

# SOCK HOPS AND RED ROOMS: ON TEACHING JANE EYRE TO MARGINALIZED STUDENTS

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**ABSTRACT.** This short story illustrates an occasion of culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogical practices in relation to the canonical texts which are often used in urban classrooms. In it, a lesson on Jane Eyre's childhood point of view and mode of introspectiveness delves into a tale of dancing and Otherness. The story shows that in spaces where the majority of students are marginalized, opportunities wherein diverse bodies are encouraged to respond in ways that are meaningful to them, to "write themselves" into narratives, are crucial for inclusive and equity-building engagement.

**LES DANSES « SOCK HOPS » ET LES CHAMBRES ROUGES: SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE JANE EYRE AUX ÉTUDIANTS MARGINALISÉS**

**RÉSUMÉ.** Cette nouvelle illustre une occasion de pratiques pédagogiques culturellement sensibles et durables en relation avec les textes canoniques qui sont souvent utilisés dans les salles de classe urbaines. Dans cette nouvelle, une leçon sur la perspective de l'enfance de Jane Eyre et son mode d'introspection se transforme en une histoire de danse et d'altérité. Le récit démontre que dans les espaces où la majorité des élèves sont marginalisés, les opportunités dans lesquelles diverses personnes sont encouragées à réagir de façon significative pour eux, à « s'écrire » dans des récits, demeurent cruciales pour un engagement inclusif et équitable.

I'm teaching Jane Eyre to the grade twelves in what they call "the cardboard box classroom." It's the smallest in the school. Its mouse-brown painted walls are unadorned and its desks are strangely aligned, sticking to the margins of the walls in haphazard form — like stray beans from a spilled bag. They're not easy to move because they're heavy with melded seats. I can picture them once existing in a 19th century school house on the prairies where an intrepid carpenter figured that sturdy desks would be a smack in the face to harsh elements. The type of furniture that would laugh in the face of a blizzard or remain unfeeling under the cruel glare of a self-righteous teacher. They're ugly too. These are not the antique expensive kind of desks, they're the old cheap ones that look like they're better off rusting in a junkyard somewhere beyond city limits.

My desk, the teacher's one, is more like a counter with one empty drawer, save for a couple of bent paperclips, a whiteboard eraser that disappears sometimes like it has somewhere else to be (other surfaces to wipe clean), and a binder of loose-leaf paper that comes in handy when the students are using class time to write essays and one of them (a girl who dreams of being a pediatrician) runs out or another (a boy whose dreams of being a pilot are given a wakeup call when someone he loves tells him it's like being a taxi driver in the sky) forgets to bring his own. Or can't afford to.

Even though I sometimes wish there was a window here, the cardboard classroom has grown on me. Maybe it is complacency setting in but it doesn't bother me that we don't have many resources or can't afford colourful inspirational posters. Maybe it's the students who're taking root in my heart. They're a racially diverse class in an urban school meant to serve the Muslim community.

The truth is that I love coming here, discussing books with them. These students of mine. Reading old things in new ways in a grade 12 core English class.

"We live in stories," I told them when they complained about the space. "Never mind where we actually are. We can imagine something better."

Today, that mantra is good because we're talking about *Jane Eyre* and what it means when an adult narrator (reader, I married him) tries to authentically capture the story of herself as a child growing. What does it mean, for instance, that the infamous Red Room scene of Jane being punished by her aunt, is placed where it is? Does it connect to her later learning that Rochester has a mad wife he keeps locked in the attic? Or is it a site of childhood trauma that she keeps coming too – the story in the beginning that explains everything else that happens in the plot of her life? Different literary theorists have all sorts of ideas about the scene but I'm interested in what the students in this classroom, on this day, think.

"You are all still pretty young," I say, "but how would you write a scene from your childhood now? Would you embellish? Would you play it down?"

We have a short discussion and then I suggest we think of an episode from our childhoods to write about. I do it with them because I used to hate it when a teacher asked us to do things and then sat back doing nothing while the students suffered. Usually, it was the gym teachers.

So, I grab a couple sheets of paper from the binder in my counter-desk and give a few to the girl who wants to be a pediatrician and to the boy who used to want to be a pilot and take some for myself too.

The boy who used to want to be a pilot says he can't think of an incident to write about but I tell him what one of my favourite teachers (definitely not a

gym teacher) used to tell her students: “You may not know, but your pen does, let it guide you along. The pen knows.” He grunts like he’s heard it before.

When the class is silent, the blank walls start transforming before me into concrete ones painted a drizzly grey and with a large dragon mural. The dragon blows blue fire and represents the school I attended once upon a time. An urging sign.

I start to write my incident:

My socks match. I glare at them, take in their pink heels and toe area on white background. I study my socks like they hold the answers to a test I haven’t written yet. A tiny hole near my left baby toe looms large for an instant. I tell myself that it is so small, so insignificant that it’s a wonder I can even see it under the fluorescent gym light, dimmed but fluorescent nonetheless. Maybe the yarn just tugged a bit when I took off my shoes. I shift my left foot anyway, trying to make it so that if there is a hole, no one will see. Just in case.

They’re playing a song I’ve heard on the radio. I listen to it on Sunday afternoons; tell my mom that it helps me study in case she complains about the noise. I like the song a lot. It’s *Against All Odds* by Phil Collins. It’s written for boyfriends and girlfriends and people who love each other, I think. I don’t sing along even though I know the lyrics. If it was playing on the radio on a Sunday afternoon at home with my bedroom door closed and my books open around me, I might have sung along, would have probably sung along. I won’t sing here, not on a Thursday afternoon in the large gym at my school with the entire junior high student body around me.

“Look at Johnny and Carrie!” Someone along the back wall where I am standing (staring at my socks) says this.

It sounds like Alison.

“They’re so cute together!” It is Alison.

I look up, and sure enough, on the dance floor are Johnny and Carrie. Carrie looks like a doll, not Barbie though, something more classical. Maybe a Victorian doll or something that sits on a shelf in a fancy home with one-of-a-kind porcelain china and maybe is enclosed with glass so that people are dissuaded from touching. Johnny touches her now though. His hand rests atop her golden hair that shines bright even under ugly dimmed fluorescent lighting. Carrie looks like she’s meant to live in Hollywood or Hawaii or someplace sunny like that. She’s also just broken up with her boyfriend who was three grades older than us and owned one of those fancy bikes that looks like a motorcycle.

Now Johnny will be her boyfriend. I could have guessed that they’d soon be a couple. I sit near them in class and noticed how Johnny helps her with math and how she laughs when he makes a joke. Johnny makes lots of jokes – the smart kind. He’s tall too. I watch his hand fingering her hair, and their

bodies swaying, not to the beat of the music, more to their own beat. She rests her head in the groove of his chest. My stomach clenches. Alison is right, they do look good together.

Now that I've lifted my gaze from my socks, I consider those of us on the back wall of the gym. About twenty of us look on while most of our fellow junior highs are on the gym -slash-transformed-into-dance floor. I try to count our number exactly but it's weird craning your neck and trying to count everyone on either side of us. I don't know why I care to get our exact number, I hate math. Sometimes I like to count things but mostly I hate math. 14, 15, 16. Did I include myself? There's a sea of shoes nearby. The smell of sweaty feet wafts into my nose. I wonder how we're supposed to find ours when this thing is done.

Sock hops, what a stupid idea.

"The teachers are just trying to get us all in one room without having to supervise. They're doing report cards." Chris offered this information when the announcement came in the middle of our second period math class. His hair is greasy and his sweat glands are maturing oddly so that I'm always trying to sniff under my own arm pits when I'm near him just in case it is me who smells. I complained to the homeroom teacher earlier in the year, trying to not be rude, but seeing no way around it.

"He has a disease," she explained and I felt ashamed. I didn't insist on switching seats. I just decided that when he wasn't looking or paying attention, I'd move my desk away just a bit. I also started using my mom's antiperspirant and rolling a bit under my nose. It doesn't help that much now.

I spot Chris at the far end of the wall, near the shoes. Alison is there too with a couple of others but she doesn't act like she's on the wrong side of things. She's pointing at the couples, laughing at the pairings from her wheelchair. She doesn't seem like she feels left out. She doesn't seem like she feels like I feel.

And then there's Sameera, the tiny girl from Pakistan whose family had just come to the country. I'd seen her at the mosque a few weeks ago but didn't talk to her there or here at school either. She's ESL so she isn't in any of my classes. She meets my gaze. She waves, walks over. I shudder a bit wondering how my gaze was taken as an invitation. I feel like a giant standing next to her. Too big, too awkward, too aware am I that this place is place far from the middle of the gym. That this is the wall where the outcasts gather. Outcasts, I believe, are those who no one asks to dance when there are slow dances.

She tells me her name, though I know it. I tell her mine, not sure if she already knows it.

"Have you ever watched a Bollywood movie," she asks, her voice bigger than Phil Collins'. Her English sounds fine. She speaks with a British accent even. This surprises me. I nod, thinking about how my mom's friend and her would watch them whenever we visited her house. They had Arabic subtitles so my mom could understand the Hindi and neither would translate for me.

And if I asked what was happening, I wouldn't get a response from either. It's like the movies hypnotized them.

"I never understand why they're singing and dancing all the time," I say to Sameera.

"Do you know how to dance like they do?"

"I can't dance like that," I scoff, abruptly and a bit harshly. She's quiet for a moment and I think I shouldn't have been so rude. She's about to walk away but I don't want to be alone anymore.

"Why are they always breaking into song and dancing in Bollywood movies anyway?"

She smiles at my question.

"It is the only way to break the tension of all that drama. Pretentious drama." She lifts an eyebrow and twirls. "This sock hop is begging for a Bollywood number."

I bobble my head like I've seen them do on the screen when my mom and her friend watch. Sameera grabs my hand and I slip and slide after her. The gym floor is slippery but I soon have control and I move my feet and arms like she does. We come up with an impromptu choreographed number to the last notes of *Against all Odds* and it's pretty wild and pretty good. People are clapping and joining in. Chris and Alison, Johnny and Carrie. Sameera and I are leading them into the next song. I have so much fun, I forget about the maybe hole in my sock.

"Time's up," I say. We put down our pens, me and the students.

"Who'd like to share theirs?" I ask but no one lifts a hand. Not pediatrician girl nor non-pilot boy. Maybe they don't feel comfortable enough.

It's hard for the marginalized to be vulnerable, I think, when they're constantly told that they need be better than everyone else in everything. Otherwise, what opportunities will they have outside of a cardboard classroom?

So, I read mine.

"Did you have a crush on Johnny," the students ask when I'm done. There's a snicker or two.

"Not exactly the point of this exercise," I answer, evading. "This is us creating something. A form of artistic expression. Like Charlotte Brontë having her narrator, Jane Eyre, write about something in her childhood with the perspective of insight gained. Our stories matter too and —"

The bell rings, cutting me off. I watch the students rise out of the chairs attached to their substantial desks and remind them to read the next chapter before our next class. “In it we find out what – or who – is in the attic. I’ll expect you to have a lot to say about that!”

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