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## 6.1: Deconstructive Pedagogy

### A Deconstructive Pedagogy

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#### A Disorientating Introduction

The first day of my course normally sees a few departures. Of course, this is common in all university classes and is, in the case of required core courses such as the freshman composition course I teach, to be expected. My enrollment declines on that first day because the freshman students are often rather disorientated by my pedagogical approach. Of course, they do not call it as such despite my openly naming it, but the first day's comments are generally enough to cull a good few of the herd. What do I say that could be so disorientating to an eager student at one of the most expensive institutions in the country? It doesn't seem all that radical, piece by piece, until it all conglomerates and then, with the final death stroke of the 'grading policy', a student or two run for more familiar territory with clear and discernible boundaries.

I commence the first class session by informing students that we will begin our readings *in media res* but that, unlike the 'classics' they are so familiar with from high school, we will only come round as if on a Möbius strip: no clean circles to be had in my classroom. I tell my students that those who answer the questions we will have put forward, will have likely not read our predecessors or our peers carefully enough. And, I inform them, much to their horror, that their grades are, in no small part, determined by the revisions made in response to their peers' critiques; not as I determine the revisions adequate, but as their peers see their concerns and questions appropriately addressed. In short, I try, within the strictures of the university structure that employs me, to begin my course by placing my traditional position under erasure, that is, by removing the violence of the one; I am not the authority, I tell them, I cannot approve or disapprove of the writing they will do in my course. It is their peers, their discourse community, that will determine the adequacy of their articulations. The students, the heterogeneous many, are the center of the course.

Thus, it is from the outset that I try to impress upon my students that I am akin to a specter, coming in from stage left, here to provide a few recommendations, a friendly suggestion, perhaps, a scaffolding of texts and themes, and hopefully, a playful remark or two about the way we write, specifically in my courses, about the way we write animals and animality. I do not wish to be coy or clever for the sake of such, either here or in the classroom. I do not commence this essay or my course with vague linguistic play in order to entertain, at least not in order to entertain *in the place of* education. I begin my course, and this essay, in a manner that works hard to be earnest, rigorous, and demanding of myself and my students. By refusing certain unexamined positions, from my centrality as the arbiter of grades to the expulsion of the animal from our garden of moral consideration, my course seeks to resist a few of the more dominant forms of accepted violence. This resistance is inspired, but not determined, by Derrida's deconstructive critiques. Of particular importance to this discourse would be his writings on the university, hospitality, 'the animal', and violence. Books, essays, interviews, and even movies have informed my continuously morphing attempts to provide an hospitable environment for an array of activisms to take place, radical activism such as: friendship, conviviality, hospitality, justice, compassion, and many others. But how does one court such radical spaces, such heterogeneous eruptions of otherness, of radical alterity, within the homogenizing fabric of violently enforced normativity? With small steps.

#### Which Animals?

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“I thought this was going to be a course about “Animal Rights,” like PETA and stuff. You know, ‘Fur Is Dead’, ‘Vegetarians Taste Better’, ‘Meat Is Murder’, all that. What hell does racism have to do with animals?”

“I thought we would look at Disney films and Harry Potter. This book is about a pedophile in South Africa. I mean sure, the guys a creep, maybe even an ‘animal’. But the only real animals are the dogs he puts down.”

“We’re reading Heidegger? I don’t want to read Heidegger, that’s philosophy, not writing. I thought this was a writing class. I don’t understand what philosophy has to do with animals?”

Such are just a few of the inquiries I’ve received on the first day of class. And what excellent questions they are! As is the case time and again, when we carefully and hospitably listen to our students, they often, perhaps in blindness and perhaps not, take the class discourse straight to the complex issues at hand. In the spirit of Derrida’s writings, I try to avoid the silencing violence of my answers to such questions; I attempt to displace my position as the fountain-head of knowledge, the truth-giving “decider” in the course and instead hope to open up a hospitable place for the Other, in this case students, to respond to such exclamations. A simple enough tactic, certainly. Yet, followed to rarely nonetheless. By avoiding interpretation of their responses, assessment of their replies, and other homogenizing gestures, I begin at the very outset of my course to provide a space in which the students will have just as many answers as I do, if not more.

“Well, first off, Animals can’t have rights, otherwise they’d not be animals. And besides, PETA just uses half-naked women to sell their position. They’re totally sexists. They care more about rats and mice than women being oppressed.”

“What’s wrong with Disney films and Harry Potter? I mean, we get our ideas from somewhere right? I got a fish as I soon as I saw Finding Nemo but he died pretty quick. I’m just saying, these things influence as kids.”

“Philosophy is totally writing; it’s just boring writing. It’s writing for people who couldn’t figure out what the hell stories and poems were saying, so some old white guy, now probably dead, has to try explain it all. It’s like directions on how to put something together for those that couldn’t figure it out in the first place.”

So much was packed in to each student’s question and the many responses that we could have spent the term untangling the threads of the first day. Of the many reasons I chose this topic for a freshman composition course, one is that deconstructing the writing of animals and animality is not as difficult as, for example, the tradition of onto-theology. At least, not at the outset. As the above student responses note, we all have come in contact with animals, ‘real’ or ‘represented’. Furthermore, these encounters are complex and varied and can readily allow interrogations about what it means to be a living being, to have an ethic, and the category ‘animal’ in its more far-reaching sense. So, while the topic of the animal is easily and readily accessible to a freshman student, *the question of the animal* is still caught up in the larger trend of phallogocentrism. Derrida is clear about this:

This “sacrificial structure,” it seems to me (at least for the moment, this is a hypothesis that I am trying to relate to what I call elsewhere the “phallogocentric” structure) defines the invisible contour of all these reflections,

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whatever the distance taken with regard to ontology in Levinas's thinking (in the name of what he calls metaphysics) or in Heidegger's with regard to onto-theological metaphysics. Going much too quickly here, I would still try to link the question of the "who" to the question of "sacrifice." . . . [O]ne day, I hope to demonstrate that this schema implies carnivorous virility. I would want to explain carno-phallogocentrism even if this comes down to a sort of tautology or rather heterotautology as a priori synthesis. ("Eating Well" 280)

More important than this 'heterotautology', however, is that the students, both in the texts we read in class and in other cultural texts they bring in, draw out these threads and open up spaces to act on them or perhaps even *with* them, in writing. That the question of the animal is caught up in this thread of 'centrism' allows the students to interrogate many issues at play in a variety of discourse communities, starting with the class itself but nesting in fields as far off as immigration and economics.

In fact, it rarely surprises my students that Derrida notes that the question of the animal is one of the central questions in philosophy. He notes in "The Animal That Therefore I Am" that "this agreement concerning philosophical sense and common sense that allows one to speak blithely of the Animal in the general singular is perhaps one of the greatest, and most symptomatic idiocies of those who call themselves humans" (409). Furthermore, in a spectral nod to the student's earlier comment on the difference between philosophy and writing, Derrida notes that this "symptomatic idiocy" may not extend to 'writers' (of fiction or poetry I assume), or at least they may not be either as symptomatic or as idiotic as "most philosophers":

There are very few other philosophers who don't give into this prejudice against animals—practically none. That's not to say that the discourse is homogenous, but on the whole, most partake in a forceful presupposition, a prejudice against the animal. *Writers are different—I'm talking about philosophers.*" (Derrida, *the DVD*; emphasis added)

What exactly can 'writers' do that avoids or complicates this "prejudice"? And just who may qualify as a 'writer' in this sense, when Derrida is clearly excluding philosophers, though they obviously compose texts? How do we compose animals and animality? And, how does a close examination of these questions enable students in a composition classroom the opportunity to explode unexamined assumptions in and of their own compositions?

Of course, I do not wish to offer my answers to these questions, here or in the class room. Rather, I wish only to point out a few of the tracks these beastly question leave here to expose how quickly the 'question of the animal' becomes a far more problematic line of inquiry than the freshman students at first assumes. Yet, they are quick to discover this, to bravely follow philosophers such as Cixous and Derrida and authors such as Yann Martel and J. M. Coetzee. Some students have even managed to challenge such authors in very compelling and rigorous essays! My deconstructive pedagogy seeks to continually open up the opportunity for the student to tease out new threads of inquiry, to never rest in their endeavor to explore. Writing plays an important, central role to boundary creations and transgressions in the human/animal binary. The students' readings of texts and their compositional responses which illustrate in stark and terrifying terms how dangerous and infectious our species tendencies are and the role language plays in boundary enforcement or in boundary transgression. In order to facilitate and encourage these examinations and their far-reaching tracks through ontological assumptions and epistemological constructions, I attempt to provide various discourse opportunities.

## What Kind of Writing?

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One very simple way I begin to de-center myself is by having daily class postings on a website in addition to the in-class discussions. In both settings, rather than require the students to respond to a specific question, or analyze a specific section of text, I simply begin the session with something in the text that interested me, a *trace* worth noting. I believe it is important to keep my own prose and lecture informal to encourage a space of hospitality, so that the students do not feel pressured to write or speak 'correct' prose. One way I do this is by using typographic conventions found in SMS and IM chats. The students are quick to respond to this as they begin to feel that the online discourse is unencumbered by heavy moderation. Open to a discourse style the students are already accustomed to, such a hospitable environment allows the students begin to explore the questions my course sets up for their examination. This space remains free and open throughout the entirety of the course. It provides a kind of 'free-writing' space yet with the added dimensions of the discourse community and a public scene. As the term progresses, I remove myself further and further from the role of 'prime-mover'. I hopefully end the term with entries where other students post even before I do, in which case I respond to them.

While certain problems certainly persist in my attempt to place my position under erasure (my 'watching' as emblematic of the panopticon, my initial gesture as 'prime mover', being the 'decider' of which texts to read, etc.) I believe even the subtle gestures I make take some important steps forward in allowing the students to begin to write for each other and for the Other more generally, rather than simply writing to please me, writing to pass the test, the next hurdle in a long phase of useless and sometimes counter productive exams (SAT, ACT, GRE, etc). Our writing of animals and animality provides students with a myriad opportunities to examine the many, varied hierarchical and violent constructions that are founded upon that discourse, that greatest, and most symptomatic idiocies of we who call ourselves humans. Even a subtle gesture, like contextually accepting the typographic habits in SMS and IM, begin to provide a hospitable space for a student to explore more 'risky' and 'radical' activisms, textual and otherwise.

Of the few controlling, imposing gestures I make, one is to call attention to writing as an affective force in the way we conceptualize and carry out the human/animal divide. From petting baby piglets to eating pork, from acting like a bitch to behaving like animals, students are asked in the first weeks to examine a few of the myriad ways our language first sets up these conceptual structures: 'human' and 'animal'. Students have consistently taken the next step, exploring the way our language has an affective force, both textually and corporeally.

I often commence class readings with J. M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals*. With this text, students are thrust in to the middle of a complicated ethical and sociopolitical debate that partakes of numerous rhetorical and narrative strategies, examining many of the resultant structures that use the human/animal binary as their foundation. Particularly beneficial for the students is that this piece of Coetzee's draws out innumerable questions of composition that students are quick to notice and discuss.

Much of this is due to the very format of Coetzee's work. As one student pointed our class discussion, Coetzee was asked to participate in the Tanner Lecture Series at Princeton University and most expected a informative position piece about South African apartheid or the aftermath thereof. Yet, as Amy Gumann's introduction to the text notes,

Like the typical Tanner Lectures, Coetzee's lectures focus on an important ethical issue—the way human beings treat animals—but the form of Coetzee's lectures is far from typical Tanner Lectures, which are generally philosophical essays. Coetzee's lectures are fictional in form: two lectures within two lectures, which contain a critique of a more typical philosophical approach to the topic of animal rights. (Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* 3) Students are quick to ask about the compositional strategy Coetzee has chosen:

"Can I write a story instead of a final paper? What's the big deal? What's the difference between writing a piece of fiction and piece of philosophy? Why would a Nobel Prize Winner, who lived in South Africa during and after Apartheid, talk about animal rights in that setting? Why give a lecture of a story of a woman giving a lecture? Where is the 'real' philosophy or ethics about animals?"

All are questions students raised in the online forum and during in-class discussion. These kinds of student questions are indicative of precisely the kind of disorientating yet inquisitive space in which a deconstructive pedagogy plays. Because Coetzee's fiction portrays so many of the rhetorical (ab)uses of language with regards to the question of the animal, the (im)propriety of the academic lecture, and the (in)ability of philosophy to address ethical issues, students easily find some affective force of the composition with which to take issue, with which to support, or simply with which to explore. They are quick to want to respond, in writing, and Coetzee's own

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creative, discipline-defying prose gives the students much to think about when planning and executing their own compositional response.

Far too often, students' capabilities are underestimated, so I am careful at this stage to only encourage what I have found to be an already well developed tendency for systematic and rigorous analysis of the language at work in a text. Students, by the hospitable space given in the online forum, often find themselves moving along quickly even as they transfer to lengthier prose, tracking some of these deconstructions so that they are soon complicating many of our most often unexamined ethical structures. One student began the first weeks intrigued by terms such as 'factory farming' and 'rendering facility' that we found at play in Coetzee's fiction only to find that she was soon examining how the industrialized slaughter of animals pioneered in Chicago provided something of a direct inspiration for the mechanization at Hitler's death camps. Due to peers' comments and questions, this student moved on to find that the language put to use by the Nazis to dehumanize cultural others was then quickly appropriated by the Allied forces after the conclusion of the war to equally dehumanize the Nazis themselves. This investigation led other peers to examine how this cycle is common, done often to protect we who call ourselves human from the polluting force of acts so violent they are called 'barbaric', 'inhumane', and 'bestial'. The student became quite unconcerned with her grade, far more intrigued and interested in articulating herself as clearly as possible to her peers.

It is possible that I would have never thought to encourage any of the students down such paths. By displacing my authority position and encouraging the students to write not for me, but for each other and the other more generally, students find that not only are their compositions more interesting in subject, but more likely to be composed well, even by 'academic' standards, as their revisions are made not for the one, but for the many.

## What if I Fail?

Students often come to ask me about their grades: where do they stand at this point? What do they need to do for an 'A'? What do they need to do to *not* fail?! My answers are purposefully challenging and non-committal; I refuse to provide concrete, calculable assessments as much as I am able to within the university system. My reasoning is not *solely* a distaste for the arbitrary assignment of a violent mark upon a student's record. I am involved in the lives of these students for only a semester, maybe a bit longer if they want a letter of recommendation. I see their 'task' in my course as learning to write for Others, not just me as *the* other. So I reiterate to the students, time and again, that their prose, their compositions, are to be graded by their revisions as they relate to peer reviews and those peers see their concerns and questions appropriately addressed.

I cannot extricate myself from the violence, the arbitrary and inappropriate nature that the grading mark creates. It is required for my position. But I hope to mitigate that violence to the best I am capable. Removing my assessment as the authoritative ruling power is one way to do this. There are certainly others, but this one works well for the composition course. After all, what are we trying to teach these students? I care very little if they can write for me, and thereby receive what I consider to be a mark of 'A'. There are many excellent scholars whom

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would not receive such a mark in my class and it is certain that I would fair similarly in their course. What I care a great deal about is if the student is able to enter into a discourse community, are they capable of reading the texts in that community carefully and rigorously, and, most importantly, are they capable of articulating a response, opening a dialogue, entering in to discourse *within* that community. This, to me, seems like the most important thing I can teach them. Not to write in some manner that satisfies the violently homogeneous discourse of 'academic' and/or 'professional' writing. Rather, I hope to assist them in what ever way I am able to write in a manner that is affective within a particular discourse community, in a manner that opens space up, rather than closes it off; to write in a manner that creates questions, not one that blindly offers solutions at the expense of intellectual rigor.

This results in some complicated and difficult situations for me as the instructor. Do I let a student write a piece of fiction as a final essay? If he is responding to Coetzee's work, bringing in Peter Singer's quasi-fictive response, then yes, I do. What if a student is examining the discourse of animals and animality in advertising for fast food stores, would I allow their final piece of composition to be a parody of those ads? Were it accompanied by some explanatory prose, I would. What if a student has taken issue with PETA's use of the 'female' body in their animal rights campaigns; should I then permit the student to build a critical website as their final paper? I believe I should.

Yet, I cannot help but wonder if I am doing the students a disservice? In short, am I a bad instructor for not forcing them to write a traditional academic essay? I might be. In fact, my deconstructive pedagogy insists that I am open, *always*, to the possibility that I too might fail; and I try to explain this to the students. That I might fail, or that they might fail, does not mean, necessarily, that they would earn an 'F'. Not in my class. A student who attempts to enter in to a difficult discourse community should not be penalized because they did not master said discourse. In fact, the assumption that they will, or could, master any discourse is not only contrary to my pedagogy, it is a gross error in judgment if we think a semester of our instruction can help a student 'master' anything. Derrida's numerous comments on the mastery of a text should be remembered here.

One student in a recent term wrote on the dehumanization of Latina/o Immigrants and used, to my amazement, the work of Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray. I say that I was amazed not because I doubted her ability but because I myself had, to that point, had tremendous difficulty with the texts. They were complex and very dense and I had wrestled with them for some time in consultation with my peers but had achieved little progress. This student did not 'master' the compositional style of these difficult authors. In fact, she was so astute as to point out that 'mastery' of any prose, any composition, any discourse community is to commit the very kind of error that Derrida writes about in one of his earliest pieces. I'd like to quote at length here: A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. It's law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything could rigorously be called a perception. . . . There is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it had mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once, deluding itself, too, in wanting to look at the text without touching it, without laying a hand on the "object," without risking—which is the only chance of entering into the game, by getting a few fingers caught—the addition of some new thread. . . . One must then, in a single gesture, but doubled, read and write. And that person would have understood nothing of the game who, at this, would feel himself authorized merely to add on; that is, to add any old thing. He would add nothing: the seam wouldn't hold. Reciprocally, he who through "methodological prudence," "norms of objectivity," or "safe guards of knowledge" would refrain from committing anything of himself, would not read at all. . . . The reading or writing supplement must be rigorously prescribed, but by the necessities of a *game*, by the logic of *play*, signs to which the system of all textual powers must be accorded and attuned. (Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy" 63)

The student did not name this difficulty as such; she did not cite this passage. Yet, she realized the problem and articulated a response within her own discourse community. That kind of writing is what I hope to teach. Not, to quote Hakim Bey's anti-copyrighted *Immediatism*, a writing "like vultures regurgitating and reconsuming the same carrion, in an obscene ecstasy of self-referentiality" (9). Rather, a writing that is fresh, contingent, and hospitable to the Other.

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My students and I face very similar difficulties. The pedagogy I play offers no solutions, creates no course templates, and, in fact, often explicitly but always at very least implicitly, undermines any attempt to coral our meditations and resultant aporias within those fences built by institutional guidelines and procedures, which thereby undermines any attempt to form a semblance to what could be called a 'pedagogy' as such (if, by pedagogy, we wish to articulate a positive space full of the presence of class outlines, exercise ideas, and course proposals). This is not a problem-solving pedagogy. This is a problem-*making* pedagogy. This is a pedagogy that seeks to reveal, explore, or at least gesture towards discontinuities and contradictions that are already at work, no matter how naturalized they have become. This is a pedagogy of the feral insurrectionists fighting to let loose the violently domesticated.

Again, I do not wish to be purposefully coy. For despite the lack of universalizing, programmatic answers, a deconstructive pedagogy can offer much to the composition class room. It can open doors to questions that are problem-creating, to discourse communities that are more comfortable with not-knowing answers or best-methods. It can open a space of hospitality for the student to articulate their responses in manner appropriate for the discourse community that interests them, not the one that we determine as correct or necessary. Such spaces resist the violence of the one. These are spaces that are productive by being aporetic; spaces where discourse and inquiry can take any number of lines of flight. An examination of the animal and animality is just one flight pattern where knots are undone, not to reveal a clean straight thread, but rather, in just one student-proposed figuration, to reveal a möbius strip where we find ourselves, like Escher's Ants, following our own tracks to constantly find ourselves on the 'other-side' that is not.

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