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Form, Gender, Pedagogy: Shaping and Engaging the Period Survey

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<1> In recent decades, scholars working in nineteenth-century literary studies have productively expanded the spatial and temporal horizons that have defined the field. From the wide-ranging work generated by Transatlantic and Hemispheric American studies, which have articulated new lines of connection across geographic and national borders, to the growing body of scholarship on *fin-de-siècle* literature and culture, which has challenged the boundary that typically divides Victorianism from Modernism, our field has benefited greatly from scholarly interventions that expand our archives and methods. Despite these robust and generative contributions, however, the way that the period has been framed in our teaching—and our undergraduate teaching, most especially—has remained much more limited and fixed. Indeed, across a wide variety of institutions, most students are still first exposed to the field of nineteenth-century literature in some form of survey course, which is typically organized around nations, traditionally defined, and long-recognized historical markers, like the French Revolution and World War I.⁽¹⁾ Moreover, since the basic descriptions and parameters for these courses were set, by and large, long before we arrived on our respective campuses, let alone before we began to think about how we would organize our syllabi, their shape and construction are influenced as much by disciplinary and curricular forces largely out of our control as by our own intellectual investments and aesthetic interests.

<2> In this essay, I argue that survey courses provide an important place for us to consider the ways that we frame our field, both in our teaching and beyond, since they are important sites where we make our period legible for our students. In what follows, I interrogate the period survey by viewing it through a formalist lens, by exploring the organizational structures we use to define its contours, and, more particularly, by extrapolating the impact these forms have on our students' understanding of the complexities of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century. Since constructing a syllabus necessarily demands that we draw a set of aesthetic, thematic, and temporal boundaries around a set of texts and then chart our trajectory across them, I argue that analyzing the formal construction and arrangement

of these survey courses offers a crucial point of entry for understanding how we expose our students not just to nineteenth-century literature and history in a general sense but to the specific constructions of gender and sexuality that coalesced within the period.

<3> Reading the period survey in this way not only demands that we recognize how ideologies of gender and sexuality work precisely in and through various modes of formal organization in influential concepts such as the “separate spheres” but also compels us to acknowledge how the shapes that we use to arrange and present our courses’ content can reproduce and resist these normative structures. To illustrate these dynamics, I focus on two particular and commonly used shapes for organizing a course—the “historical arc” and the “spokes on a wheel”—and analyze how their forms potentially replicate patriarchal and heteronormative modes of thinking in their reliance upon teleology and taxonomy, respectively. At the same time, I demonstrate how their structures might also be deployed to usefully illuminate patterns of change and contestation, in depictions of marriage, for instance, in the case of the arc, and in charting the mutually constitutive relationships between gender and other social processes and phenomena, such as race and imperialism, in the case of the wheel.

<4> In this respect, while many of us have long communicated to our students the crucial importance of the nineteenth century within the history of gender and sexuality—from the formation and codification of “modern” sexual identities to the increased role that women played within the artistic and social life of the period—I assert that becoming more acutely attuned to the forms that we use to shape and formally organize our courses simultaneously allows us to recognize the ideological and epistemological force of these pedagogical choices and to measure the specific impact on the narratives that we construct about gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century. By making these forms apparent and visible for our students, I contend that we can not only help them more critically engage with the history and literature of the period but also transform our classrooms into spaces of feminist and queer praxis, in which our students understand both the complexity and contingency of gender and sexuality—in the nineteenth century and in the present—as well as the constructed nature of knowledge itself.

Theorizing Shape: On Arcs and Wheels

<5> My approach to thinking about the period survey in these formal terms is deeply influenced by Franco Moretti and his embrace of visual abstraction as an analytical and explanatory tool in *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*—even though pedagogy was not at the forefront of his analysis in that project and even though a ten- or fifteen-week syllabus hardly represents the “big data” that he privileges within it. In identifying the “trio of artificial constructs” named in his title as apt descriptors of the “shapes, relations, [and] structures” that are most typically used to organize literary history, Moretti demonstrates how they can be used to cultivate a meta-critical awareness about our methods of reading and interpreting information (1). In the case of the graph, its ability to quantify and gather data allows trends to be visualized and plotted, whereas the map spatially orders information by making it concrete, and the tree provides a mechanism for tracing the morphology of particular forms or concepts. In this way, Moretti’s framework shifts our perception “from texts to models” in thinking about literary history while also providing a useful conceptual apparatus for thinking about the forms we use to structure and present that history in our courses and for our students (1). Since, for Moretti,

these spatial forms underscore how abstraction can function not as “an end itself, but a way to widen the domain of the literary historian,” I argue that they can also be helpful tools in articulating and delineating how we design a course syllabus and how we undertake the work of simultaneously distilling a period into a few representative parts and providing a wide and comprehensive portrait of its domain (2).

<6> Furthermore, when we combine Moretti’s use of geometric shape as a mechanism for historical and literary analysis with Caroline Levine’s more recent insistence that we look at the particular “affordances” or the “potential uses or actions latent” in a given formal structure, we can “grasp both the specificity and the generality” of these shapes as well as their “constraints and possibilities” (6). Borrowing this concept from design theory and using it to analyze a different set of forms than Moretti—in considering wholes, rhythms, hierarchies, and networks—Levine argues that focusing on the affordances of form allows for a more thorough examination of “potentialities” that are encoded within specific “aesthetic and social arrangements” as forms are deployed across a range of contexts over the course of time and as they overlap, intersect, and collide. Additionally, by emphasizing a form’s ability to transport its affordances from one time and space to another, she reveals how they “work on different scales, as small as punctuation marks as vast as multi-plot narratives or national boundaries” (13). In this respect, her work allows us to change our focus from the macro-structures and patterns that Moretti is interested in to look at the smaller-scale micro-practices that manifest themselves in our syllabi and classrooms. Thus, by identifying the specific affordances of the forms that we use to structure our courses, we can then usefully articulate the critical work that shaping our syllabi performs and interrogate the pedagogical opportunities that are simultaneously created and delimited by these choices.

<7> In my own teaching, I have used two basic forms to organize my nineteenth-century period surveys, and, given my consultation with a few colleagues, I hypothesize that these shapes are incredibly common ways to organize a survey class. The first, which I have found is the much more frequently used model, is the historical arc, which proceeds in a chronological fashion across a set of textual materials often chosen from one of the major anthologies and supplemented with a handful of novels. The second is the thematically organized “spokes on a wheel” model, which moves through a set of clustered texts and uses them as case studies to explore a series of specific topics.⁽²⁾ I have designed my courses using these two forms because they each afford, to use Levine’s terminology, a number of pedagogical benefits when introducing nineteenth-century literature and culture to my students. In their simplicity, both the historical arc and the thematic wheel arrange information and content in ways that help students become more aware of how the course is moving between individual texts in a specific and deliberate fashion while also offering a legible framework for thinking across them. And while these two forms can and often do overlap—in the ways a historical arc might trace a set of texts that are organized around a certain genre, such as the realist novel or the lyric poem, or the ways the texts within a single spoke might be arranged chronologically—I will focus here on the distinctive impact that these shapes have when they are used as the primary organizing form for the course as a whole.

The Affordances of Arcs and Wheels

<8> To begin with the historical arc, its shape is incredibly valuable for tracing trends and patterns across texts, and I have used it in this way to great effect in my survey of nineteenth-century women's literature, in illustrating how narratives of female identity and independence, for instance, emerge across a variety of novelistic genres over the century, from the female bildungsroman to the sensation novel. Similarly, within the "spokes on a wheel" model, a course can produce a rich and varied understanding of a very particular concern or topic by moving back and forth across texts from a range of years and across fiction, poetry, non-fiction prose, and drama. In my Victorian literature survey course, I have organized these groupings around the four "Victorian Issues" sections included in the "Victorian Age" volume of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*: the "Woman Question," Evolution, Industrialism, and Empire and National Identity. These clusters have allowed me to provide a concrete structure for the class that eschews chronology while using the power of juxtaposition to bring the similarities and differences among several texts into sharper relief and to produce a rich and varied understanding of specific historical concerns as a result. In this sense, by providing a formal apparatus that makes these lines of possible connection and contrast apparent for students, both shapes foster, albeit in different ways, their ability to engage in the more relational modes of thinking across texts, which, in turn, allows them to produce a sense of the nineteenth century as a complex yet coherent whole. Thus, both the arc and the wheel are forms that help students understand that texts should not be understood in isolation but rather as part of a larger literary conversation and process of cultural exchange.

<9> At the same time, in considering how these shapes produce knowledge about gender and sexuality, they afford several constraints and possibilities that can also be seen as critical liabilities. Undoubtedly, in shaping a course as a historical arc, its linearity and its implicit assertion of a progressive telos carries significant cultural and ideological baggage, especially in its associations with patriarchal and Eurocentric ways of knowing that elide women, non-Western epistemologies and communities, and non-normative sexualities. As Julia Kristeva famously articulated in her essay "Women's Time," linear temporalities have consistently been masculinized and associated with narratives of progress and development, often at the expense of the two feminized modes of temporality: the cyclical time of nature and reproduction and the monumental time of eternity (13-14).⁽³⁾ For these reasons, the use of the arc as a structuring form within the classroom can appear to reinforce its status as the most "rational" and, by extension, "male" form of temporal organization to the occlusion of others in the way that it privileges development and unidirectional lines of cause-and-effect. Similarly, within the more recent work on queer temporalities, the persistent alignment of reproduction with futurity and progress has also led to a number of profound critiques of the ways that our current regime of "chronobiopolitics," to use Dana Luciano's phrase, imposes linearity as the normative temporal rhythm for regulating bodies and sexual practices (9). Within this schema, "properly" temporalized bodies and identities develop along a set of prescribed events defined by their progression and their collusion with compulsory heterosexuality, white supremacy, and capitalism—in which marriage, wealth accumulation, and childrearing are all required actions within a socially sanctioned and affirmed life. As such, by potentially valorizing certain subjects within these temporal norms and regulations, the historical arc is a form that can efface the "queer uses of time," as Jack Halberstam has argued, by those subjects who "opt to live outside of

reproductive and familial time as well as on the edges of the logics of labor and production” and who are rendered illegible and abject because of it (10).⁽⁴⁾

<10> For the “spokes on a wheel” model, different problems arise, especially in the way that gender is commonly conceptualized within the particular set of thematic and historically-focused categories that organize the field. While the wheel model does not, by its very nature, settle into a fundamentally binary structure, the common treatment of “The Woman Question” as its own distinct “issue,” to use the framework offered by the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, suggests that it is possible to separate gender from a myriad of other issues.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, the idea that one can cordon off gender and, more specifically, women as a discreet subject of investigation implies that the other spokes on the wheel either have nothing to do with questions of gender or have little impact on women and their concerns in the nineteenth century, an implication that we know to be patently false but that is nevertheless evidenced within this anthology’s structuring logic. In so doing, the wheel form can subtly articulate a construction of gender in the nineteenth century that reinforces static and dualistic notions of public and private that, therefore, promote a binary construction of gender and perpetuates the paradigm of “separate spheres.” Of course, as Cathy Davidson powerfully asserts in her essay “No More Separate Spheres!”, this construction, while seductive in its “metaphoric and explanatory” appeal, ultimately proves to be an “unsatisfactory” and limiting model because it is “too rigid and totalizing...for understanding the different and complicated ways that nineteenth-century...society and literary production functioned” (444-445).

<11> Thus, as a structure that works precisely through the mechanisms of separation and division, the “spokes on a wheel” form constitutes the world of the nineteenth century as “neatly divided up according to an occupational, social, and affective geography of gender,” to use Davidson’s words, which problematically “allows the literary historian to both model the last century’s binaric view of gender and to practice it” (444).⁽⁶⁾ As a result, even though it is a form that can invite a number of connections *within* a grouping of texts, it can potentially create divisions that inhibit students from thinking *across* the groupings as well. Importantly, though, while the impact of the problematic associations and liabilities of the arc and wheel should not be underestimated, the ostensibly negative affordances they provide can also, like their more positive affordances, be used in ways that offer important points of critical intervention in the classroom. By making their uses and limits transparent to our students, we can begin to develop their awareness of how forms both organize and produce knowledge.

Making and Breaking the Historical Arc

<12> When viewed with an attention to its full range of affordances, a chronologically organized historical arc can be utilized as a structure that productively illustrates the very places where that narrative breaks, even though it might appear, at first, to outline a trajectory of developmental progress. To follow Levine, the fact that the arc inevitably contains these points of explanatory or conceptual weakness—which is to say that it necessarily includes places where the pattern breaks—means that these, too, are part of the form’s affordances that create opportunities for critical insight. When exceptional examples and outliers inevitably emerge, they help identify the points at which an arc

becomes stressed or even ruptures. In this sense, while a historical arc has a tendency to flatten difference or to press onward and upward, the ruptures and deviations that it affords, by its very nature, offer powerful instances where students can begin to understand the complexity of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century in a much more three-dimensional and variable way. In these moments, the form of the arc serves as a starting point for discussion rather than a predetermined and reified end and, thus, becomes the very mechanism for perceiving the convergence and divergence of multiple trajectories rather than the shape to contain and manage them.

<13> In this sense, by focusing on the alternate trajectories that fail to align with or be subsumed by a “standard” narrative of linear progress, the form of the historical arc, with its positive and negative affordances, can also provide the basis for articulating a more “perverse” narrative, to use Judith Roof’s term, about the nineteenth century. While the trajectory of a course might follow a chronologically ordered series of texts, a “queerer” narrative of the nineteenth century can also emerge that cuts across the teleological grain. In this narrative, the lines and trajectories constructed by the texts in a course would undermine any effort to create stability or point to an inevitable end. Rather, the course would trace a “narrative about narrative dissolution, a narrative that continually short-circuits, that both frustrates and winks at the looming demagogue of reproduction...[and that] enacts a perverse relation to narrative itself” (Roof xxiv). When used in this manner, the form of the historical arc is actually one of the most effective tools for helping students identify the instances where prescriptive and normative categories are violated and transgressed or even where they no longer cohere and hold.

<14> I have utilized this more “perverse” form of the broken arc in my survey course on nineteenth-century women’s literature, in which I chronologically arrange my selected texts but begin in the first week with a set of framing discussions that analyze excerpts from Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*. In one respect, introducing this theoretical text allows me to call attention to and disrupt the received notions about nineteenth-century gender and sexual norms that many of my students have coming into my class, especially when we move through the analysis that Foucault outlines in the first section, “We Other Victorians.” With the images of prim, proper, and sexless Victorians walking around in crinolines and top hats still largely shaping the way my students typically imagine and understand the period, Foucault’s work enables me to quickly turn these assumptions on their heads and to train their eyes to look for other places of resistance, rupture, and emergence. More importantly for my purposes, though, having them read Foucault so early in the class also allows them to become immediately aware of the nature of historical narratives themselves and to think more carefully about narratives of rise and fall, especially in considering Foucault’s well-known dismantling of the repressive hypothesis. By establishing this critical framework from the very beginning, the class can utilize the benefits of the historical arc as an organizing principle while simultaneously building discussions that help students cultivate an awareness of history’s constructed-ness and contingency.

<15> The first time I taught this course, I did not begin with Foucault, but in the times that I have since his inclusion, I have found that students quickly become less invested in tracing a narrative that focuses on a vague notion of women’s progress and increasing freedom across the century. Rather, they become immediately attuned to the multiple ways gender and sexuality are negotiated, performed, and contested across the literature of the period. I have seen evidence of this more complex critical gaze in

the comments that they produce in our discussions throughout the term, which becomes especially salient as we trace a number of articulations of and engagements with the marriage plot. In moving through a series of novels that begins with Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* and ends with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, I have students identify and discuss the complex ways that marriage is critiqued and disrupted in an era that seems, at first, to so centrally valorize it. For example, while I will often initially present Austen as setting a normative template for the marriage plot and female propriety, I will also push my students to look at the multiple models of gender and marriage that are offered within it, most centrally in the opposition between Elinor and Marianne Dashwood but also across its many plots and subplots. In this way, students come to identify, in a more Foucauldian vein, points within the novel where regulatory power structures meet potent resistance by pointing to the varied ways marriage and sexuality are inhabited and enacted across the text. These dynamics are brought into stark relief when we spend our last day on the novel discussing how the text complexly frames its closure and the sisters' double marriage. In close reading the last sentences of the novel together, students typically comment on how the tensions that are thematized in the text's central oppositions are carried through to the novel's closing lines, which ultimately place greater emphasis on the sustained intimacy between Marianne and Elinor after their marriages than on the romance that they ostensibly share with their husbands. In this way, even as they are introduced to Austen as a functional origin point in developing their knowledge of the marriage plot, they are already seeing signs of complexity and complication within it.

<16> From the starting point of Austen, we move chronologically across a diverse set of texts, each of which fail to end in the resolution of marriage and that either adapt or reject the marriage plot in addressing a range of larger issues. In our class discussions of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, we consider what it means to have marriage be defined as much by violence as by love and passion, and my students inevitably make comments about Catherine and Heathcliff's haunting and haunted wandering on the moors as a gothic form of marriage. In moving to Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, students become more attuned to the critical possibilities of a text's refusal to link marriage with narrative closure and, as a result, focus their comments on the novel's ambiguous ending and its resistance to firmly placing Lucy Snowe in the final position of wife—a resistance which serves as a striking contrast to Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which we read later in the term, in which the title character's many marriages are the central problem of its bigamy plot. Thus, rather than tracing a linear development, both the class trajectory and the conversations that emerge with my students demonstrate how the shape and chronology of the historical arc are useful for tracing various trajectories and pathways of connection that cannot be reduced to either progress or decline and that instead call our readerly attentions to points of critical resonance and dissonance.

<17> These moments of textual counterpoint become especially critical when we discuss the texts that deal most explicitly with issues of race and empire, which powerfully undermine any attempts to interpret the course's historical arc as a progressive telos. In reading Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example, I guide students through the racialized history of marriage in the United States in which the question of marriage is one that would have been always already foreclosed for Linda Brent. In this way, they begin to fully comprehend how her complex and often traumatic

negotiations with her sexuality are always delimited and determined by her status as a black woman and a slave. This intersectional understanding and framing of marriage is equally crucial when we read Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*, when our classroom discussions spend a great deal of time talking about the independence and intelligence embodied by Lyndall and her complex understanding and construction of marriage. But as students recall our conversations about Jacobs, their comments also make clear the necessity of reading Lyndall's plot within the novel's South African colonial context. In this light, students work through the critical process of identifying how Lyndall's compelling characterization and plot stand in stark contrast to the depictions of the indigenous female characters in the novel, who are only briefly described and who are almost always at the novel's periphery and often in the quite literal service of its white colonial characters. This discussion then sets the stage for our reading of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, our final text, in which we think again about how the novel undertakes its feminist analysis of marriage, motherhood, and desire against the incredibly complex social and historical backdrop of race, nation, and class in turn-of-the-century Louisiana.

<18> These movements across our texts and the resulting class discussions not only help my students question what "development" and "progress" might mean in the nineteenth century and for which female subjects but also reveal how the shape of the historical arc can do the incredibly valuable and vital work of de-essentializing the category of "woman" and revealing it to be a contingent rather than universal category of identity. These interventions are especially important in a course that is framed precisely by the binary parameters of biological sex as a survey course on women-identified writers of the nineteenth century. By centering these intersectional complexities that emerge across our readings in this way, I can help students cultivate an awareness of the intellectual dangers of positing a single and comprehensive narrative for a complex body of diverse writers and texts.

Moving From Wheel to Web

<19> In turning to the "spokes on a wheel" form, similar challenges and opportunities arise, especially when its structure inevitably breaks down as texts begin to violate and blur the boundaries that define a given issue. Again, though, like the points of rupture in the historical arc, this eventual collapse does not necessarily need to be viewed as a fatal flaw within the wheel's organizing form; rather, this affordance within its shape and structure provides multiple opportunities to help students produce a more complex understanding of gender and sexuality in the nineteenth century. While the spoke can be seen, in one sense, to hold women within its own separate sphere, once the texts that represent the other "spokes" are explored, the divisions that I have established in my syllabus design are quickly revealed to be the useful but externally imposed structures that they are. Thus, as the course progresses and students begin to understand my role in choosing which texts were assigned to which spoke, they can also begin to make arguments for why a text could or should be placed within a different spoke, even while they understand the fundamental logic of my original placement. As such, rather than reify the categories established by each spoke, the wheel structure can also lead to more complex understandings of how they are mutually constituted in the period and variously exhibited across our many texts.

<20> For instance, in my Victorian literature survey, I have typically presented Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the weeks dedicated to the "Woman Question" and have used the novel to talk about female

education, women's labor, and the bildungsroman, all of which provide an important foundation for understanding these literary and gendered concerns as they emerge over the course of the century. However, once we get to our last cluster of texts on "Empire and National Identity," an incredibly productive conversation emerges when students realize that *Jane Eyre* could have just as easily been placed in that cluster as well. Instead of conceding this insight as a point where my design of the course loses its coherence and structure, I take it as a rich opportunity for reflection and synthesis. In the discussion that ensues, I have students talk in-depth about the role that the novel would have in the other clusters, and their comments articulate what features would come more forcefully into the foreground and what features it would bring out within the other texts in that unit.

<21> To help ensure that this conversation takes place, I incorporate strategies and assignments that help facilitate this movement towards critical synthesis. Thus, as we move through the texts in the "Empire and National Identity" unit, which is anchored by Bram Stoker's *Dracula* but that also includes short fiction by Arthur Conan Doyle and Rudyard Kipling, I have the students read excerpts of Elaine Freedgood's analysis in *The Ideas in Things* of the mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* and her framing of those objects as metonyms of colonial violence. These readings allow students to move in two important directions: first, they come to more fully understand how Jane's domestic life at the end of the novel and her inherited wealth are inseparable from the colonial "otherness" that "taints" Bertha and her madness, and second, they place the attention paid to imperial commodities and foreign objects in *Dracula* and "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" in a new light. These discussions usefully model the tasks they must undertake in their final paper, in which they must analyze one of our course's texts within the context of a different "spoke." In the essays, students have written in deep and productive terms about what it would mean to move from a Jane-centered approach to the novel to a Bertha-centered one and about the kinds of pressures this shift puts on the closure that Jane as narrator institutes and constructs. In a particularly insightful essay that looked at Brontë's novel from a slightly different angle, one student wrote a compelling analysis of St. John Rivers and his mission to India that drew connections to the actions of Carnahan and Dravot in Rudyard Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King." In this essay, the student not only developed a fascinating account of the ways the project of imperialism informs constructions of white, British masculinity and vice versa but also produced an argument and analysis that productively and innovatively synthesized the approaches that we used in both the "Woman Question" and "Empire and National Identity" clusters.

<22> Since I have found that this dynamic work of connection is most important in the final sessions of a term, I highlight these more synthetic modes of thinking through and beyond the "spokes" model when we finish with George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, which is the final text in my Victorian literature survey course and is purposefully not assigned to a particular cluster. As we move through the last days of discussing Eliot's wonderfully expansive novel, I have students take turns placing its many characters and plots onto the spokes of our original wheel, which I draw up on the blackboard. In this process of charting, they come to ultimately realize that the text encompasses them all. Throughout the discussion, gender and sexuality emerge as crucial concerns but always in connection with the salient issues illuminated by the other spokes. Indeed, as students consider Dorothea's longing for various forms of affirmation and fulfillment in her unhappy marriage, they make connections with Casaubon's quest for

the “Key to all Mythologies” and our discussions of evolution and the rise of new scientific discourses (Eliot 51). They also link her interest in making housing improvements for the Middlemarch villagers with our earlier exploration of industrialism and the struggles of the working classes. The same is true for our discussions of Rosamund and Lydgate’s profligacy, and the connections that they can make vis-à-vis our discussion of furniture in *Jane Eyre* with the global and imperial implications of British consumption. Thus, by the time we have finished the novel and this mapping exercise, the discreet and seemingly rigid spokes that were named at the beginning of the term and that served as the course’s organizing principle, have transformed into the intersecting and intertwining threads of the more Eliotian form of a web. In this way, like the moment when the continuity of the historical arc is disrupted and breaks, this deconstruction of the wheel and the dissolution of its spoke structure serve as moments where students begin to more fully grasp the rich complexity of the nineteenth century and of the multiple and often contradictory ways gender and sexuality operated within it. And they do so precisely by realizing that the wheel’s schematic organization can only produce partial, if provisionally useful, insights.

Form as Praxis

<23> Certainly, there is much more at stake in these moments of reflection and realization than ensuring that our students know more about the nineteenth century at the end of the course compared to when they entered our classrooms. Indeed, for those of us who care and think deeply about gender and sexuality as central topics in our courses, the transformation of our students into more engaged learners and critical thinkers is part of our deeper, if not deepest, commitment to feminist and queer pedagogical practices. As I have strived to articulate in this essay, I believe that identifying the formal structures that organize our classrooms and making them clear and visible to our students is a vital part of this process. Although we are all already acutely aware of the artificiality of the various limits and boundaries we place around our literary periods and the canon that constitutes them, most of our students are not. In this respect, helping them understand the patterns and shapes that undergird our own historical and literary thinking—and, most crucially, in making those patterns and shapes apparent—we can begin to more effectively model and develop the kind of meta-critical awareness that can grasp and articulate how forms can be usefully deployed as well as where they reach their conceptual limits. When, over the course of a term, students are able to recognize the places where the historical arc ruptures or where the thematic spokes on a wheel dissolve, they are able to understand in a more concrete way how knowledge production is itself an unfolding process and one that requires engagement, reflection, and revision.

<24> In creating classroom environments where students can undertake this critical work, we not only help them become more familiar with our field and the body of literature contained within it but also show them how to embody and perform, as bell hooks has articulated, “the pleasure of working with ideas, of thinking as an action” (10). We can also destabilize and partially dismantle the hierarchical relationships between teacher and student that organize the classroom but that largely go unspoken. When I make my own modes of thinking and course organization visible for my students, I can pull back the curtain of my thinking in the process of fostering and facilitating a robust dialogue about why I have selected certain texts, why I have arranged or ordered them in particular ways, and how I have

negotiated the benefits and limits of those choices and that organization. For hooks, these moments of self-reflection, transparency, and, indeed, vulnerability on our parts as instructors are crucial to creating classrooms in which both teacher and student are actively invited to “think passionately and to share ideas in a passionate, open manner” (11). When this can take place, she contends, “everyone in the classroom, teacher and students, recognizes that they are responsible for creating a learning community together” in a dynamic exchange that ensures that “we leave the classroom knowing that critical thinking empowers us” (hooks 11). And while an attention to form is not always seen as the most obvious way to create these more engaged and just classrooms, it might be, as I have been arguing here, a crucial component and first step.

Endnotes

<25> An early version of this essay appeared as a blog entry written on the V21 Collective website (v21collective.org). I thank the V21 Collective’s co-organizers, Anna Kornbluh and Benjamin Morgan, for permission to use portions of that entry here.

(1) In this essay, I define period survey in expansive terms, and refer to any course that provides a broad overview of the literature of a particular historical era. I include within this swath capacious surveys of the “long” nineteenth century, surveys of smaller, more focused periods such as Romanticism and Victorianism, and surveys of particular topics or genres, such as nineteenth-century women’s literature or the nineteenth-century American novel. Notably, at many institutions, even the many different kinds of classes that would fall under this rubric have been or are in the process of being replaced by other, more topically-driven courses designed to bolster English enrollments—a move that I attribute, in part, to the neoliberalization of the university and the specific attack on the humanities within it. I thank Susan Cook for reminding me of these curricular shifts, and for her and Victoria Ford Smith’s feedback on early drafts of this piece. (△)

(2) These two shapes were first brought to my attention as ways to shape a dissertation by my advisor, Catherine Robson, many years ago. Needless to say, I have found them useful ways to think about pedagogy and course design—a fact that bears out Levine’s point that “patterns and arrangements carry their affordances with them across time and space” (6). (△)

(3) For a recent survey of the ways feminist scholars have built on Kristeva’s notion of “women’s time,” see Apter. (△)

(4) Temporality has become a rich site of investigation and theorizing for queer scholars in the last ten years. The *GLQ* special issue on “Queer Temporalities,” edited by Elizabeth Freeman, offers a broad overview of these debates and includes contributions by several prominent scholars who have contributed to this sub-field in their own work, including Halberstam and Luciano, cited above, and Freeman herself as well as Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and the late José Esteban Muñoz. (△)

(5)The idea that gender settles into a binary is, of course, itself a formal articulation of gender that must be historically and culturally situated. In many diverse cultures, gender does not operate in binary terms, and Thomas Lacqueur's work in *Making Sex* has chronicled how the two-sex model that currently operates in Western culture is one that has a relatively short history.(^)

(6)In this essay, I cite Davidson's preface to the special edition that she edited for *American Literature* titled "No More Separate Spheres!" See also her introduction to the edited collection *No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader*, which expands on her earlier preface and was co-written with Jessamyn Hatcher. Additionally, and notably, in *Forms*, Levine cites Davidson's initial essay in the discussion of gender that she develops in her chapter on hierarchy. While Levine affirms the problems of viewing gender in the too "simplistic" and "clear-cut" terms of a "reductive" binary division, she nevertheless continues to articulate gender as a "hierarchical form" that "arranges social materials into two levels of power and authority"—an articulation that ironically bears out Davidson's main point about the force of the separate spheres paradigm and tendency to replicate an organizing, binary logic (93-94).(^)

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