

How I Learned to Keep Worrying and Love Teaching the Canon

ANDREW DILTS

FOLLOWING THE LATE IRIS MARION YOUNG's usage of the term, I take pedagogical questions to be essentially *pragmatic* questions. As she puts it, "By being pragmatic I mean categorizing, explaining, developing accounts and arguments that are tied to specific practical and political problems, where the purpose of this theoretical activity is clearly related to these problems" (Young 1994, 717–18). When thinking about the importance of feminist and continental pedagogical questions, I want to therefore locate my thoughts in *specific* political and practical problems faced by teachers.

The specific political problem that I am concerned with here is the notion of the canon as it shapes the courses many of us teach. The specific practical manifestation of the problem of the canon is the question of how to teach such courses when one is assigned a syllabus, or constrained by the requirements of set curricula. My immediate concern is to focus on the position of the graduate instructor, adjunct lecturer, teaching assistant, and junior faculty member who lacks the institutional power and employment security to challenge the notion of the canon whether wholesale or only in part. I want to insist that teaching the canon *as a practical and political problem*, turns out to be an exemplary way to practice feminist, continental, radical, queer, and transgressive pedagogies. Teaching a canon is potentially radical because its (re)production is always also dangerous.

I turn to feminist and continental approaches to teaching in particular because they are especially well suited to this practical and political problem. First, feminist philosophy has demonstrated the omission of women from the

canon while also emphasizing that women are central and crucial figures within canonical texts. Second, if continental philosophy distinguishes itself from those strains of the analytic tradition that conceive of themselves as timeless, ahistorical, and geographically universal, it does so in part by pointing to a historical and geographical referent: the “continent.” By taking the canon as an object of analysis, both perspectives can ground a pedagogical approach to a canonical course that provisionally embraces the canon precisely as a question, reflecting rather than refusing its contingency. Feminist and continental commitments to close reading, critical analysis, and sympathetic interpretation can promote a self-conscious and repeated practice of grappling over foundations. Such a practice would not be for the sake of preserving disciplines and normalizing canons, but rather for the sake of understanding the disciplined and normalized subjects that we are as teachers and student. A contingent and self-conscious stance toward canonical teaching, one that attends especially to the danger of pedagogical power, might moreover help us to situate our classrooms as spaces in which we, teachers and students, exercise something like collective agency.

Let me make this more concrete with a symposium of two practices and one organizing principle. First, canonical courses must confront the question of the canon itself. The persistent questions of any survey, “classics,” or “foundations” course should be to ask what exactly makes the subject surveyable? What makes a classic a classic? What is built on a foundation and what makes something foundational? I first pose these questions by taking the course title itself as our first shared “text” for analysis, and by asking students what they think the class will be about and how exactly they have come to think that. It is usually striking to see just how confident many students are in what they’ve signed up for, and how sure they are in their knowledge of what counts as “classical” thought. Yet they have seldom thought about where this knowledge comes from. Such first questions of the course are thus self-reflective and critical questions: *How* did they know that Plato or Aristotle would be on the syllabus? This is the very first step in helping the students to recognize themselves as being active *participants* in the canon themselves, right along with me at the front of the room, actively investing their time in the production and reproduction of the canon.

Our course will necessarily maintain some notions of classics, foundations, and canons. We share this interpretive responsibility from day one of the term, even as we also find ourselves in a world where this tradition was not our own creation. We are responsible for a world we did not create; we are free even as we are constrained. If we are appreciative of the history of philosophy in its inclusions and its omissions, then we can remind ourselves and our students that there are also histories of the canon, histories of foundations, and genealogies of those things that profess to be timeless and eternal. Most importantly,

my goal is to destabilize my students' confidence, to question the grounds of their certainty, and to ultimately queer the canon from within.

Second, by starting from a self-conscious and self-critical approach, the canon is open to radical, feminist, queer, antiracist, and transgressive readings. We can and should have a both/and, rather than an either/or, pedagogical approach. Substantively, this means that Plato's *Republic* can, and must, be read with an eye toward the role of gender in structuring equality. The centrality of Aristotle's account of natural slavery to the boundaries of the *polis* can and must be grappled with.

Such critical reading—beginning by questioning the very status of “the classic” or “the foundation”—insists that we read texts sympathetically to identify what makes them work, the stated and unstated claims that allow them to function, and the exclusions that constitute the totality of their systems. My students sometimes express surprise that we talk so much about race, gender, and sexuality in my courses. But why should they be surprised? Machiavelli's accounts of *virtù* and *fortuna* are expressly gendered in *The Prince*; Locke's social contract is explicitly raced and gendered; Rousseau is obsessed with the cultural character of distinct peoples; Hobbes's epistemology relies upon ableist assumptions about sense perception.

In light of these two strategies, however, we must confront one overarching principle: all of this is necessarily dangerous. Even a provisional defense of canonical teaching remains a reproduction of canonical thinking, and my biases, privileges, and power each mark that reproduction. But above all, my students and I continue to reproduce and maintain the idea of a canon precisely as an exercise of disciplinary and pedagogical power that remains a function of relative privilege. The self-consciousness of privilege does not excuse its exercise, but it might allow for a more responsible use of it. In practice, this plays out in arguably the most contentious aspect of teaching in a canonical course: the limited power exercised when one actually *does* get to decide what goes on the syllabus. At its best, these selections may play out openly in self-conscious group symposiums and reflections on set syllabi. Yet such reflections, when they do occur in institutional settings, nevertheless remain exemplary sites in which power manifests itself through gender, race, age, academic rank, and disciplinary authority. Rather than serving as reflections on the status of the canon itself, they more usually devolve into familiar yet pernicious false choices: “We can't teach Du Bois without dropping Kant; we can't add Mary Estelle without cutting Locke; We can't read slave narratives without skipping Rousseau.”

These are false choices not because we have an infinite number of class sessions, but because they misunderstand the contingency of the canon. That the canon is being constructed and re-constructed over and over again is clear, but the idea that canon must be therefore policed because of that contingency

is what presents these tradeoffs as choices. There is no way to escape this problem definitively, so this problem should be seen as the organizing problem of the course itself. It is a problem that matters. Our common mistake is in trying to resolve the tension, in trying to settle the canon, in thinking we can definitively figure it out. The remaining option at hand is to use the problem of the canon, and where possible, confront pedagogical power without rejecting it, to canonize new thinkers by including them, to question the canon even as we might reproduce it, and to embrace the pervasive danger of teaching itself. As Foucault reminds us, power is never simply good or bad, but always dangerous.

Perhaps the most pernicious form this danger takes is when, precisely as a marginalized part of philosophy, we go too far and become overly concerned with ourselves in relation to the canon. It is all too easy to start thinking that we can and must fix the canon, that we must define the boundaries of continental or feminist philosophy, that we must isolate what is and what is not theory so that our own locations within it may be secured. This is a particular danger of the canon, and it is deadly. It destroys departments, it destroys careers, and it can destroy lives.

This danger also, however, occupies and shapes the space in which many of us work, and in which many of us might be able to affect the lives of the people who matter most in the end: the students in the room. It may be worth taking on the risk of the canon, for what it can provide, and because under many circumstances, it may be unavoidable. Yet, above all, it may be worth the risk because the most dangerous things are potentially powerful resources for a radical and transformative pedagogy within given circumstances.

—Loyola Marymount University

REFERENCE

- Young, Iris. 1994. Gender as seriality: Thinking about women as a social collective. *Signs* 19, no. 3: 713–38.