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The Consolidation of the Capital: Theory Versus theory Across the Curriculum

Marxists emphasize the consolidations effected by capital. My focus in this response will be on a different type of capital symbolizing a consolidation of another sort. This focus is in part prompted by Victor Li's closing conundrum, "Theory is, theory ain't," suggested by the Afro-American saying, "Black is, black ain't." The paradox, "Theory is, theory ain't," speaks to my initial reaction to the three papers we have just heard because it helps to articulate a question their conjunction begs. What counts as "theory"? What theory "is" recognized as such and what theory "ain't"? In addressing this question and some of the others these papers raise, I will posit an opposition—admittedly a crude one—between capital-T theory and small-t theory: between forms of Theory that operate from positions of institutionalized power and theories that often are not viewed as Theory at all, except by those whose practice is informed by them in sites subsumed by, or on the peripheries of, institutional power. By the end of this response, I hope to suggest how this distinction between Theory and theory is related to the phenomenon Teresa Hubel has described so well—the relative absence not of Marxism, in certain forms, but of constructions or representations of "working-classness" in Canadian university English departments.

One is struck first of all in these three papers by the divergent response to Russell Perkin's opening comments, in which he cites Gerald Graff's and Paul de Man's descriptions of theory as a form of resistance. In general, this view of theory seems to be largely accepted in David

Baron's paper, resisted in Victor Li's, and approached from another angle altogether in Teresa Hubel's paper. The approach in Teresa's paper may initially appear tangential, but it seems to me to be instead a striking example of what Carol Gilligan theorizes as women's different voice, and of the phenomenon Elaine Showalter describes as women's time.

"Theory is what erupts when what was once silently agreed in a community becomes disputed," Russell cites Graff as saying; in Russell's own words, theory is "a *resistance to* the authority of interpretive paradigms." This definition of theory does not at all reflect the etymology of the word, as Victor has reminded us, in pointing to the Greek noun *theoria* and the group of authoritarian repositories of knowledge it denoted. Like Victor, I am sceptical of the notion that theory as it is currently constructed in our discipline is a mode of resistance. Small-t theory may be what "erupts" when interpretive communities begin to dispute their own paradigms. But Theory as it is reflected in journals, anthologies of criticism, and job advertisements is very different. Capital-T Theory is what happens when a cultural hegemony reconstitutes itself and its world.

The evolution of the ACCUTE (Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English) "Theory Group," which began as a group of maverick outsiders in the early 1980s and finally fizzled out in 1992, points to the ways in which theory is often transformed into Theory, following a pattern that would not have surprised William Blake. In the early years, these theory sessions were crowded, free-flowing, and excitingly subversive. But the diminishing number that gathered together for the last few annual sessions increasingly began to sense that the scene of the action had shifted, and to feel for all the world like a conglomeration of disconsolate teenagers convinced that somewhere else, if only they could find the place, there was a better party going on. Those of us who speculated about the matter concluded that the Theory Group gradually dissolved because theory had been incorporated in the main sessions of the conference. In short, Theory had been embraced and capitalized.

In describing Theory as what happens when a cultural hegemony reconstitutes itself and its world, I am echoing the moving conclusion of Adrienne Rich's "Natural Resources": in particular, the passage in which she casts her lot

> with those
> who age after age, perversely,
>
> with no extraordinary power,
> reconstitute the world. (264)

I do so in order to mark the difference between theory as it is mobilized by those "with no extraordinary power," and those in positions of relative privilege or power. Few women have more significantly shaped modern culture than Adrienne Rich. Like the figure she describes in "Planetarium," Rich has been a cultural prophet:

> an instrument in the shape
> of a woman trying to translate pulsations
> into images for the relief of the body
> and the reconstruction of the mind. (116)

But despite her importance, you won't find Adrienne Rich's criticism in many anthologies of contemporary Theory—and that tells us something about the world as it is presently constituted and the power structures in it. You may, however, find Rich's poetry in pockets of the curriculum, and you may also find that her poetry and prose (as opposed to Theory) appeal to readers who are outside the university context altogether.

Despite its aura of institutional power, Theory sometimes appears to be "pocketed" like Rich's poetry within the curriculum. David Baron has tellingly conveyed the containment of Theory within certain sites in the curriculum through his suggestive comparison of theory and composition classes. I agree with his acute analysis of the problems this institutional structure reflects, and I think there are many cases when "instituting a single theory course" can be, in his words, a "form of resistance to theory. The institutional act reifies it, locates it in the canon, and marginalizes it all at once." What we need, following David's analogy between composition and theory, is a theory across the curriculum approach, like the writing across the curriculum programs that are now much touted in many universities (although, admittedly, they are successfully practised in very few). As Victor Li suggests, when a separate theory class is introduced to resolve the theory quandary, this class often acts to support a status quo in which instructors in other classes do not

have to acknowledge the particular theories and ideologies embodied in their presuppositions and naturalized critical conventions.

I would add to Victor's and David's comments the suggestion that theory classes are further alienated within the curriculum because the Theory that such classes tend to feature is often heavily philosophical and/or based on examples of literature drawn from French and other European cultures. Barthes, for instance, does not apply his five codes to a writer most Canadian undergraduates are likely to be familiar with, let alone to authors such as Milton Acorn. One is led to conclude, therefore, that the Theory taught in theory classes may not in fact lend itself very easily to a theory across the curriculum approach.

This observation points to the limitations of David Baron's composition-theory analogy. As Robert Frost says, it's touch and go with the metaphor; all metaphors break down at some point. The composition-theory metaphor breaks down because classes in these two subjects tend to have very different power profiles in the institution. Theory classes that are recognized as such tend to be taught either by senior professors with some power in their departments or by younger professors with tenure-track appointments who are on the fast track to career consolidation. Even in those departments where there is still resistance to Theory from some faculty members, there is a demand for Theory classes that is usually accommodated because a commodified Theory is now very much in demand, and graduate students tend to seek out such classes. Composition, on the other hand—well, its status is reflected in the way it is marginalized at our own national conference, and in responses I have heard in ACCUTE circles to proposals for sessions on compositional pedagogy.

Further problems in the approach to Theory as a form of resistance are revealed by survey of anthologies of contemporary criticism published in the last 20 years, or of the syllabi of Theory classes. Such surveys strongly support Victor Li's point that Theory is often presented in ways that replicate the structure of canonical lists of Great Books or Great Thinkers. Who and what tends to be left out? Feminist theorists most notably, and theories with a strong focus on political and/or pedagogical practices and their relation to material conditions. Elisa Kay Sparks's survey of anthologies of criticism up to 1988 indicates the pattern of exclusion that helps to determine what counts as Theory and what

doesn't. Sparks's survey, updating one carried out by Susan Lanser and Evelyn Beck in 1977, reveals that "[w]hat was missing from mainstream, historical anthologies of literary criticism then—theoretical work by women and critical treatment of poetry written by women—[was] to a large degree still missing" in 1989 (51). Granted, female critics do tend to be better represented in certain types of anthologies: "The more an anthology is concerned with practical, pedagogical issues, the more likely its contributors and/or editors will be women." But "anthologies focusing on theoretical developments, especially those with strong philosophical emphases such as hermeneutics or deconstruction, tend to be edited and written by men" (52). The latter are, of course, the anthologies principally used in Theory classes. Lawrence Lipking concludes that "few women have cracked the admittedly mandarin but highly prestigious bastions of literary theory" (cit. Sparks 52), phrasing his observation in a way that points the finger of blame more at women themselves than at a politics of exclusion.

When female critics are included in anthologies of Theory, they are often ghettoized in a separate section on Feminism, much as nineteenth-century female poets were ghettoized by turn-of-the-century editors and literary historians. Dan Latimer's 1989 anthology, *Contemporary Critical Theory*, is a representative example. Latimer includes six sections in his table of contents: Structuralism, Deconstruction, Marxism, Hermeneutics and Reception Theory, Psychoanalysis and Myth Criticism, and Feminism. While some of these categories seem eccentric and odd (like the conjunction of Psychoanalysis and Myth Criticism), Latimer is less eccentric in choosing to contain all of the women critics he includes in his sixth and final category. Women critics have carried out important and influential work in all of the categories he lists, with the possible exception of Structuralism. One has only to think of Cora Kaplan's work in Marxist feminist theory, for example; or Jane Gallop's or Nancy Chodorow's or Luce Irigaray's work in psychoanalytical theory. But Latimer's construction of "contemporary critical theory" creates the impression that women have only produced theory of note on the subject of women, much as it once used to be assumed that women reporters were suited only to writing columns on women in the "women's pages" of the daily newspapers.

As Elaine Showalter points out in her essay on "Women's Time, Women's Space," a similar politics of exclusion is reflected in literary histories of modern criticism. The "periodization and conceptualization" of this history as a progress from New Criticism to structuralism to post-structuralism not only elides feminist criticism; it also "negate[s] it." Critics such as Gerald Graff and Frank Lentricchia "condemn the apolitical nature of modern criticism" and "issue a ringing call for a worldly, secular, oppositional critical practice, ignoring all the while the socially-based feminist criticism going on for fifteen years right under" the author's nose (32). "How would we have to rewrite the history of modern criticism and its meta-histories of dynastic struggle and change if feminist criticism were seen as part of it?" Showalter asks (31). One way of doing so, she suggests, would be to synchronize "critical time" as it is constructed in standard histories of contemporary criticism with "women's time," a history rooted in the concrete specificity of "relationships, continuities, friendships and institutions." Although it is a form of history, "women's time" has been "written out of the historical record," Showalter suggests (31, 34). One could also argue that it has never been written in.

The task Showalter articulated in 1985 is one we have hardly begun to address in 1993, though Judith Lowder Newton is one critic who has notably contributed towards the synchronization Showalter calls for. Newton demonstrates how the theoretical positions and critical practices articulated by the "new historicism" were in many cases anticipated by feminist critics and cultural materialist critics of the 1970s. Here again, however, we see the pattern of elision I have emphasized above. Newton points out that "barely alluded to in most histories of 'new historicism' so far are what were in fact the mother roots—the women's movement and the feminist theory and feminist scholarship which grew from it" (153).

The inflections of a canonized body of largely male Theory are discernible even within the texts of feminist critics with an explicitly gynocentric approach. Patricia Yaeger's *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing* is a case in point. Yaeger's final chapter, in which she constructs seven general emancipatory strategies, draws heavily on what she describes as "male theory": on Barthes, Lyotard, Foucault, Gadamer, Habermas and Jameson, for instance. Only

two of the seven theories Yaeger presents are theories "invented by women," to use her words (263). Employing a loaded analogy, Yaeger both defends and celebrates her "oral pleasure" in the male theories she deploys by comparing her use of them to the devouring of forbidden goblin fruit in Christina Rossetti's famous poem (246-47). As she puts it, she fills her chapter on emancipatory theories with "writhing male voices" in order to draw from this "gathering of male texts . . . a feminist harvest" (247).

Yaeger's intent is certainly explicitly feminist and subversive, but there is also more than a little unintentional irony in her representation of herself as a "honey-mad woman" "openly revelling in the fact that [she] has 'had to do with goblin merchant men.'" One cannot help wondering if the "goblin merchant men," on the whole, have not had their way with Yaeger instead, when one considers the field of Theory she assumes as her starting point. Only Julia Kristeva is treated by Yaeger in the way that she treats male theorists. All other feminist theorists—including French, American and English theorists—are lumped together under the simple monologic category of "utopian" theory. As for the women writers she so insightfully analyses, Yaeger acknowledges that they use "emancipatory responses" she has "not named." But she explains that, in constructing her final array of theories, she has drawn only on "theories that are extensively rationalized and philosophically based" (264). The slippage from "theories" to "responses" here reflects the pattern I have emphasized from the start of this paper: the way in which the slash interposes itself between Theory that "is" and theory that "ain't"—between Theory that is granted the name, to use Yaeger's revealing term, and theory that is not.

Given the way in which subtle demarcations, often gendered demarcations, tend to interpose a slash between Theory and theory, I am curious about David Baron's comments on the difficulty Juliet Mitchell's writings posed in his theory class. Why did Mitchell's criticism prove exceptionally difficult for the class, despite the editor's characterization of it as "clear, sane and straightforward," written with an "'appealing directness and lucidity'"? Were David's students equally vociferous in resisting some of the male theorists he taught? How did the class respond to Derrida or Lacan, for example? Research by Dale Spender and others has shown that readers of both sexes grade or assess essays differently,

depending on their assumptions about the gender of the writer. Do such differences also enter into reader responses to theory written by women and theory written by men?

To shift the focus to readers rather than writers of theory, I can't help wondering as well about the gendered interpretations that might shape responses to the model reader of theory pictured in the conclusion to David's paper. He suggests that, like the character of Tunner in Paul Bowles's novel *The Sheltering Sky*, this reader should be neither intellectually arrogant nor emotionally enthusiastic and undiscriminating. The ideal reader of theory must accept that theory is "difficult stuff" and be willing to be "fascinated by half-grasped ideas," "prepared . . . to fall short of controlling language and text." I find this description of the model reader of theory very interesting: in fact, the three types of readers David invokes correspond to the three principal modes of interacting with literary texts discovered by the feminist reader-response critic Elizabeth Flynn in her research. Yet my experience of reading letters of reference over the years leaves me a little uneasy about how a female graduate student who reveals her fascination with the "half-grasped ideas" of a Kristeva or Irigaray or Chodorow might be viewed by some faculty members—particularly those hostile to feminist theory. The Masters of Theory like Paul de Man who deconstruct their own authority paradoxically succeed, as Victor Li notes, in asserting it. In Victor's words, "The humbling admission of the impossibility of theory yields a theory so sceptically pure and self-negating that no other theories can violate it." But a female student who continually falls "short of controlling language and text" because she is fascinated by difficult theoretical texts is apt to be viewed very differently.

On the other hand, such a student, like many of her classmates of both sexes, might well be most engaged by texts that are not viewed as Theory at all in the academy. In many cases, the theory that is most accessible and relevant to students, particularly at the undergraduate level, is theory applied to familiar literary texts or theory intermixed with political or social practice, like certain types of feminist theory, new historicist theory, pedagogical theory, or reader response theory. In my view, these types of theory might be better suited to a "theory across the curriculum" approach than some of the material regularly included in anthologies of

Theory. Yet often they tend to be underrepresented, if they are represented at all.

This absence connects to the specific absence Teresa Hubel has delineated: the absence of constructions of Canadian working-classness or theories relating to it in our university curriculum. Since I come from a particular type of working-class origin myself, Teresa's analysis of the suppression and repression of working-class discourses and experiences in the academy cuts more than a little close to the bone. Her paper has led me to wonder why theorizing Canadian working-class otherness does not seem to have the commodity value that theorizing racial otherness has right now—by critics such as bell hooks, for instance? Ironically, bell hooks has been so eagerly accepted by the academic establishment as a compelling voice of black culture that her own critique of the ways in which our society deals in a commodified version of exotic black otherness is in danger of being made into a version of what it critiques. Meanwhile, in Nova Scotia, very few blacks—particularly young black males—appear in our university classrooms, and while our newspapers now feature notable achievements in black history, their coverage of black communities has focussed chiefly on black pimps of late, and not on the activists, community workers and people in a wide range of professions and trades who chiefly constitute those communities. For the student or professor reading bell hooks in the library at Dalhousie, these local black communities and the theories that activate social change within them may not really exist as significant sites at all.

If certain commodified theories of race seem more compelling in the 1990s than theories of working-classness intimately connected to regional realities, could one possible explanation for this discrepancy lie in the movement towards an international "global economy"? In this new economy, race is important, but ultimately less important than who owns what, and what the owners do with their control of resources on that mythical "level playing-field" that advocates of the international corporate agenda repeatedly invoke. If there is a connection between the phenomena I have very broadly and crudely described, the elision of class (other than in a rather abstract philosophical discourse that transforms the political into the textual) may be related to the resistance by Theory to particular forms of feminist theory that are most focussed on social and political praxis. Women, after all, tend to be the exploited among the

exploited in today's global economy, much as they were in the nineteenth century, when Chartists and socialists turned away from the feminist reformers originally among their ranks.

While I strongly agree with Teresa's call for more representation and theorizing of the working classes, I'm left with some questions about how to bring this end about, and with even more questions about how the working classes might be defined. There is a vital need for theories of Canadian working-classness, but theories alone will not suffice. Cultural studies programs will definitely help, and I join with Teresa in calling for more of these, and for more Canadian content in them. The practitioners of Cultural Studies rightly claim that, in "the last two decades, when theory has sometimes seemed a decontextualized scene of philosophical speculation, cultural studies has regularly theorized in response to particular social, historical, and material conditions" (Grossberg, Nelson, Treichler 6). But Cultural Studies programs will not incorporate Canadian working-classness into the curriculum if students in them primarily read theories and academic essays about American and British Cultural Studies developments and disputes. Proponents of such programs are keenly aware that what began as a mode of resistance—"a counter-disciplinary field" (4)—is rapidly becoming institutionalized as a new type of field. What we most vitally need in our curriculum is not theory alone or Cultural Studies alone, but novels, poems, personal narratives, films and manifestoes—texts that embody Canadian working-class languages, perspectives, and realities in all their polyglot variegation. Such texts are concrete where theories are too often abstract. Ironically, given my own training and areas of specialization, I probably know more about texts like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* that represent nineteenth-century British working-class realities, or texts like Marge Piercy's novels that represent American urban working-class environments, than I know about texts that represent the Canadian working classes, past and present.

A wider knowledge of such texts would help us to grapple with those difficult questions Teresa broaches: the question of defining who is and who is not working-class, and of distinguishing among the enormous diversity of groups within this monological category. I sympathize with her argument that we need to define the culture of the working classes as separate and different in the way that women's culture has been defined. At the same time, however, I wonder how we avoid an ideology of

"separate spheres" in carrying out this task? Like the gender ideology of the Victorians that has too often been recuperated in contemporary theories of female difference (in applications of Carol Gilligan's theory of woman's different voice, for example), the conceptual demarcation of a Canadian working class risks reiterating the very classist ideologies that Teresa dissects. If we seek less ideologically invested criteria for distinguishing working-classness, what can we turn to if income is not a determining factor? The type of work people do? The language they speak? How can we engage in such a theoretical project while avoiding the dangers of totalizing that Teresa points to, particularly in a classroom that remains populated by members of the white middle classes who may be eager to consume Fredric Jameson or bell hooks, but who often do not connect Jameson to the plight of unemployed female fishplant workers, or hooks to the treatment of blacks in Nova Scotian newspapers?

The difficulty of defining who is and who is not working-class is foregrounded by the interview with David Adams Richards that Teresa cites. As Richards rightly points out, "Half the characters in my novels earn more than the critics that are criticizing them for being poor." Many sessionals and part-timers are now in essence academic migrant workers, many of whom are paid considerably less for teaching three classes than secretaries in university departments. These academic laborers often find themselves in the impossible situation which demands that, in Victor's words, they "know their Derrida and their Lyotard" if they hope to obtain a tenure-track position, while they mark stack after stack of first-year papers in the composition classes they have to teach to live. In the meantime, there are the even more immediate needs of the child crying in the next room or wanting a bedtime story, not to speak of thoughts of how they are going to support that child for the next 20 years. And this is increasingly the situation for men as well as women, as men become more actively involved in parenting. The result is that the young academic who may want to start a reading group in a home for battered women or in a home for street kids, as opposed to reading the latest anthology of post-, post-, postmodern Theory with a capital T, is not likely to get tenure or even a full-time position. Moreover, the theories informing such activism may be dismissed as naïve or well-meaning do-goodism, unless they are embodied in suitably sophisticated and

philosophical publications informed by commodified forms of Marxist Theory.

Maybe the state of affairs I have described will form a new site of resistance in the new world order as university budgets are cut, and universities increasingly model their structure on private corporations. The differences between academic migrant workers and other groups of exploited workers will begin to dissolve and there will be a new class solidarity. . . . But this is beginning to sound like a Marxist dream. And what is a dream but the beginning of a theory? And how does one distinguish between the theory that ain't and the Theory that is, the Theory that constitutes and reconstitutes the powers that be and the theory that resists and reconstitutes them with no "extraordinary power"? The revolutions, one hopes, will continue—though Blake, as Northrop Frye was fond of pointing out to his classes, was very aware that a revolution could also be a closed circle.

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