR

Alemseged Tesfai’s *The Other War* is probably the most significant work by an Eritrean author that is available in English. The Norwegian students were told about the circumstances in which this play was produced and first performed. It was originally written in the Tigrinya language in 1984, and was commissioned and performed to promote a nationalist agenda in areas under the control of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF). The government of Ethiopia was at that time involved in a full military war against the EPLF. The “other war” of the title refers to the Ethiopian strategy of producing interracial children by marriage or rape, children who were to become a new generation of mixed Eritrean-Ethiopian heritage.

The play has five short acts, each set in the family home of Letiyesus in Asmara. Her daughter Astier has herself a teenage daughter by a violent marriage. Now Astier has married again, this time to an Ethiopian who, it transpires, has fathered her baby son as part of the other war. The fraught cohabitation of the family is resolved when the grandmother and granddaughter leave to join the community of fighters in the field, taking with them the baby boy. The Ethiopian husband is outwitted and rejected, and Astier is left a lonely, abandoned woman. This movement from community to excommunication consolidates the play’s political message: the inevitable abandonment of Eritreans who collude with the enemy.

The Other War was created in the expectation of sharing knowledge and values with its audience. In an interview the author later explained:

Fighters had to be glorified, the enemy's "invincibility" had to be cut to size, the equality of women was to be promoted, the inevitability of the final victory despite the odds had to be inculcated into the psyche of men and women; in short, art had to serve revolutionary objectives. (Dhar, 2006, p. 7)

The war of independence has been woven into the fabric of Eritrean thought and language to such an extent that the interpretive strategy most readily available to the Eritrean students more than twenty years later was still very much in line with that of its authorial audience. For young Norwegians the war was not only distant in time, but also in place and context. By their own accounts, the Norwegian students had no previous knowledge of Eritrean history. On the other hand, they brought to the play their extensive exposure to film and television dramas. They were, therefore, far removed from the authorial audience both in what they did not know, and in what they did know. The students' various experience of and expectations of drama, combined with the institutional conditions of reading, the context of the research situation and, most importantly, the cultural and social contexts of the two groups, resulted in two very different sets of decodings.

In their responses, the Eritreans took the discursual position of hosts – providing contextual information, expressing pride in the author and the play, and using the discourse of the text in their own construction of meaning. The Norwegians, by contrast, took the position of visitors by hedging, distancing and occasionally asking questions. When it comes to ideological assumptions and how the students judged and allocated motives to the characters, all the Eritrean students made use of a dominant decoding, namely one that accepts and reinforces the position offered to the authorial audience (Hall, 2001). They did so despite the playwright deliberately drawing rounded characters with complex motivations. Here is one example of such a decoding:

Here in this play the main and foremost theme is to know the plans of the enemies (Amhara) the way the[y] have been using to *treat* or *tame* the *united* people of Eritreans whiles they were trying to *force* them on wars parallelly by making racial mixing with the Eritrean *unarmed* people or civilian... (italics added)

An *oppositional* decoding explicitly rejects the position offered to the authorial audience, but may be more or less defiant. None of the students offered such a reading. A *negotiated* decoding neither accepts nor rejects the position offered to the authorial audience, but presents an alternative interpretation. Typically, the Norwegian students negotiated the text by focussing on psycho-social relations between the characters. Thus for the Norwegians, Astier's behaviour is tentatively explained in the light of her previous experience, whereas the Eritreans understand Astier's fate as the inevitable consequence of her mistaken choice of husband and her betrayal of "her own people".

The play's resolution is seen by the Eritrean students as morally correct and uplifting. By joining the EPLF fighters in the field, the grandmother, her granddaughter and the little grandson achieve participation in a bigger and greater community. The prospect of belonging to this community resolves and gives meaning to the turmoil which the family has lived through. The Eritrean students accept and reiterate the allocation of the roles of hero, villain and traitor. The Norwegian students, by contrast, do not to judge any of the characters, but bemoan the break-up of the two families, and the difficult choices they faced.

DISCUSSION

So far I have presented relatively specific findings of this doctoral thesis. In this last section I consider the bigger claims that these findings authorise. I suggest how the thesis can offer methodological and theoretical insights that may be of use to other researchers, and some research questions that build on the present study. Perhaps most importantly, I argue that the detailed exploration of what student teachers in two very different contexts wrote about literary texts can contribute to teachers' understanding of the very significant role that culture plays when their own pupils make sense of texts and the world.

EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The Eritreans, as a group, valued "The Monkey and the Crocodile" for its educational import, and showed great facility in identifying a lesson to be learnt from it. Their response reminded me of the African proverb, "When an old person dies, it is like a library burning down". The Eritrean students could perhaps be described as members of this library of oral literature, and their assertiveness explained by their familiarity with fable as a genre. However their confidence in reading the story also reflects patterns of rhetorical uniformity in the country at large, as well

as an academic socialisation where facts are facts and individualised opinions do not count for much. Their certainty can be contrasted with the relative uncertainty of the Norwegian students when they identified the message of the story. The students in Norway were more likely to point out the individuality of their responses, and the possibility of there being other interpretations.

The response to “Anisino”, especially, invites the conjecture that the Eritrean respondents were more inclined to look for what is positive in a narrative text about Eritrea, and disinclined to write about problems, whilst the Norwegian respondents were inclined to find and name problems. An example of these different ways of negotiating a text is the concept of Christian-Muslim equality, a cornerstone of Eritrea’s nation-building project and a crucial factor in the fight for independence. The Eritrean students negotiated the friendship between the Muslim boy and the Christian girl under the theme “together despite difference”, whereas the Norwegian students explicitly addressed themes of religious intolerance and loss.

The students in Eritrea consistently reproduced an understanding of the Eritrean nation that was not available to the students in Norway, most clearly in their response to *The Other War*. The preferred strategy of the Norwegian students was to interpret the fable, the short story and the play in terms of the characters’ intentions, emotions and earlier experiences. This strategy required neither insight into the Eritrean social and political contexts, nor a moral standpoint. As these examples show, the foremost empirical contribution of this study lies in detailing how fundamentally *learnt* are the different ways in which we respond to literature and, I argue, to the world. Were the student texts to lose their national tags, and quite aside from idiosyncrasies of English, I dare claim that it would be possible to sort them correctly into two piles, one Eritrean and the other Norwegian.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Firstly, the study illustrates that student teachers’ texts, also those written in English where student teachers are “making do with a limited amount of someone else’s words” (Kramsch, 1983, p. 246) can provide rich research material. They were well suited to a situation where the researcher was herself under observation, and where it was important to make clear that the respondents were not being invited to respond to controversial or provocative questions. A second methodological benefit of analysing student teachers’ texts was that they are in a sense observable behaviour, making accessible the culture and the codes of the student teachers’ academic socialisation, as well as their individual voices. Finally, and

perhaps most importantly, this study illustrates that it is feasible and fruitful to compare cultural repertoires, also across national contexts, and that in so doing one can achieve insight into the complexities of cultural difference.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study develops “where” as a didactic category. It does so by exploring the dominant ideas of two interpretive communities situated in their respective national, cultural, social and institutional contexts. And it does so while avoiding the parallel and false allurements of attributing causation to context, and essential characteristics to respondents.

A second theoretical contribution is the application of concepts derived from the field of cultural studies to the field of reader response. In particular Hall’s (2001) concepts of the dominant encoding of ideology, and the dominant and negotiated *decoding* of ideology, proved fruitful. A lesser but more innovative contribution is my identification of the discursal positions of owning, hosting and visiting a literary text.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

The study has particular relevance for the teaching of diversity, culture, society and literature. It demonstrates that what students of English write in response to a literary text can provide insight into how they put to use national, educational and political agendas, collective values, interpersonal relationships and gender expectations. It can therefore contribute to an understanding of how different interpretive strategies are constructed, how they are brought into play, and, not least, how teachers of English can use literature to go about exploring divergent agendas, values, relationships and expectations. At the same time we must remember that students are not only representatives of their respective and many-faceted cultures, but individuals for whom the process of engagement with unfamiliar texts can play a part in their own development, as Signe Mari Wiland’s study (2007, see chapter 12 in this volume) demonstrates.

Literature can provide a relatively safe point of departure for the discussion of sensitive and ideologically loaded issues in the very diverse classroom contexts in which English, and indeed all subjects, are now learnt in Norway. The study can also serve as a reminder that even though English is the language of instruction in secondary and tertiary education in Eritrea, it “is someone else’s words” to a greater extent than is English for most Norwegian learners.

In the original research design, the two groups of respondents were to comment on each other's texts with a view to gaining insight into their own and each others' perceptions and cultural contexts. These sharing sessions could not be implemented in Eritrea for a variety of practical reasons, and in Norway only three or four of the more articulate and enthusiastic students entered and posted on the digital forum in which they were invited to comment on each others' texts. This led me to conclude that if student texts are to fulfil their considerable potential for promoting intercultural understanding, both tertiary and secondary students need clear guidelines in order to engage effectively with them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There was, and still is, very little published research in Eritrean-based humanities, or indeed in other fields. Tricia Hepner (2009, p. xi) writes that "ethnography is needed perhaps nowhere so urgently as it is in Eritrea today. As access to information and the country itself becomes increasingly restricted, it is vital to record and reconstruct people's actual encounters with the past, present, and future". This urgent need has to do with the enduring dominance of the state-controlled narrative. Eritrea is an extreme instance of a country where people's actual encounters with their past, present and future are not a subject for public discourse, let alone the object of systematic study.

In a freer setting, the didactic category "where" can provide a rich and relatively unexplored field for further research. Studies could also usefully continue to explore the interface between cultural studies and reader response, and the ways that media practices influence literary interpretation. New comparative studies of reader response could consider the significance of such factors as gender, linguistic background and genre. Finally, further detailed studies similar to the one described in this chapter, exploring how readers make sense of texts in the light of their various cultural, social and institutional contexts, could be of considerable educational interest, and contribute to a deeper understanding of diversity.

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