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[Next: Thinking Ecology](#)

ON TEACHING TRANSGRESSIVE LITERATURE

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The carnivalization of American culture has become ubiquitous as we advance into the 21st century. Shock television from Spike TV to *The Jerry Springer Show* to *Cheaters* crowds morning and late-night programming. Unspeakable options catering to every possible desire are provided by the Internet. Fetishized violence, often sexual violence like that found in the *Saw* franchise, *Turista*, *Seven*, and *The Watcher*, remains a Hollywood staple. Eminem rapped about disemboweling his former wife and record sales boomed. But what happens when the transgressive text is introduced into the more intimate space of the college classroom, when the outrageous ♦outside♦ is brought ♦inside♦? More specifically still, what processes and responses typically arise as transgressive novels appear on more and more of our syllabi? Instructors who choose to include Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, Dennis Cooper's *Try*, or even those old war horses of the contemporary seminar *Lolita* or *Naked Lunch*, often find that when such works are to be taught and discussed in frank and serious-minded ways, there is, on the one hand, typically a surprising resistance, even outrage, on the part of many students who, outside the classroom, are otherwise ardent consumers ♦as are we all♦ of whatever the popular culture disgorges for our leisure. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the ♦moral laxity♦ said to afflict our students often hardens into something less tolerant, less pliant, when they confront the written word in the public sphere of the classroom. On the other hand, it is often the case that the instructor, too, as I hope to show, is transformed by such texts' inclusions in ways that might surprise us. Moreover, the manner in which the transgressive itself is reconfigured once it becomes an institutionalized object of analysis and interpretation is perhaps most instructive, as I hope to demonstrate, in describing our relation to the ♦deviant Other,♦ which we repress even as it is introduced into the literature classroom.

Given the state of contemporary American culture, it has become increasingly difficult to articulate distinctions between the transgressive and the non-transgressive; at a certain level arguing about that which is beyond the pale is ultimately a subjective judgment. Despite any one group's claims to the contrary, moral relativism is one of the givens of our age. Even still, however, we can perhaps grant that there are at least some broad agreements as to what constitutes the admittedly shifting parameters of the transgressive. Although the specifics of what today is deemed transgressive in fiction, film or theater may differ radically from prior historical vantages, some essential character of the transgressive still obtains over time. ♦At its simplest,♦ claims Allon White, ♦transgression is the act of breaking the rules♦ (52). The transgressive simply outstrips a culture's tolerance for extremity, monstrosity, and perversion:

It can be inscribed in both social action (crimes, carnivals, festivals, "perversions," subcultures) and also in discursive formations such as dress, music, literature, and painting. Transgression is an inversion or subversion of some existing socially valued norm, rule, structure, or contract. It often operates through a systemic inversion of hierarchical oppositions (high/low; animal/human; body/spirit; outside/inside). It mixes those things which are conventionally separated and divides up traditional unities. . . . [and] . . . is usually thought of as destabilizing existing social forms and is thought therefore to be *intrinsically radical*. (52)

Early on, Foucault believed that transgression held immense promise as a transformative agent and, in an uncharacteristically nostalgic move, conceived of it in curiously theological terms:

Profanation in a world which no longer recognizes any positive meaning in the sacred ♦is this not more or less what we may call transgression? In that zone which our culture affords for our gestures and speech, transgression prescribes not only the sole manner of discovering the sacred in its unmediated substance, but also a way of recomposing its empty form, its absence. (30)

Identifying the crucial concepts of boundary and limit, Foucault recognizes that ♦transgression is an action which involves the limit, that narrow zone of a line where it displays the flash of its passage♦ (34). Foucault concludes that ♦The limit and transgression depend on each other for whatever density of being they possess: a limit could not exist if it were absolutely uncrossable, and reciprocally, transgression would be pointless if it crossed a limit composed of illusions and shadows♦ (34). Emphasizing essential reciprocity, Foucault discerns that without recognized principles, accepted ♦laws,♦ there can be no violation. As Bonnie and Hans Braendlin put it, ♦Systems that limit and acts that transgress limits necessitate, ♦authorize, each other♦ (1). Not only could the transgressive be a potent agent of revolutionary change, its detection could also be harnessed as a powerful lens by which to detect the hegemonic interests of the dominant culture. We should rather quickly come to realize that study of the transgressive might yield illuminating perspectives indeed, and it would seem an appropriate focus of literary inquiry in our lecture halls and classrooms.

Transgression, of course, operates in many domains and on many levels. In literary studies, texts that deploy formal and linguistic disruptions familiar to readers of avant-garde fiction might be said to be transgressive. Robert R. Wilson, for example, exclusively emphasizes structural and linguistic elements such as subversion of plot expectations,

exploratory treatment of literary conventions, and generative word play in defining a certain category of literary transgression, venturing that ♦transgression can even become♦perhaps, indeed, it must become♦the criterion by which to distinguish postmodern (and modern) literature from its precursors♦ (75). (Think *Finnegans Wake* or Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*.) The sort of transgressiveness I wish to target here, however, is of a different order from Joycean verbal pyrotechnics or experimental exotica like Oulipian poetry that foregrounds aesthetic constraint or structural innovation. Instead, it is literature that revels in, as Bakhtin's quaint phrase would have it, ♦the carnival of the night. ♦ More pointedly, critic James Gardner has defined this other class of transgressive fiction as a ♦literature of self-defined immorality, anguish, and degradation [that] is constantly waxing and waning in our culture♦ (54). This variety of transgressive literature fixates on ♦graphic scenes of child molestation, sodomy, and murder♦ (55). Add sexual torture, necrophilia, and extravagant, even gratuitous violence to Gardner's short list and still one has not fully accounted for the presence of the transgressive in a sizeable body of ♦serious♦ contemporary literature.

We might consider some specific examples drawn from contemporary American fiction♦books taught in the academy with some regularity♦that limn the dominant culture's limits on monstrosity and excess. As to the nature of such books, White has argued that what was at one time public, ritualized transgression has now devolved into private performance as ♦the dismembered fragments of the social carnivalesque body♦ now become ♦lodged in bourgeois fictions♦ (55). White is implicitly contending that we can no longer invoke Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque to justify the teaching of this kind of transgressive literature because the democratic or ♦communal spirit♦ no longer obtains. Of this modern shift, White summarizes the transformation of social to private transgressive deviance succinctly:

Terrible things happen when the traditional carnivalesque body, public and social, animated by a communal spirit, becomes privatized and fragmented in its encounter with the emergent formation of bourgeois individualism. . . . In the postromantic carnival of the night, social pleasure gives way to chamber-games of bed and torture, a reduced and yet intensified transgressive base of demonized sexuality. Enclosed within its airless linguistic spaces, the carnivalesque will increasingly turn inward on itself, transgressing its own transgressions, accelerating and escalating its formal and stylistic infractions. . . . [In] the process of being internalized, of being driven in upon the inner darkness of individual consciousness, [the images of carnival] become largely negative elements, often indistinguishable from nightmare and sickness. (61)

Beyond the social realignments and formal disruptions outlined by Wilson, this other strain of the modern transgressive can be regarded as such because of content that violates conventional moral boundaries and social proprieties which are culturally sanctioned. This is literature whose subject matter might be judged ♦prurient♦ or at the very least raises questions of ♦redeeming social value. ♦ Perhaps, then, we need look no further for the fiction of ♦nightmare and sickness♦ that White describes than a book like Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, but not as we would read it in the privacy of our own dens and studies but in the charged environment of the classroom.

With its publication in 1991, Ellis' novel triggered, in the words of Mark Storey, ♦a moral panic♦ and on an order far beyond what fiction is usually capable of eliciting in this post-literate era (58). Ellis' first-person narrative, despite or maybe because of its exceptionally salacious subject matter, has been widely reviewed and even became a best seller for a time, and therefore a protracted synopsis does not seem warranted. Briefly, the novel traces the exploits of yuppie serial killer Patrick Bateman, detailing to excessive, some might say pornographic, lengths acts of almost indescribable brutality. Even by the standards of ♦serious♦ contemporary literature, the novel is sexually graphic, and, more disturbingly still, the lurid, gynecological precision by which the torture, dismemberment, and cannibalization of Ellis' female characters is rendered is, in a word, ghastly. Somewhat famously, The National Organization of Women issued a resolution boycotting it, stating that its ♦publication . . . is socially irresponsible and legitimizes inhuman and savage violence masquerading as sexuality♦ (Freccero 50). Carla Freccero has argued that some readers of the novel have found it to be ♦obscenely nonproductive of knowledge♦ (45). Naomi Mandel contends that ♦much of the publication scandal surrounding *American Psycho* was informed by the assumption that the novel itself is capable of perpetrating, or facilitating the perpetration of, violence, and the arguments against publishing the novel take the form identifying the violence and denouncing it♦ (10).

Then why teach it? Why bring before a college classroom a text that is, by the lights of standard, conventional notions of decency, vile?

At the most banal level, one might conceivably include *American Psycho* on a syllabus as an act of provocation, for ♦shock value,♦ for the horrific titillation of its sex murders. But then how do we account for instructors who teach it for ♦higher purposes,♦ as they themselves conceive of them? To defend one's ♦purest♦ motives for teaching transgressive texts, to appeal in this case to one of those ♦higher purposes,♦ we might invoke Marcel Detienne in *Dionysos Slain*. Detienne, in accord with Foucault before him, argues that ♦to discover the complete horizon of a society's symbolic values, it is also necessary to map out its transgression, its deviants♦ (19-20). One might claim that the study of violations plumbed in books like *American Psycho* and its ilk can reveal cultural codes that are both deliberately regulated and also those that are more often unconsciously endorsed. Instructors might tease out the implications of *American Psycho's* tangled publication history and its critical and popular reception. The novel might become a sort of case study for a seminar to investigate competing notions of canonicity. Or instructors might delineate the historical evolution of what constitutes the ♦obscene♦ text in twentieth-century literature. Obviously, in the end, we little doubt Detienne's observation that interrogations of the transgressive can illuminate a culture's matrices of tolerance and denial and abomination.

However, a curious phenomenon occurs whenever *American Psycho* is introduced into the classroom. Once the potentially transgressive is introduced into the rarified atmosphere of the academy, there is more often than not a turning away from the thing itself, a shunning of direct treatment of the deviant by both professors and students. The singular occurrence that Gardner has observed about book reviewers of the transgressive applies equally well to our classroom lectures and discussions. Addressing Dennis Cooper's *Try*, a novel that enthusiastically details pedophilia and sexualized violence, Gardner writes:

What is entirely unpalatable is the squeamishness of *Try's* reviewers, squeamish not in the sense of opposing so off-color a work, but in the sense of being too timid to call it by its name. The reviewer for the *New York Times* states that "Dennis Cooper has written a love story, all the more poignant because it is so brutally crushed." The reviewer for *Spin* calls it "Painfully poignant . . . beneath the queasy surface, no novelist empathizes more with the pathos of put-upon youth." Of course opinions may differ. But suffice it to say that I found no trace of poignancy at any level. (55)

Rather than treating the work as if it might reveal something to us about the limits of expression in American culture in the twenty-first century, we often shift our energies from analysis of the text as disruptive force to a process of

acculturation that normalizes or regularizes or denatures the text's deviance. This may be an unavoidable consequence attendant upon the intellectualizing of any phenomenon. Perhaps, after all, it is Wordsworth and his famous formula that captures it best, ♦Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things: / --We murder to dissect. ♦ Although our object of analysis in the present case is far from standard notions of the ♦beauteous, ♦ the thinking still holds, and the deviant is transformed by our ♦disinterested♦ observation of it. At some point in classroom discussions the text will invariably be brought in line with prevailing notions about the construction of yet one more version of ♦American literary history♦ as a totalizing concept and how and why the subversive text ♦fits. ♦ It is always made to fit. Furthermore, the work will come to be valued or renounced in the public forum of the classroom as it meets or fails to meet canonical preferences of the dominant culture, with surprisingly less regard for its transgressions than we would have thought.

In the largely unconscious project of normalizing the transgressive, we work to make the text in question square with the canon of Anglo-American literature. In so doing, we seek out the familiar, the non-subversive, and fixate on that to the detriment of the actual transgressiveness figured in the fiction, presumably the very feature of the work that we initially sought to investigate most scrupulously. Therefore, we find that the most common measure applied to, say, William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* involves placing it in the tradition of Swift's corrosive satire (See, for instance, Donald Palumbo's essay on allegorical social satire), and subsequently the extensive coprophagic, sex-murder fantasies that fuel so many of Burroughs' ♦routines♦ in the book are said to offer a direct analogue to Swift's celebrated ♦excremental vision. ♦ So Burroughs become the son of Swift♦the weird son, admittedly♦but the son nonetheless. Now, safely ensconced in a ♦tradition, ♦ Burroughs is heralded as a moral writer actually promoting western ideals, and the transgressive is defanged. In turn, Kathy Acker's fiction, replete with its radical feminist appropriations of porn, is then constructed so as to be in keeping with the literary heritage of Burroughs himself. And so, on many levels, it is at once disconcerting and somehow reassuring for students of literature to find Katherine Dunn's blurb extolling *American Psycho* as ♦a masterful satire and a ferocious, hilarious, ambitious, inspiring piece of writing, which has large elements of Jane Austen at her vitriolic best. ♦ To offer this claim, Dunn must either willfully suppress or, is it even possible?, unconsciously elide recognition of pages and pages of excessive sexual torture and must extravagantly reconfigure the book's obsessive fascination with ♦the lower bodily stratum, ♦ in Bakhtin's phrase, that makes up so much of Ellis' book, a variety of subject matter, which, if memory serves me, Austen never broaches in *Pride and Prejudice*. Dunn seems compelled to foreground instead the work's participation in a literary tradition and *American Psycho* becomes, as it were, one more novel of manners, even one with a rather august genealogy, if considered ♦rightly. ♦ The transgressive becomes constrained by its alliance, now voiced, with a literary history that it does not depart from but rather putatively participates in, and so we champion an image of ourselves as careful archivists of the academy and not purveyors of the unseemly.

Likewise, when the transgressive is brought into the classroom, we become meticulous catalogers of the work's handling of conventional literary values, often at the expense of direct confrontation with the book's aberrance. We talk at great lengths about such entrenched (and often tired) critical preoccupations as characterization, point of view, symbolism, and especially irony and satire. It becomes a question, apparently, not so much a text's transgressiveness that will demand its ouster from our consideration as it is an author's bumbling attempts at dialogue or heavy-handed use of imagery. *Blood and Guts in High School* might be analyzed, even lauded, for its barbed allusiveness and parodic energy, while Acker's flippant race-baiting and eagerly incestuous daughters are far less easily accounted for and therefore provoke ♦again surprisingly♦less commentary. Judging from the reviews, *American Psycho*'s worth was often perceived to hinge ♦somewhat astoundingly♦on the technical merit of Ellis' handling of first-person narration. Ultimately, the book's sadism *in extremis* comes to be viewed by its critics as ironic gesture, by which, so the argument goes, we arrive at a new sense of moral outrage through the sheer horrific onslaught. How often, though, in criticism of the postmodern do we attribute to an author ironic intentionality when the perverse, the obscene, the antisocial is depicted? Almost obsessively, the transgressive text is made to correspond to prevailing canonical preferences, often technical predilections, that mark other ♦normal♦ literary productions of the dominant culture. Thus the alien Other is further regulated into the seamless vector of ♦American literature. ♦ In the end, what would first have seemed to be the radical gesture of inviting the transgressive into our seminars so as to interrogate boundaries becomes in actuality a far more conservative enterprise, one that reinscribes the dominant order, and we, often despite ourselves, become apologists for such old-fashioned standards as tradition and ♦literary value. ♦ The deviant is normalized.

But why? What motivates this process of assimilation, these choices and acts that level difference? It seems clear that we are, ironically, trying to distance ourselves from the transgressive even as we make room for it on our syllabuses by adopting what amount to these coping strategies. In the classroom we may give glancing acknowledgement to the flagrantly transgressive in fiction, but I can imagine few of us willing to read aloud and exactly explicate one of the nightmare scenes of sexual torture from *American Psycho* with our students. (Skeptical readers are encouraged to read ♦Chapter XX♦ if they think they might disagree, and then imagine their public treatment of it before a class.) Our refusal points to the discomfort that arises when the transgressive is to be taught in the public sphere; it is, most probably, a dilemma borne out of questions of representation and advocacy. Simply put, we fear that teaching the transgressive may well be teaching transgression. Our not unwarranted anxiety is that the provision of a forum, the university classroom, that ♦officially♦ recognizes and sanctions the transgressive text may be construed as tantamount to ♦authorizing♦ the deviance it represents. We may be right to be troubled that at the very least we are materially culpable in supplying to readers images of misogyny, violence, and sociopathology in general. More than one instructor has no doubt had students report that they find *Blood Meridian*'s exorbitant carnage ♦cool♦ or ♦exciting, ♦ when we might have hoped they would be instead appalled and perplexed by it. Even as we may waffle endlessly over questions about representation and causality (not to mention First Amendment considerations), we worry that NOW may have been right when they denounced *American Psycho* as a ♦how-to novel on the torture and dismemberment of women♦ (Freccero 50). Does the culture need one more outlet for the dissemination of the transgressive? Rather than face that accusation, in the spirit of free inquiry and invested with whatever small authority we in the professoriate may have in shaping the canon and conceptions of ♦literary taste, ♦ we ask students to read the transgressive text in private isolation and trust they will come to the ♦right decisions♦ about its worth; we, with some few exceptions no doubt, however, do not wish to scrutinize publicly the depraved details in the classroom. Is it any wonder then that we would focus instead, in ways that seem ♦natural♦ to us, on the technical attributes of Ellis' novel or its place in literary history?

On a conscious level, we put controversial texts before our students because we want them ♦to discover the complete horizon of a society's symbolic values, ♦ all in the name of intellectual advancement; however, in doing so, we may, we fear, unmask to the eyes of others our largely unconscious attraction to ♦low♦ and ♦depraved♦ manifestations of the transgressive in the books we teach. While I would stop well short of claiming that those who teach *American Psycho* harbor violent tendencies toward women, I *would* argue that such texts' inclusion could be perceived as indicating a kind of repulsed fascination at the very least. Allon White and Peter Stallybrass have described our

conflicted relation to the transgressive as one that swings wildly between the twin poles of repugnance and fascination, that contradictorily wishes to reject and eliminate the debasing low and yet is powerfully and unpredictably impelled by a desire for this Other (4-5). They conclude that a fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of normative cultural identity is productive of new objects of desire (25). White and Stallybrass go to considerable and convincing lengths to demonstrate that disgust is the dominant trope of transgression in Anglo-American culture, and they in turn are led to conclude authoritatively that disgust bears the impress of desire (77). They write:

Bourgeois [culture] continuously defined and re-defined itself through the exclusion of what it marked out as low as dirty, repulsive, noisy, contaminating. Yet that very act of exclusion was constitutive of its identity. The low was internalized under the sign of negation and disgust. But disgust always bears the imprint of desire. These low domains, apparently expelled as "Other," return as the object of nostalgia, longing and fascination. The forest, the fair, the theatre, the slum, the circus, the seaside-resort, the "savage": all these, placed at the outer limit of civil life, become symbolic contents of bourgeois desire. (191)

Substituting the categories of deviant sex and ultra-violence with the more wholesome-sounding categories of the forest and the savage should still reveal to us that we reserve our sternest disavowal for that which may be said to provoke our most compelling clandestine fascinations. In short, we are anxious that our teaching of the transgressive might be perceived as our attraction to it, and therefore we adulterate our treatment of the *outré* text in the classroom, undermining our avowed intentions to explore rule-breaking work.

Therefore, while it may be a comforting thought that if we can intellectualize the transgressive, we can place ourselves beyond its dark appeal, yet still when we are drawn to teach works that violate tolerable bounds, we recognize sooner or later that the same desire that animated us to teach serious fiction like *Blood Meridian* or Dennis Cooper's sadomasochistic novel *Frisk* could be imputed to the same spirit that animates the video renter's choice of *The Faces of Death, Pt. III* or club kids some years ago listening to Prodigy sing their hugely popular *Slap My Bitch Up*.

Finally, despite all our concern over the introduction of transgressive literature into the rarified domain of the academy, we must concede in the final analysis that the whole exercise is something of a sham. The authentically transgressive text and I recognize the ineffable definitional quandaries will perhaps never gain wide purchase in the classroom. By this I mean that institutional hierarchies possibly even including law enforcement officials and legislators but certainly department chairs, deans, and college presidents will intervene to thwart the actual dissemination of the unequivocally transgressive in the more-or-less decorous confines of most American college and university classrooms. Granted, some few select programs have courses devoted to mainstream pornography, and porn studies is an emergent academic subfield although one can imagine few career opportunities awaiting its advanced degree holders. Still, it is exceptionally rare that academicians actually screen hardcore pornography with its robust complement of fetish specializations in undergraduate literature or film courses with avowed intentions of explicating significance. Why? Here, Linda Williams is helpful in identifying the essential nature of pornography: it works if and only if it does something to the physical body. It exists to serve the lower bodily stratum. Williams maintains that Pornography is a volatile issue not simply because it represents sexual acts and fantasies, but because in that representation it frankly seeks to arouse viewers. Perhaps more than any other genre its pleasures are aimed at the body. Indeed, Williams concludes, pornography fails as a genre if it does not arouse the body (165). Physical arousal not its study, but its actual production! is a species of inquiry that the academy would seem reluctant to embrace. Having taught classes in porn at MIT, Henry Jenkins is nonetheless careful when he does so. He acknowledges concerns about causality, anxious that teaching pornography was the best way to ensure a dramatic increase in sexual violence (1). More pragmatically, he recognizes that many other educators have had their reputations destroyed, lost their jobs, and faced legal sanctions for teaching or researching porn (2).

Fraught and risky, porn studies and its ilk will only enjoy fringe status at best as long as current (and conflicted) cultural attitudes prevail, and so direct treatment of the transgressive will, for the most part, be deferred, even as some few course catalog listings suggest otherwise. Rather, when we do discuss fiction that partakes of the deviant, the sociopathic, or perverse, we do so through works by Acker or Ellis or Cooper, books that approximate the authentically transgressive, but ones that can ultimately be defended as the artistic expression of disturbing subject matter, metaphoric indices of cultural drift. Some other discursive formation upon which to fasten always seems to avail itself to us. It is equally true to affirm, as I have tried to show here, that texts that approximate the genuinely transgressive, as well as a book like *American Psycho* appears to do, seem to come through the experience of institutional appropriation with much of their transgressive force, if not nullified, then greatly diminished. And some of us, perhaps many of us, might see that as a positive good, but neither does it bring us any closer to mapping the complete horizon of a society's values, the ostensible goal of any instructor who aspires to impart truth in all its complexity. Genuinely transgressive literature ceases to be transgressive once its excess has been constrained by rational appreciation in our classrooms. Meanwhile, beyond the confines of the classroom walls, the spectacular, omnipresent carnival of the night lays increasing claim on the attention of media-addled consumers, yet within the academy we find ourselves strangely mute on the glittering spectacle, compromised by the very nature of the transgressive and its impossible relation to institutional attempts to co-opt it.

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Return to [Table of Contents](#)

[Next: Thinking Ecology in First Year Composition](#)