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Teaching Statement

I distinguish between teaching and teaching something. The former, for me, calls for a committed engagement with ethics and critical thinking, which, in this country today, means devising tactics to deconstruct 1.) the explicit and institutionalized exclusionary practices visible in, for example, the deaths of Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown (to name but a few), and 2.) the capitalist fervor for consumption that would like to transform university education from a training ground for creative thinkers into a preparatory academy for the inexorable world of work. Teaching something, by distinction, and in my case this is usually teaching theatre history or dramatic literature, means guiding students through a well-traversed and adeptly mapped field of disciplinary-specific knowledge in order to introduce the vocabulary and methodological know-how that will enable students to join the conversations going on in that field. Preserving and calling to mind the distinction between teaching and teaching something helps me to remember that all encounters with the past, either through text, image, or repertoire, produce affects in the present. Students should never simply memorize names, dates, and facts, but, instead, search adamantly for connections between historical events and the world in which they live. I argue that finding these connections will strengthen students' abilities to think historically, which, in turn, will expose the structures undergirding "business as usual" (and "school as usual") in the present and then lead, perhaps, to the dismantling of those structures.

Activist teaching, however, requires great self-reflexivity and a careful approach (that is, an approach full of care) to the classroom. My pedagogical practice oscillates around two poles. The first pole resonates with instructions offered by native pedagogical practice. Malcolm Margolin, writing about the insights of a Yurok political and cultural leader, gives me two particular ideas to think about. The first is that teaching is not "just a means of conveying knowledge and information; it is an integral part of that knowledge and information as well."<sup>1</sup> In other words, as a teacher I must always remain cognizant of the fact that, in the best-case scenario, students will remember *what* I teach and also *that I was the one who taught them*. I am, in this respect, insinuating myself into the lives of my students through the material I choose to teach them and the ways in which I choose to present the material to them. I cannot take this act lightly. Related to this insight, Margolin also highlights the theft of teaching: "When you teach someone something, you've robbed the person of the experience of learning it. You need to be cautious before you take that experience away from someone else."<sup>2</sup> In order to interiorize this warning, I carefully devise methods of teaching theatre history and performance studies courses that excite students about the process of discovery, the complexity of research, and the art of question asking. By enthusing learners to guide themselves, I can minimize the cases of theft in the classroom, those moments when I become the owner of knowledge and the students feel that they must withdraw the knowledge from me in order to succeed in the class.

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<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Margolin, "Indian Pedagogy: A Look at Traditional California Indian Teaching Techniques," *Ecological Literacy: Educating Our Children for a Sustainable World*, eds. Michael K. Stone and Zenobia Barlow, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Margolin 70.

The second pole broadcasts fiery, activist messages from Cornel West and the dynamic and progressive thinkers whom he likes to channel. Speaking about pedagogy in a recent interview with the philosopher George Yancy, West declared the following: “It’s about praxis and what kind of life you live, what kind of costs you’re willing to bear, what kind of price you’re willing to pay, what kind of death you’re willing to embrace.”<sup>3</sup> These words build from earlier statements about the current thaw that West senses, a thaw that transitions from the frozen ethical wasteland of 1980s Reganomics and 1990s neoliberal Clinton policies to the fire of contemporary protest cultures unable any longer to stomach the oppression of the poor and the dispossessed people of the United States. Teachers of the West school of thought—a group that includes bell hooks, Frederick Douglass, John Coltrane, Suzan Lori-Parks—modulate between pedagogy and psychagogy where the latter term connotes a guiding of the soul instead of an endowment of new capabilities and skills. To guide students’ souls, a teacher must openly name his inner-contradictions and beliefs. I, for example, am a heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian-raised (though currently unaffiliated), young(ish), white male. Building pedagogical certainties out of cultural traditions to which I cannot lay claim requires tireless work. It, in fact, requires that I give up my certainties of self, all pretension of ownership or mastery, that I acknowledge the privileges from which I have willingly benefitted, and humbly accept criticism when egotism leads me astray. Making these admissions in the classroom, while encouraging my students to join me in the quest for knowledge, has led to many meaningful classroom experiences where, together, students and I have guided our souls and minds to new understandings.

Margolin’s words and the insights of the Yurok encourage the creation of a self-less, attentive, slow, quiet (but not passive) learning environment where students make their own way. By contrast, West’s philosophical sermons entice me to name truths, unveil unjust historical structures created to perpetuate the reign of the few, and show the stakes of critical inquiry. Drawing from these two different charges keeps me on my toes, challenges me to reinvent syllabi, forces me to unseat myself as the master of knowledge in the classroom, and provokes me to find relevant connections between theatre history and contemporary politics. In practice, these charges have led me to abandon the survey format in theatre history in favor of “flights” through specific topics. A feminism flight in the second half of a theatre history class, for example, contains four plays and events emerging from different times and spaces that offer a multi-perspectival appraisal of feminist tactics utilized by playwrights over the last four hundred years. A flight on the performance of blackness uses the same structure to track the impact of European melodrama on contemporary African American identities expressed in *The America Play* and Lupe Fiasco’s music video for his song “Bitch Bad.” A flight on comedy provides an opportunity to look at laughter as a rift in decorum that exposes the dark side of everyday life in Ancient Rome, Neoclassical France, and Medieval Germany. Consciously refusing the survey method of theatre history curricula also allows me to help students think about the acquisition of knowledge and the premises supporting the existence of certain knowledge: What do we gain by working through inherited hallmarks of theatre history? What, by distinction, do we gain when we give up those structures and invent our own pathways and connections? If, as most students readily admit, victors write history, how precisely do we access the stories of those who have

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<sup>3</sup> George Yancy and Cornel West, “Cornel West: The Fire of a New Generation,” “The Stone,” *New York Times* 19 August 2015 <[http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/cornel-west-the-fire-of-a-new-generation/?\\_r=0](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/08/19/cornel-west-the-fire-of-a-new-generation/?_r=0)>

been pushed aside? Once we have accessed the stories of the lesser known, how might we lead our lives in the present so as not to contribute to the obfuscation of similar stories?

I consider myself first and foremost a teacher committed to enlivening the imaginations of students and sharpening the analytical abilities of citizens whose burden it will be to create the next generation of thoughtful art (i.e., art that is full of thought). Next, I consider myself a teacher of theatre history, dramatic literature, performance studies, and performance philosophy, each a concrete and evolving academic discipline concerned with the ways in which theatre and performance contribute to the production of knowledge and challenge the status quo. I am seeking a working environment that will nurture my abilities, inspire new approaches to teaching, and help me expand my mind, a place where faculty commit to helping students teach themselves while simultaneously arousing the fire within.