

Misreadings

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“That reading wasn’t more comfortable than writing. That by reading one learned to question and remember. That memory was love.”¹

I’ve been teaching the literary theory and criticism class required of all English majors, my sixth time teaching it in as many years. The common charge of many students in the class has been, and remains, that *it is just too difficult*. For students for whom literature has been a site of potential and pleasurable disidentification, this theory class can be acutely alienating, especially if the comfort of reading is a constant they’ve had in a largely unfamiliar world. Over 80% of students at California State University, San Bernardino are first generation students, and thus academia, with all of its accompanying rituals, can be a space unknown.² Some retreat into self-doubt, or worse, the paralyzing possibility that they were never good at reading to begin with.

1. Bolaño, Roberto. *Woes of the True Policeman*. Trans. by Natasha Wimmer. Farrar, Straus and Giroux: New York, 2012. 102.

2. José Esteban Muñoz’s “disidentification” is a survival strategy for minoritarian subjects wherein they read themselves in cultural texts that are not “meant for them.” A minoritarian subject, Muñoz says, “scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message [...] in a fashion [its] universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications” (12). For many, what English departments hold up and teach as “literature” function as sites of potential disidentification and disruption; assured of their lifelong identities as *readers*, students find the moments where scrambling and reconstructing meaning are not only possible but also pleasurable. But when the very text itself is closed off not because of its narratival difficulty but because of its linguistic and structural ones, what was once a plenitude suddenly appears barren.

One reading for the class is Barbara Christian's "The Race for Theory." In it, she excoriates the division between "literature" and "theory" as a divide that ignores the active theorizing undertaken by writers of color in narrative forms. I have asked students to engage with the shifting definitions of literature and theory and consider how one can be disciplined by a discipline, to ask the question that Christian puts to her readers: "[f]or whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?"³ With Christian, students often conclude that literature is in some ways much more difficult to read than theory. Theorists eventually tell us what their arguments are; "creative writers," on the other hand, don't. Literary analysis, as part of the educational model of reading literature, might seem 'easier' because it has been the template, training us to explain the symbolism of Kino's pearl or Jonas' red sled.

Reading is not only a question of *what*, but also of *how*.

*"I can't help but wonder if I've been disciplined to cite Foucault, & whether or not it matters if I read Foucault correctly. Why, still, am I so anxious about misreading Foucault when I have been misread time & time again?"*⁴

Teaching as faculty of color, as underrepresented Black or Native/Indigenous faculty, can mean teaching our students the knife edge of inter/disciplinary language and methodology when they – and we – are so often misread through the depoliticizing and flattened rhetoric of diversity.

Why the anxiety of performing a misreading when misreading of people occurs so frequently? When formations of antiblack texts leads to misreading Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd as an act of one bad cop, rather than the institution of policing working perfectly?⁵ When the strategic formations of heteronormative and misogynistic texts lead to continuously misgendering Tony McDade and erasing entirely Breonna Taylor? When white liberals and conservatives alike delight in quoting Dr. King as a figurehead of respectable niceties, performing not only a willful misreading of his most-quoted speech but also a selective reading of his oeuvre? When so many insist on misreading Amy Cooper as an exception to white womanhood, rather than the rule? How are these things connected to, produced by, something like institutional diversity?

"For each paragraph break, he leaned back or forward in his chair. She had an excuse now to stare at the tented fingers she

3. Christian, Barbara. "The Race for Theory." *Feminist Studies*, 14.1 (Spring 1988), 77.

4. Perez, Jason Magabo. "Crayoning the King: On Discipline." In *This is for the Mostless*. Wordtech Editions: Cincinnati, 2017. 20.

5. I borrow the concept of the "strategic formation," "which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large," from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (28). On defunding and abolishing the police and the prison industrial complex, see criticalresistance.org and Ruth Wilson Gilmore's *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*.

had always loved: a tap of his left fingertips to his right meant a comma. Right index fingertip to left was a colon; pinkie to pinkie a semi. He bent his knuckles and locked his fingers together for a period."⁶

Being misread consistently is a condition of what W.E.B Du Bois calls double consciousness, and, differently, what I think of as *nunchi*.⁷ Those who teach from behind the veil or with this keen eye prioritize reading students with both tenderness and acuity. We understand the significance of clarity not only in what we teach but with whom we create, for that is what it means to teach – always fleeting, yes, but no less powerful because of its ephemerality. This has been one of the challenges of teaching online: how to teach without reading the question marks of students' brows, the commas of their spines after a graveyard shift, the punctuation of their faces and bodies shaping the breath and pauses of our work? How to teach when, because they are essential workers, they cannot attend meetings, when they sometimes refuse entry by keeping their cameras off?

*"She is teaching herself how to read."*⁸

As the initial panic over COVID-19 seemingly wanes, the pendulum sways to the priority of the university over the priority of people, which is itself endemically American. Perhaps the answer is not rewarding students if they can make synchronous classes or punishing them when they refuse entry into their private lives. Nor is the answer about implementing the slew of "innovative" teaching practices that we are expected to undertake.

Rather, the responsibility is on us to collectively commit to reading differently, either as a radical epistemological shift or deepening of already existing practices, against institutional definitions of diversity and toward liberation, as Dionne Brand has named it.⁹ Institutional diversity is not a reading between the lines; institutional diversity *is* the lines that protect the interests of white supremacy within the university. These lines work, as barricades to "an opening in the present order of meaning and being through which another structure, or

6. Alvar, Mia. "In the Country." In *In the Country*. Vintage: New York, 2016. 561.

7. "Double consciousness" is of course from W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. The Korean concept of *nunchi* is, as closely as I can explain it in English, a constant awareness of where you are and with whom, an affective and physical registering of said place. Needless to say, who has it—and who doesn't—(or, in other words, who has to have it, and who doesn't) quite often divides along gender and class lines.

8. Whitehead, Colson. *The Intuitionist*. Anchor Books: New York, 2000. 186.

9. "Dionne Brand: Writing Against Tyranny and Toward Liberation," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhlzoeIm0&t=8s>. Brand notes: "This business of justice then, I don't believe in the notion of justice, since it presumes a state of affairs that is somehow formally good... In our case, I think that we live in a state of tyranny, and to ask a tyranny to dismantle itself, to claim, to ask for, to invoke justice is to present our bodies already consigned in that tyranny to the status of non-being, to ask that tyranny to bring us into being and that is impossible. And it won't. That state is, in fact, anathema. That state is anathema to us and so I do not write toward anything called justice, but against tyranny and toward liberation."

perhaps another world, might be preciously assembled.”¹⁰ It may be a reading of those cameras kept off as a concerted refusal of white supremacy, of the possibility of being misread by the university. To read, rather than misread, is to move toward a Black queer world, “an excavation of some of that which never was, but might have been. It accumulates. It refuses to(o). And still is, lying in wait.”¹¹

*“Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done – together.”*¹²

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10. Keeling, Kara. *Queer Times, Black Futures*. NYU Press: New York, 2019. 174.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Morrison, Toni. Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Media AB 2020. Wed. 20 May 2020. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/> (1993)