

Violating Pedagogy: Literary Theory in the Twenty-first Century College Classroom

Heather GS Johnson

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

Undergraduate and graduate students in the field of English Studies often know, from students who have gone before or from previous experience, that the usually-required course on literary theory is likely to be one of the hardest they will take. While some will look forward to the challenge, others will approach the course with dread. Such a course is also one of the most difficult to teach, posing a whole series of problems that require inventive solutions. Both teacher and student are likely to find the course mentally taxing, but the potential for payoff is massive; the depth and quality of thinking that emerges out of class discussion can be astonishing. And delightfully invigorating. And sometimes just plain *fun*. But it takes time, effort, and to put it bluntly, a bit of pain to get to those moments. To make the literary theory course worthwhile, the teacher and students have to willingly practice a pedagogy of intellectual violation, one that gently but *deliberately* undermines core beliefs, firmly held ideological stances, and common-sense assumptions about who we are and what we do. One way to

approach the literary theory course is to embrace theoretical opportunism, a stance which deliberately rejects any theoretical school's claim to dominance or "rightness."

When teaching the graduate version of my course, I willingly admit to my students that one function of the study of theory is induction into the literary studies community. Every scholarly group has its own language, and that language is used for more than mere communication. The ability to use field-specific jargon is a badge of belonging, and speaking the code fluently is a way of signaling one's expertise and authority. In advanced academic circles, knowing some theory is required if one wishes to walk the walk and talk the talk.¹ In a field that is actually quite fragmented, where members of the same department or attendees of the same conference might study very different topics, literary theory is one place of significant overlap. A specialist in American Southern Regional Literature might read very different materials and know very different authors than a British Medievalist, African American Literature specialist or a Romanticist, but all four are likely to have read Derrida, Butler, Freud, and Fanon in the course of their studies.

Because theory is notoriously difficult, it also functions as a mark of distinction. The writer or speaker who can reference theoretical ideas with confidence and accuracy is marked as an expert and accorded at least a measure of respect.² But I maintain—vociferously—that institutional belonging is only one minor benefit of studying literary theory in the 21st century.

More importantly, reading and “doing” theory helps one to discover new ideas, ask new questions (and old ones in fresh ways), confront difficult and sometimes painful complexities, and locate or create meaning that is intellectually and emotionally satisfying. Theoretical engagement has the potential to engender a new kind of critical conscious that reshapes our vision, not just of literature and culture, but of the whole human-made world in which we live. Furthermore, literary theory can help us to clarify our roles as analysts of culture; it gives us purpose and direction.

The paragraph above might seem to have painted literary theory as all sweetness and light, a balm for the troubled analyst’s soul and solution to the confusions and incoherencies that naturally arise around any complex use of language. Certainly, theory can ground reading practices, giving them weight and direction, but the process is not easy and often anything but “sweet.” The fact is this: a reader’s early experiences with literary theory are often extremely painful and can *create* confusion instead of resolving it. Literary theory *hurts*. This is the disturbing core of my argument: the pain is part of why literary theory is worth teaching. Such an idea might be hard for many teachers to accept, especially for those of us who entered the profession because we are genuinely sympathetic individuals who understand education as the delicate process of nurturing the growth of intellectually vulnerable learners. We care deeply about our charges, and it seems emotionally counterintuitive to turn around and reward student

trust by inflicting pain upon them. There are times when, as a teacher of literary theory, I feel an impulse to apologize to my students for leading them into the intellectual minefield.

It's a minefield that has changed in interesting ways since the heyday of "high theory." Many literary theory textbooks still arrange theoretical works into schools that conform to the borders established in the late 20th century—with varying degrees of coherence. Courses, likewise, are frequently designed around the investigation of a number of such schools. There might be units on "Structuralism" or "New Historicism" or "Psychoanalytic Theory." I begin the project of disrupting standard conventions by violating the borders between theoretical schools, creating a syllabus that ignores obvious affiliations in favor of an organization based on topics of inquiry. (I am hardly unique in this—see discussion below.) Because while these designations might be generally handy (and I do introduce my students to the terms used to indicate lineages of thought), they can also be misleading. Some theorists straddle multiple borders, and to place them in a single theoretical "box" can only lead to misunderstanding. Furthermore, in the 21st century more and more literary critics are combining theoretical perspectives in their work. On a purely experiential level, I've met fewer and fewer scholars who are dyed-in-the-wool devotees of any particular school. The combativeness and territorialism that was common in theoretical discussions of the 1980s seems to be disappearing.³ Vincent Leitch, in his recent *Literary Criticism in the 21st Century*, also recognizes the border-straddling that is now far more

common, citing Spivak as an early example: “The modes and conventions of academic critical reading have proliferated during the contemporary period, prompting continuous fusions and flexibilizations. An early pioneering illustration of such eclecticism would be Marxist feminist deconstructive postcolonial cultural criticism—the kind of blended critical approach associated since the 1970s with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak” (33). And he sees staunch adherence to a particular, narrow approach as a kind of willful blindness.

In the interests of pragmatism, flexibility, and broad scope, I advocate open-ended critical fusions. I am against reductionist programs for criticism such as formalist close reading only, exclusive art-for-art’s sake aestheticism, selfless spiritualized phenomenology of unreading, or reader-centered existential phenomenology stripped of critique. They constitute throwbacks to modernist avant-gardism and fantasies of revitalized autonomy in an era when economics and politics enabled by media continue to seep into and reconfigure spheres of life. Count me out on such nostalgic and defensive campaigns for purification. (49)

Leitch’s collection, *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, which he co-edits with a group of fellow scholars and which I use in the graduate version of my course, reflects his feeling that purification is reactionary and ultimately impossible. The texts included are primarily arranged simply, in chronological order. The book also includes several alternative

tables of contents, only one of which groups texts into “schools and movements” – the others divide along lines of historical period, genre, and topic.

Like others of my generation, I don’t feel particularly tied—and not the slightest bit loyal—to any given theoretical school (though there are certainly some that appeal to me more than others). Leitch’s assertions about critical fusion and flexibility are commonsensical to me: I use various theories as lenses when they are helpful or instructive. I refer to this attitude as theoretical opportunism, and it is one that I encourage my students to adopt.⁴ Most of my readers will recognize this attitude immediately; they either are themselves theoretical opportunists or have had conversations with one. It would be easy to underestimate the profundity of the shift; in truth it represents a sea-change in the way we think about literature and literary theory. To be a theoretical opportunist is to already to have adopted a postmodern attitude; to be a theoretical opportunist means to accept a multiplicity of constantly changing interpretations, to not insist on a particular perspective (or particular combination of perspectives) as inherently right or proper and to distrust any single grand narrative capable of systematically explaining “Literature” or “Culture.” According to some, this might even mean that we aren’t really “doing” literary study in any proper sense. Considering early formalists and their legacies, Jonathan Culler explains that

[Tynianov’s] paradoxical insight insists that we have two levels of systematicity:

on the one hand, the individual work can be treated as a system and the function

of various elements within this system analyzed; but this is not sufficient for unrelated to the work of art as autotelic whole there is, on the other hand, the system of literary possibilities, which is quite a different matter. Proper literary study involves this second level of systematicity, poetics. (8)

To be a theoretical opportunist is not to outright reject larger levels of systematicity like that studied by poetics, but does involve putting such levels in the background in favor of pursuing more varied, pointed, idiosyncratic questions.⁵ Rather than decrease political and scholarly engagement, the approach may actually lead to a more profound dedication to certain ideas or stances that nevertheless draw from multiple sources.

Most of my graduate students tend toward theoretical opportunism, even if they identify a particular lens as primary to their studies or as a means of self-identification. With a few exceptions, undergraduates are also willing to abandon the notion that there must be one “right approach” to a text. Even those students who initially approach works looking for a single “correct” interpretation that perfectly matches some mysteriously intuited authorial intention usually make the transition to a more open attitude eventually. Choices about theoretical lenses become matters of preference and expedience; students make the choice of what theoretical lens to use in relation to a particular text or phenomenon in much the same way that they choose their majors (it’s a matter of investment, interest and utility, rather than correctness or propriety).

On a practical level, teaching theory from an opportunistic perspective leads to some changes in course design and daily pedagogy. Rather than follow the standard route of studying theoretical schools discretely, one after the other, I instead organize my courses around a series of terms that seem central to a number of different theoretical perspectives or to the field generally.⁶ For each central concept or term, we read several theoretical texts as well as a small number of short primary texts, each of which seem to “speak to” the concept in some way. We may, therefore, read works by feminists, poststructuralists, semioticians, and new critics all in the same unit or even class period (for graduate versions of the course, the class meets once a week for three hours, so a large amount of material must be covered in each class period). For a recent graduate course, the terms covered included, among others “aesthetics/beauty,” “text/textuality,” “structure,” “gender,” and “race” (to name just a few). For a class period entitled “Authors, Writers, and Scriptors,” students read Emerson’s “The Poet,” Barthes’ “The Death of the Author,” Foucault’s “What is an Author?” and an excerpt from Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy.”⁷ Each set of thematically linked theoretical texts is accompanied by one or two primary texts that we use to test out our newly-discovered questions and concepts. In the case of the “Author” class period described above, students were assigned to read Joel Chandler Harris’ highly problematic introduction to the Uncle Remus stories (“Uncle Remus Initiates the Little Boy”) and Alice Walker’s reflections on his use of African tales (“The Dummy in the Window”).

The goal of all this sampling is to explode terms and multiply questions. We take what seems at first to be a relatively “simple” term, like *author* or *gender* and think through the ways in which theory helps us to understand the depth of complexity implied by it. The key is to move so far beyond bare definition that simply encountering the term in question instantly evokes a series of possibilities; the terms become almost impossibly rich. I use the word “explode” very much on purpose; it is meant to indicate a concussive intellectual detonation in which assumptions and standard meanings are reduced to fragments and bits which must then be reconstituted into intelligibility (but never remade into simple forms). Far from presenting each of the terms as existing as the center of an easy constellation of ideas and issues, I attempt to choose readings that will create conflict and dissonance (or at the very least, not fully compatible perspectives). The purpose of the class period is to explore the fragments left behind after the explosion, determining how they may be used or interrogated. The statements made by our readings are always understood as *proposals* rather than *facts* (in essence, I am asking students to exercise what Keats called “negative capability”). Figures 1 and 2 are examples of exploded terms and multiplied questions that were originally developed (for the most part) together in the graduate class, each within the space of a single class period (in each case, I wrote up our findings and distributed them to the class later, as a review and survey of where we’d been and where we were going). Each “term” explored in the course gets a similar treatment,

though each semester's results are somewhat different in form and content. The figures included here are an amalgamation of several semesters' worth of exploration. The undergraduate version of the class deals with many of the same issues, but on a smaller scale, covering less material for each key term.

At the center of each figure is the primary term with which the class was concerned. Ranged around that term is a series of proposals set forward by our theorists of the day (some of them by *multiple* theorists, as proposals become generally accepted premises); some of these will necessarily be in contradiction to one another (or in contradiction to common sense notions). Some of the proposals generate fairly hot debate among students (the proposal that gender is purely performative, for example), while others seem unobjectionable (like gender being inflected by race and class). Questions generated by interactions with the theoretical texts are listed at the bottom of the figure. Some of the texts we discuss attempt to answer the questions they raise, to differing degrees of satisfaction, but our in-class practice is to treat all of these questions as essentially "open." While we may each find "answers" to which we at least partially subscribe, we understand that they are contingent, partial, and subject to further refinement. This, in itself, can feel like a violation of the pedagogical project, especially for younger students. If they come to a literary theory course hoping to find new ways of exploring and alternative reading practices, they'll be well satisfied. If they come looking for final answers

or for a one-size-fits-all approach, they'll be sorely disappointed.

Part of each class is spent tailoring one or two questions raised by the theorists to the primary texts read in concert with the theoretical texts and then attempting to answer the questions using the concepts developed or altering them as needed. In the case of the undergraduate class, which meets twice a week, this process is split over two class periods; I've labeled period 1 "Comprehension Day" (minimal lecture and active discussion of theoretical ideas & questions) and period 2 "Application Day" (review of primary text, group work, and discussion of possible applications) so that students have more of a chance to digest and incorporate difficult material before they attempt to use it. The extra time also gives them necessary distance—undergraduates, especially, often have trouble accepting their own intellectual authority, and may cling slavishly to the particulars of a given theory, producing the "cookie cutter" readings with which we are all familiar. Giving the ideas time to settle and sort can help free students from the theorist's authoritative, heavy presence.

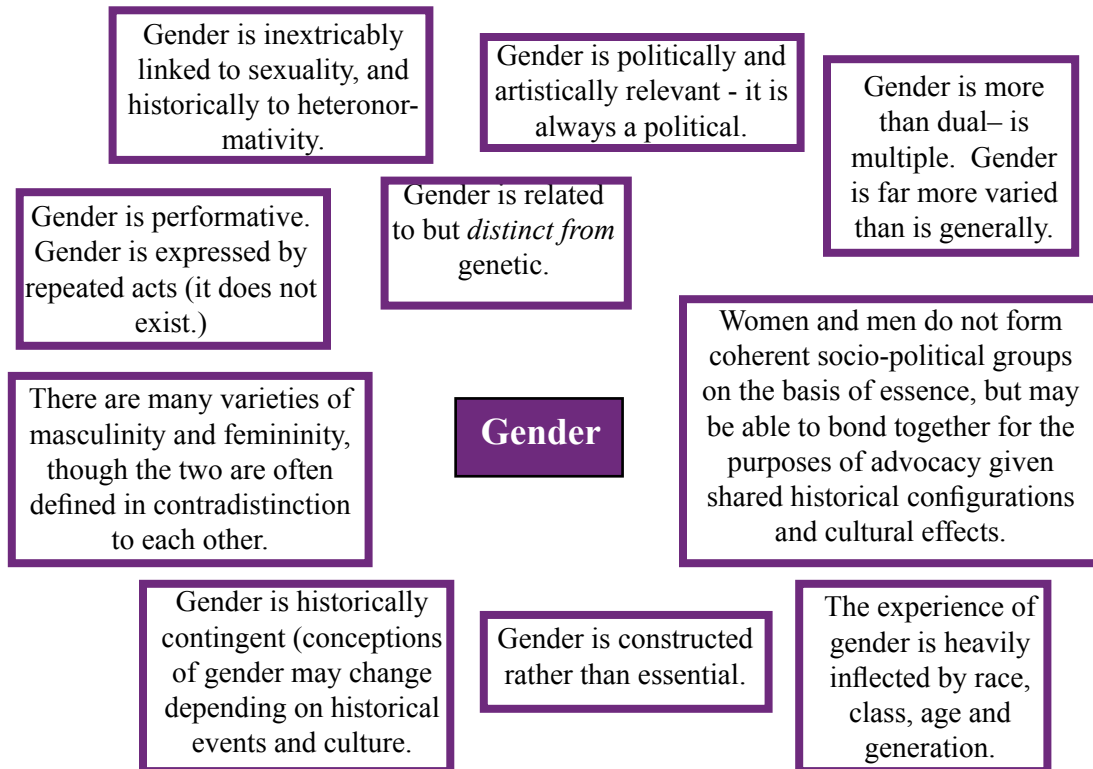


Figure 1: *Gender Exploded*

- How does gender affect writing? Is there a masculine or feminine style? How does the political and economic situation of women affect expression? What would a “woman’s writing” look like?
- To what extent is gender a *construction*, and how is that construction maintained? (Is gender in any sense “natural”? What is the role of biology in gender formation? To what extent does gender rely on a *continuous performance*?)

- How can women achieve change in socioeconomic status? To what extent can women form a coherent political group? How do women's struggles for equality dovetail with similar struggles among classes and races? (To what extent does a change in women's status necessitate a change in the entire social system?)
- How are femininity and masculinity defined, constructed, or produced in relation to each other?
- In what ways has the theorization of femininity and masculinity been affected by psychoanalytic concepts? How might those concepts be productively challenged?
- To what extent are men and women *complicit* in gendered oppressions?
- In what ways do literature and culture....
 - Create, Record, Illustrate, Reinforce, Perpetuate, Ponder
 - Play with, Question, Critique, Undermine, Alter
 - ...Gender?
 - ...the "Natural?"
 - ...Gender Performance?

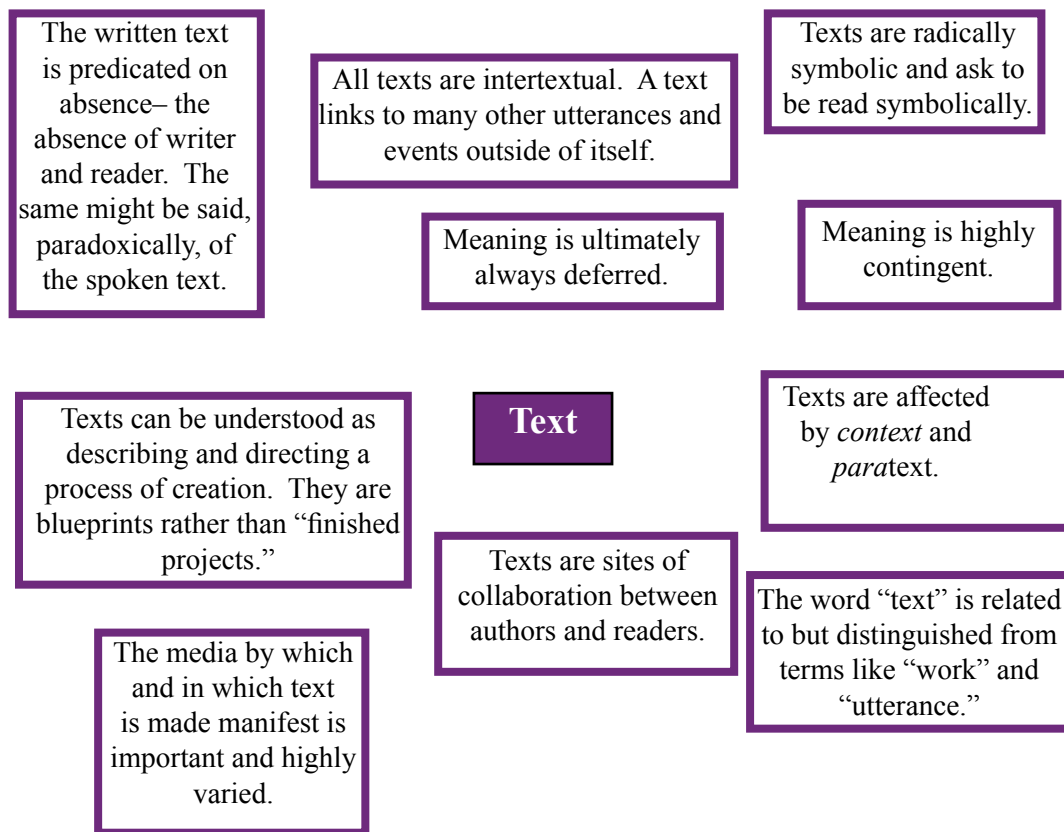


Figure 2: *Text Exploded*

- Where, when and how does *meaning* appear? (To what extent can meaning be fixed? Who produces and controls meaning and how? Is there such a thing as a stable meaning?)
- What is context and what difference does it make? (How does one decide on the proper context or try to reconstruct the context? How does context affect meaning? How does

context affect meaning and interpretation?)

- Who interprets language? What does that interpretation consist of? Whose interpretation is authoritative and why?
- What is a text? (What is the nature of the text? How does it function? How does it relate to the work? Is it art?)
- How does an author relate to his or her text?
- How does the text interact with the world/reality?
- What is the role of the reader? What is the reader's *responsibility*?
- What is the reading *process*? (How does reading work? How does it progress?)
- To what extent is "communication" possible? (And—what does "communication" even mean?)
- What is the relationship between writing and speaking?
- In what ways does communication manipulate/alter presence?
- How important is the author or speaker's intention?
- To what extent are reading and understanding a social activity?

The proposals and questions listed in the figures may appear obvious to those already quite familiar with theory and its concerns. When we consider that many undergraduates (and sometimes graduate students, too) begin with two basic questions, "Is it good?" (which really

translates to “Do I like it?”) and “What does it mean?” (which really translates to “What is the single, simple intended message?”) the importance of elaborations listed in the figures becomes clear. Furthermore, the variety of questions we ask as a class implicitly indicates (and I make it explicit by drawing their attention to it repeatedly) that new questions are always arising. We spend a good deal of time thinking about ways in which foundational questions may be altered to fit new contexts and ways in which we may create new questions to address new concerns. Students are encouraged to bring their own daily lives into the discussion; many of my graduate students are already teachers (TAs or teachers at local high schools returning for MAs), and they enjoy thinking about how they can raise variations of our questions in their own classrooms. My undergraduates bring readings from their other classes, finding new ways to think through both literature and texts from courses outside of the English department. Both graduates and undergraduates bring in events and texts from everyday life. In Fall 2014, for example, when discussing a series of texts ranged around “race,” my graduate students took a long and highly productive detour into the events happening just over the river in Ferguson, Missouri. We thought about the racial politics unfolding before our eyes both in the embattled community outside St. Louis and in our local classroom, where anxieties were running high (there was much debate about how—and even whether—teachers should address the Michael Brown shooting and protests in their classrooms).

In terms of daily classroom practice, my classes probably look familiar; we engage in general discussion of ideas, specific discussion of particular passages, generate frameworks for understanding (often sketched on the board through a messy, recursive process), and work in small groups to develop different interpretations of primary texts which are then shared and compared. Classroom discussions are interrupted occasionally with very short clarifying lectures when required. Teaching theoretical opportunism, then, is a matter not so much of creating new classroom practices as cultivating a particular kind of attitude. What matters is the posture we take while performing standard activities; instead of seeking one question and one answer we seek many of each, recognizing that all are contingent. We approach the classroom as a space of experiment, and I try to make the process as playful as possible (however, as I will discuss later, play and pain are not mutually exclusive). No theoretical statement is sacrosanct; all may be questioned, altered, or even ultimately rejected. All I ask is that my students engage with them in good faith, willingly trying on the theories before making any decisions about their value.

David Shumway notes that, at the end of the previous century, theory was often taught as a collection of “perennial questions,” and criticizes this approach, since it reinstates the professor as the ultimate authority who passes on knowledge via the banking model to passive students (100). By putting questions from different eras and different theoretical perspectives side by side, we unveil their contingency and the changes they undergo with contextual shifts.

Coming up with new questions, and new ways of addressing old ones, puts students in a position to become theorists themselves rather than just passive recorders of historical theory. As Shumway explains, “theorizing is an activity, but it is not a process without content. Rather, theorizing must be understood as a discursive practice that involves knowing not only the previous contributions but also how to make new ones” (101). Students in my courses are encouraged to process the questions provided by the texts we read and then to develop variations of their own as dictated by their own interests.

The strategy of bringing theorists with different agendas together around a single term or topic has much in common with the “problematization” strategy discussed by Andrew Campbell. These are in direct contrast to the more traditional “nominalization” strategy adopted by many teachers of theory (134). “Nominalization” courses focus on the theoretical “canon,” ensuring that students understand the histories of various theoretical schools and can identify and explain the thinking of key figures in those fields. Campbell notes that such courses were “accused of encouraging a ‘stamp-collecting’ mentality which resulted in the reification of individual theorists or concepts rather than a sustained engagement with the implications of the theory itself” (136). Problematization, on the other hand, moves toward “a more applied approach which is grounded in the students’ own experiences” and “encourages students to reflect critically on their own attitudes and beliefs about literature” (152-3). My own approach to

teaching theory follows these basic lines but departs from Campbell's—and sharply—at a certain point. Campbell explains the benefits of courses that use problematization strategies, stating that they “try to start from where students ‘are.’ And if this is done in a non-threatening way through a framework of general question” it can be a “liberating experience” and help “to develop students’ confidence to express their opinions about what they think they do when they read” (154). Ideal as this sounds, it indicates a level of comfort and harmony that shades into complacency and ease. Rather than seek the paths of least theoretical resistance, my students are asked to cope with the dissonance created when different theories are brought together.

There is another reason I use the term “explode” in the context of literary theory: it quite appropriately implies a certain destructive violence. The teaching and learning of theory—in particular, of theoretical opportunism—is fraught with dangers. It can be likened, in strange and disturbing ways, to Bataille’s dance of death and eroticism. Bataille expands the definition of violence far beyond our normal conception of physical harm; violence is that which disrupts the normal state of things, which hinders standard functions and creates disorder⁸. Eroticism is one such disruption, and the one with which Bataille is most concerned as he makes the link between life and death, reproduction and dissolution. The confrontation with theory creates an intellectual disruption that also unites seeming opposites (confusion is linked to understanding and frustration to satisfaction). With Bataille, we might say that the domain of pedagogy, like

“the domain of eroticism,” is a “domain of violence, of violation” (16).

I’ve already pointed out a few ways in which teaching theoretical texts as the source of open questions and contingent statements can feel like a violation of standard classroom aims, especially for students less familiar with liberatory pedagogies. Literary theory is violent in at least two additional ways. The first of these is purely on a practical level, and is common to all discursive constructions that rely heavily on field-specific jargon and conventions. By the time college-level readers encounter such constructions, they are generally fairly accomplished readers of standard language. They are capable of decoding the language of everyday life with relative ease and have become complacent in their own basic literacy. To then suddenly encounter texts that shatter their confidence in themselves as intelligent, literate individuals can feel like a physical blow, a personal attack. Some take these “attacks” in stride, recognizing the new discourse as an interesting challenge to be met and seeing the process as a way to develop into more nuanced, expert readers with stronger academic identities. Others have less salutary responses; they may reject the theory outright (refusing to engage at all), respond with their own form of intellectual violence in retaliation (this author is stupid!), or become frustrated, despondent, or self-recriminating (I must be stupid!). Ultimately, the sense of violence done to the student’s already-fragile academic persona may be unavoidable, but *can be* ameliorated; teachers can help by assisting students to find their feet again and by reassuring

them that they will be stronger for having had to struggle. Sharing one's own early difficulties with theory –and one's eventual “recovery” from such experiences—may assist students in viewing the process in a positive way. In her textbook for undergraduate students of theory, Mary Klages does just that, sharing her initial interactions with theory:

This was a world-shattering – or world-view-shattering – moment in my intellectual life. I suddenly saw a world of thought of which I knew absolutely nothing, a realm of ideas which illuminated how ‘literature’ worked, but which my English major training had never mentioned. I didn’t know it at the time, but I was experiencing the disorientation and confusion that my whole generation of literary scholars would go through in the next ten years, as the old methods of literary study were expanded and challenged (though never fully replaced) by this new thing called ‘Theory.’” (6)

I’m certain that all those who teach theory have similar stories in their personal histories; we can present ourselves as living testaments to the fact that the encounter with theory leaves one stronger, with sharper reading skills and greater confidence.

The disturbance described above is small compared to the second, more extreme form of violence enacted by theory. We might call this phenomenological violence: theory (especially when presented in its bewildering variety) systematically destroys the coherence and stability of the reader’s worldview. The foundations are shaken, leaving one shocked, confused, and

suffering from a deep sense of loss. The learned cultural norms upon which social behavior is based are entrenched through repetition and emotional enforcement. When these deeply embedded norms are challenged, the result can be freeing but painful, especially when those norms are directly linked to identity and community⁹. Kathleen McCormick, addressing the intellectual transformations that result from interaction with theory, notes,

I have discovered that when students realize that their beliefs and positions can be seen as a part of larger cultural movements, they become fascinated with developing, analyzing, and critiquing them. Their confidence in their abilities rises, as does their need to investigate the cultural antecedents of their positions. I have found that students want to become theoretically self-aware once they discover that theories are working in them anyway. (116)

I would certainly agree that this does happen with some students; perhaps even the majority of them, eventually. But a great many of my students have to undergo a period of uncertainty and discomfort before they can reach the “fascination” stage. Some students reject theory precisely because they want to believe in the “universality” and “correctness” of their positions and can’t bear for those positions to be made historical and contingent (this is more common among undergraduates than graduates, in my experience)¹⁰.

The work of re-creating a foundation of “norms” upon which to base a new, hopefully

more enlightened or at least more carefully considered world view from the exploded fragments is complex in the extreme, and ultimately doomed to partial failure. The violence of theory cannot be undone; the confrontation with theories (plural) leads to the inevitable conclusion that *all foundations are inherently unstable* because they are *all* theoretical. Truth with a capital T, once denied, disappears. The shifting sands upon which critical thinkers stand are permanent; terra firma is illusory.

The instability of theoretical propositions is exacerbated in my classroom by our focus on questions and questioning. Real questions (as opposed to the “false” questions, questions with pre-determined answers already known by the professor and presumably known by the conscientious students, so often asked in classrooms) are bearers of uncertainty. They represent what we **don’t** already know, what requires further investigation. Slavoj Zizek explains that the question is inherently “obscene.” The person who *asks* the question is performing dominance, since the question demands a response and threatens to reveal ignorance (thereby undermining the responder’s authority):

The basic indecency of the question consists in its drive to put into words what should be left unspoken....It aims at a point at which the answer is not possible, where the word is lacking, where the subject is exposed in his impotence....A question, even if it refers only to a given state of things, always makes the subject formally responsible for it,

although only in a negative way – responsible, that is, for his impotence in the face of this fact. (179-80)

Scholars are those who ask themselves questions, are individuals who are constantly inflicting a kind of subjection on themselves by making themselves responsible for answers they do not yet—and may never—have. Real questions can be exciting, compelling, provoking, and productive, but they can also be a burden. They require a potentially frightening confrontation with the unknown—and they require admission of a lack within the self. My students, when confronted with a rapidly-expanding set of unanswered questions, are simultaneously intrigued and frustrated. Lively intellectual debates in which such questions are explored are punctuated with pleas for clarity and firmness: “But what’s the answer *really*?” They have trouble accepting the answer that *I* truly don’t know, that *we* don’t know, that the questions are active.

All real change—even change which is ultimately for the best—is painful. In an essay on theory in the classroom, Mas’ud Zavarzadeh criticizes what he names the “pedagogy of pleasure,” which he claims “uses a number of strategies to remove social struggle from the classroom and liberate its participants from the dailiness (the historicity) of their lives” (35). Instead, he advocates a certain kind of awareness of the constructedness of the classroom as a space bound by its own institutional power structures (which he calls a “classroom with walls,” akin to Brecht’s absurdist theatre). I would push even further and call for a “pedagogy of pain”

in the theory classroom—a pedagogy that acknowledges and even cultivates the kind of pain associated with intellectual confusion (and ultimately intellectual growth). This is not to say that theory is always “only” painful—I should note that the very pain (obscenity, degradation, violation) associated with a confronting theory can be accompanied by intense pleasure (joy, exaltation, satisfaction, perhaps even *jouissance*).

Teaching theoretical opportunism is, to some extent, teaching choice—teaching that theoretical perspectives, moves, and concerns should be chosen not based on correctness or allegiance, but instead on appropriateness, interest, and utility. Such choices are difficult and time consuming, false starts common. Does the theory work here? To what extent does it help us to rethink the issues at hand? What *changes* might we need to make to the theory under current circumstances? How does the theory help us to explore our own interests and concerns? Are the questions it raises valuable to us in this particular context? As much as students want the freedom to exercise their own scholarly agency, they *also* want to hang on to the security blanket of authority. Undergraduates, especially, often balk at making theoretical choices of this kind, hoping that the teacher will make the choice for them (use theory X to explore text Y). When the authority blanket is ripped away, however gently, students may feel exposed, vulnerable, and overwhelmed.

The problem of the unanswerable question, exacerbated by the problem of choice, is

joined by a burgeoning sense of personal responsibility. Edward Said, thinking through the role of the literary scholar, explains that “the critic is responsible to a degree for articulating those voices dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts. Texts are a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components” (53). At nearly the same moment that students are pushed into making choices about the theories that are most valuable in investigations of their own selection, they come to understand the social and political *stakes* of reading and writing about literature. Their choices are their own, and they matter¹¹.

The theory class can be violating (in Bataille’s sense of *disrupting order*) not only for students, but for teachers as well. Because theoretical opportunism involves the selection of stances based on individual interests and particular expediencies, and requires the assumption of responsibility by the critic-writer, the professor must necessarily give up much control over the class, abandoning that control to the group. Students have to learn to negotiate the direction of the class, and professors have to learn to let go. As others who write about critical pedagogy have noted, student-centered teaching that aims to empower students and encourage intellectual exploration necessarily implies the relative disempowerment of the teacher, whose role is transformed from authority-leader to co-explorer.

In addition to this “structural” change, teachers who wish to cover a wide range of

theoretical stances must reconcile themselves to both being and appearing inexpert at some of them. Perhaps unfortunately, being a jack of all trades means being master of none; at this point in time, theoretical formulations and their historical roots are so complex that it would only be possible to “master” all theoretical approaches if one spent *all* of one’s time doing it (and none of one’s time teaching or having a personal life). This is in part because the theory we use in English Studies stems from many other fields (psychology, philosophy, history, sociology, political science, linguistics, etc.), and becoming truly expert in any one of those fields is already a lifetime endeavor. Culler wryly comments that “The worst thing about theory these days is that it is endless....theory is not a circumscribed body of knowledge that one could master, even if one wished to. Theory presents itself as a diabolical assignment of difficult readings from fields one knows little about” (79). There will undoubtedly be some areas in which the teacher feels deficient. One strategy is to simply avoid those areas. The other is more difficult but more rewarding; to tackle them together as a class, admitting (relative) ignorance, and asking students to work *together* as the whole class moves toward better (but never complete) understanding. It means *blatantly* inviting students to challenge the one’s own interpretations and applications of theoretical texts. It means admitting when a student’s interpretation is better or more valid than one’s own.

This may not seem particularly difficult, especially for those of us who aren’t too attached

to the kind professorial identity that is based on a vision of ultimate knowledge and intellectual infallibility. For myself, it presents no real hardship in the classroom setting; I love a good argument and don't mind being wrong and admitting it. I freely declare my ignorance when I don't know as much as I'd like, and love taking on the role of fellow student when possible (teaching this way does not, for me, feel like a violation). But I must acknowledge that this approach has some serious drawbacks. In graduate classes, filled with students who (generally) already have a good work ethic and good critical thinking skills, relinquishing authority is relatively painless. Students in such classes tend to have a healthy respect for those with advanced degrees and for the process of scholarly inquiry. And though they may initially be shocked to hear an instructor admit ignorance, they do, on the whole, accept both their own shortcomings and those of their professors. The pursuit of knowledge is something they have learned to value. In undergraduate classes this may not be the case, and deeply undercutting professorial authority can be dangerous. The fact is that we still need to maintain a certain level of decorum in the classroom and that we are still responsible for grading student work; both of these institutional necessities require some degree of authority. It is fantastic when students feel empowered to question the judgments of their teachers, but uncomfortable and potentially counterproductive when they feel empowered to challenge their grading procedures or their classroom rules (especially in today's litigious atmosphere). The dangerous challenge is to

balance precariously on the line; the teacher must relinquish enough intellectual authority to allow students “play” in the classroom while maintaining enough professional authority to do the job effectively (and to satisfy the administrative powers-that-be who demand the kinds of authoritative poses I and other critical pedagogues abhor).

Further, teachers of theory must confront and acknowledge their place in a social structure which can be and frequently is oppressive (many of the texts I teach in my class—like Bourdieu’s discussion of legitimate language in *Distinction*—explicitly raise this very issue). As much as we might like to see ourselves as gentle guides for students finding their way toward a deeper understanding, we are also enforcers of social codes. We are workers in the knowledge factory and play a role in maintaining the political status quo simply by participating in university structure. For the students in my theory classes who plan to go into teaching, the days on which we discuss power and structure are some of the most difficult. They cherish images of themselves as future critical pedagogues who nurture a love of learning and enable their students to reach their highest potential. Confronting—through Marxist, Poststructuralist, and New Historicist theory—their future roles as cultural police (however unwitting) and privileged gatekeepers maintaining economic inequality via education is always painful. Teachers who regularly engage such ideas cannot help but feel conflicted and not a little disturbed by the contradiction. The point, here, is that teaching theory isn’t just painful for the students, it can

be and often is painful for the professor who must re-confront his or her precarious status as questionable authority and unwilling enforcer.

My larger point is this: the value in the theory course is precisely that it is painful, that it hurts. It creates a discomfort that is productive, leading to deeper self-reflection for teacher and student alike. The theory course (taught not as a series of schools to be memorized and statements to be understood and accepted, but as a collection of disruptive questions) instigates the experience of confusion, of disquiet, and of *doubt*. The challenge for the teacher is to accept pain as part of process, and to resist the temptation to make the course easier or more comfortable. Eventually, most students (we hope) accept the state of doubt and become stronger readers and thinkers as a result.

Notes

¹ Not unjustifiably, Jean Weisberger puts this phenomenon in negative terms: “Unintelligible to outsiders, jargon is the privileged language of a caste: the initiates. In fact, it acts as a card denoting the membership of an exclusive set, admitting you to the Ivory Tower, far from the ignorance and vulgarity of the masses. Ultimately, it demonstrates a refusal or an incapacity to communicate, a specific disease of modern society. It is high time we eradicate it” (300). The problem is that while some jargon is used ill-advisedly purely for purposes of excluding the uninitiated, some jargon serves the invaluable purpose of referencing complex ideas quickly. While simpler, less technical language will sometimes serve just as well, sometimes it simply won’t.

² Of course, lack of conversancy with basic theoretical formulations will have the opposite effect, as described humorously by Jonathan Culler who explains that theory can be “an intimidating mass of difficult material which, people are told, they must master before they can presume to speak about literature. ‘What! You haven’t read Lacan! How can you talk about the lyric without taking account of the specular constitution of the subject?’ Or, ‘How can you write about the Victorian novel without using Foucault’s account of the hysterization of women’s bodies and deployment of sexuality and Spivak’s demonstration of the role of colonialism in the formation

of the metropolitan subject?” (78-9).

³ The editor of a 1992 volume asks: “Because literary studies are self-encased and hence out of touch with reality, their authority and consequentiality have eroded. Does this lament for lost power perhaps add impetus to the intense contentions among literary scholars, their relentless assaults on one another and their pathetic defense of tiny fiefdoms?” (Kecht 4). In an era in which the humanities are embattled, finding themselves poised to become mere “support” departments for professional schools, such internecine squabbles seem rather silly.

⁴ The concept of theoretical opportunism is related to Leitch’s fusion, but indicates even more flexibility—in addition to melding and remixing theoretical idea to create a unique approach a la Spivak, the theoretical opportunist may adopt new variations for each new project as necessary.

⁵ Eva Kushner identifies a similar trend in the study of literary history: “It has tended to renounce vast syntheses, to become more inductive, less reliant on preconceived periodizations, more content with the fragmentary, the particular” (124).

⁶ The common practice of arranging courses and anthologies by theoretical school is becoming increasingly difficult, in any case. Leitch sees the process as largely impossible for periods before and after the 20th century: “Part of my argument in the second edition [of *American Literary Criticism*] is that the schools and movements method of organization does not work for the twenty-first century. Nor does it work for earlier centuries. What we have since

the 1990s is the ongoing disaggregation of the field of literary criticism and theory into ‘studies’ areas (many many dozens of them)” (59). It’s worth thinking about how the disaggregation of the field leads alternately to increased compartmentalization and insulation for some scholars, as well as to greater numbers of scholars who feel comfortable jumping tracks or creating hybrid projects. Like Leitch and his fellow editors in one of their tables of contents, I use “topics” as a way of grouping texts.

⁷ For the graduate version of the course, our textbook is *The Norton Anthology of Literary Criticism*. While I do let the textbook guide my selections to some extent, I also add pdf versions of additional texts where I think it necessary.

⁸ In using Bataille’s notion of violence, I am eschewing another compelling definition that comes to us through political theory and which posits violence as the tool of power, used primarily to enforce and subject. In her *On Violence*, published in 1969, Hannah Arendt explores this version of violence, explaining the ways in which violence is the final strategy of power in maintaining itself [Arendt, *On Violence*, 46]. At about the same time, Louis Althusser is positing the difference between repressive and ideological state apparatuses, which work “by violence” [Althusser, “Ideology,” 97]. In both of these cases, violence is primarily *physical*, an extension of strength and an expression of political power (and both authors are clearly responding to the upheavals of the late 60s). In such formulations, the phrase “intellectual and emotional violence”

would have very little significance. While I feel that Bataille’s definition is more useful in this context, I don’t want to “erase” the political implications brought up by Arendt and Bataille.

Though I see the confrontation with theory as ultimately empowering for the students, it could also be used as a tool for subjection, to subordinate students to the professor or to the theorists studied (depending on who we consider to be “using” the “weapon” of theory to inflict violence).

⁹Critical thinking, when done well, nearly always has destabilizing effect. In his discussion of transformative critical thinking, James Heiman notes that

It is uncomfortable, even painful to a degree, for us as teachers to question beliefs we intuit as true, taken for granted because they form our belief system and standard practices. These beliefs and practices are the foundations for our professional reality and identity. However, when we (and our students) investigate these beliefs that are often received without critique because they came to us from trusted social groups — such as family, friends, church, school, work, colleagues, political party — we begin to question our rationale for holding those beliefs. (119)

¹⁰Certainly, the “violence” of theory is not equal; a discussion of aesthetics or textuality is likely to be far less disturbing than a discussion of gender, race, or power. Those topics which are “close to home”—that is, which have clear implications for student identities and communities—are more likely to cause painful confusion or outright rejection.

¹¹ I might further note that they come to recognize the ways in which others do and do not make such choices, sometimes not even recognizing the stakes involved. The students in my Fall 2015 theory course, with whom I discussed the unfolding events in Ferguson MO, were left with the disconcerting knowledge that the situation was almost unbearably complex, since one might come to different conclusions depending on one's theoretical vantage. This was made even more difficult that many of their friends and family members—in person, or on social media—were taking knee-jerk positions on events without engaging in due consideration. They were (largely) adopting the vantage points easily afforded by their subject positions. This left the students in the unenviable position of bearing the standard for other ways of thinking among their circle of acquaintances. While some might have rejected this critical responsibility, others, I know, did try to inject a measure of reflection into conversations outside the classroom.

Works Cited

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation."

Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Trans. Ben Brewster. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001. 85-126/

Arendt, Hannah. *On Violence*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970.

Bataille, Georges. *Erotism, Death & Sensuality*. Trans. Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.

Campbell, Andrew. "Teaching Literary Theory to Undergraduates: What Have We Learned?"

English 46.185 (1997): 131-159.

Culler, Jonathan. *The Literary in Theory*. Stanford, Stanford UP, 2007.

Heiman, James. "'Odd Topics' and Open Minds: Implementing Critical Thinking in

Interdisciplinary, Thematic Writing Courses." *Pedagogy* 14.1 (2014): 107-35.

James R. Squire Office of Policy Research. "How Standardized Tests Shape—and Limit—

Student Learning: A Policy Research Brief." Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2014. < <http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CC/0242-nov2014/CC0242PolicyStandardized.pdf>>

Kecht, Maria-Regina. "The Challenge of Responsibility: An Introduction." *Pedagogy is Politics:*

Literary Theory and Critical Teaching. Ed. Maria-Regina Kecht. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 1-24

Klages, Mary. *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed*. New York: Continuum, 2007.

Kushner, Eva. "Theory, Theories, Theorizing and Cultural Relativism." *The Search for a New*

Alphabet: Literary Studies in a Changing World in Honor of Douwe Fokkema. Eds.

Harald Hendrix, Joost Kloek, Sophie Levie, and Will Van Peer. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 1996. 124-8

Leitch, Vincent. *Literary Theory in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.

McCormick, Kathleen. "Always Already Theorists: Literary Theory and Theorizing in the

Undergraduate Curriculum." *Pedagogy is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical*

Teaching. Ed. Maria-Regina Kecht. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 111-31.

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism 2nd Edition. Eds. Vincent Leach et. al. New York:

W.W. Norton, 2010.

Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1983.

Shumway, David, "Integrating Theory in the Curriculum as Theorizing—A Postdisciplinary

Practice." *Pedagogy is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching*. Ed. Maria-Regina

Kecht. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992.93-110.

Spellmeyer, Kurt. "Fighting Words: Instrumentalism, Pragmatism, and the Necessity of Politics in Composition." *Pedagogy* 14. 1 (2014): 1-25.

Weisberger, Jean. "Should Literary Theory Be Unreadable?" *The Search for a New Alphabet: Literary Studies in a Changing World in Honor of Douwe Fokkema*. Eds. Harald Hendrix, Joost Kloek, Sophie Levie, and Will Van Peer. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 1996. 296-300.

Zavarzadeh, Mas'ud. "Theory as Resistance." *Pedagogy is Politics: Literary Theory and Critical Teaching*. Ed. Maria-Regina Kecht. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 25-47.

Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.