Introduction: Toward Decolonized and Student-Centered Teaching of Critical Theory

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Like no other, an introductory critical-theory course tends to divide both undergraduate and graduate students into two camps. Some consider it an eye-opening, professionally defining, and personally transformative experience, while others struggle through it, intellectually and emotionally, and vow to forget its unpalatable and unreadable content the minute the final paper hits the professor's mailbox or Blackboard shell. Who, or what, is to blame for such divergent responses? Is it our pedagogy, or the content and structure of the courses that, frankly, go unchanged or unchallenged for years? Is it the very presence of abstract critical theory in university curricula at the time when higher education is under siege by growing student debt, a public-health crisis, and staggering racial and other inequalities? Is it time to reinvent critical-theory courses or to drop them altogether?

In this cluster, our answer is that critical theory is still useful, but "the way we teach now" (to paraphrase a Victorian novel title) is in urgent need of rethinking. In our opinion, the traditional theory course (and the word *theory* in this phrase is articulated, depending on one's point of view, either with a breathlessly respectful inflection or with a mixture of boredom and fear) is an archaic ritual of initiation into the profession, compared, perhaps, to the bestowing of knighthood in a Western monarchy. Such a course is usually, in our experience as both one-time students and current teachers, a chronological survey of various critical approaches, starting sometimes with Plato,

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other times with Philip Sydney, or, at the latest, with Cleanth Brooks. It takes the students through decades of competing approaches (Freud, Lacan, Marx, Greenblatt, Gilbert and Gubar, or Haraway, if one is in the mood for some experimentation). The semester is often almost over when we get to discuss the issues of race, gender, sexuality, and disability in the way that is pressing and relevant to the increasingly diverse classrooms in which we find ourselves. By that point, such discussions, often the most productive of the entire semester, seem, paradoxically, like an afterthought, or an appendage.

In their graduate iterations, theory courses may not be broad surveys but, instead, journeys through a selection of texts that reflects the instructor's expertise or preferred theoretical approach. In all cases, abstraction, difficulty, and a certain respectful remove from "real life" are presumably the required characteristics of a theory course. It is, after all, theory, not practice. Assignments tend to be either meta-theoretical or literary-critical, involving an application of a theory of choice to a literary text. As teachers, we praise ourselves for our insistence on abstraction and difficulty for difficulty's sake, as if the nostrums of New Criticism and its love for the perpetual paradox were still fresh. The online articles that we post on our departmental websites to attract majors often argue that our graduates will get jobs for their ability to think critically and tolerate ambiguity. Such marketing is of no use if students walk away from theory courses disaffected and alienated.

It is time for a change, and change is happening. Theory courses are beginning to prioritize content that directly reflects students' experiences and struggles; moreover, these experiences replace a theoretical reading as the starting place for theorizing. Likewise, literary works or cultural documents become the crucibles of theory, instead of remaining mere objects of application exercises. If a classroom is located outside a Western context (and even if it is not), students have the opportunity to decolonize Western theories. The articles in this cluster represent the efforts on the part of academics across the globe (from Norway to Singapore) to make theory pedagogy student centered and decolonization minded.

The two essays describe a range of pedagogical challenges and the innovative teaching strategies employed in response to these challenges by the authors. The authors share experiences of teaching "theory" in university classrooms spread across two continents—Asia and Europe—and their inventive ways of updating the teaching of theory in order to meet the needs of the global present. Though teaching in classrooms that are geographically distanced and in different sociocultural spaces, both authors simultaneously stake the urgency of reimagining the practice of teaching theory in global

classrooms, specifically the institutionally mandated survey course. The essays collected here show that the learning and teaching of theory in undergraduate classrooms must connect to our contemporary daily experiences and offer students the opportunity to unlearn their desires in order to freely interrogate the university classroom itself as a site for subject production.

"Hopes for Reading in the Era of Globalization" advances the idea of developing new habits of reading in recognition of the "enormous global diversity of worthwhile reading practices that have been obscured by criticism's repeated circulation of particular critical moves and moods" (506) via "studying globalized English literature differ[ent] from those" that dominate the "university curricula" (508). Preferring to teach theory with hope and with the intention of avoiding the "schools approach" (506), this essay outlines how globalized English literatures, distinct from Anglo-America's current fascination with identity-based approaches to teaching and learning of theory and culture, offer a way to decolonize the curricula and make it appropriate for the global present.

"Teaching Queer Theory beyond the Western Classroom" describes the challenges of teaching queer theory to undergraduates in Singapore. Concerned about exporting a "Western" theory into the non-Western classroom and motivated by a desire to help students understand how their particular experiences can add new perspectives to canonical works of Western queer theorists, this class was designed to encourage students to interrogate their own assumptions and anxieties about queerness and then to bring these discussions to bear on their readings and analyses of seminal works of Western literature and theory. This approach, the author posits, is critical for developing a decolonial queer pedagogy, a self-reflexive praxis of learning and unlearning through direct engagement with Western texts but also with adequate attention to local contemporary debates around sexuality.

This cluster makes a provisional effort for restarting dialogues about the relevance and practicality of teaching theory in the context(s) of our twenty-first-century social realities. It is proviso because the task of determining the best practices for teaching theory is far from certain. As educators, we must continue to develop, grow, and reimagine our praxis with an eye on the continually changing modalities of this century.