Critical Response

II

Professional Harassment

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In “Resisting Reasonableness,” Jane Gallop develops an “exorbitant” theory of pedagogy, exploring the meanings of good teaching “via a relatively rare and marginal case,” namely, the situation in which a woman student actively consents to sex or an intensive flirtation with a teacher who is a woman and a feminist (Jane Gallop, “Resisting Reasonableness,” Critical Inquiry 25 [Spring 1999]: 608). Gallop’s position, an elaboration of the arguments originally made in her book Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, is that this erotic configuration intensifies the conditions for good pedagogy by humanizing the teacher-student relationship and opening avenues for the student’s experience of her own sexual and intellectual power. I have just spent a sobering week reading some of the standard current psychoanalytic texts on boundary violations in professional relationships; while this reading has had the wished-for effect of refining my sense of what’s wrong with Gallop’s argument, it has had the further effect of making her position now look worse to me than it did before, not at all quirky or challenging but dispiritingly consistent with the everyday profile of the professional who abuses a power differential and knowingly or unknowingly hurts the person entrusted to his or her care.

I have three points to make, two about Gallop and one about the

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professional environment we live in that validates her ideas as controversial. First, Gallop’s defense of teacher-student sex rests on a number of mystifications that are identical to justifications commonly found in instances of boundary violation. Very often, a doctor, therapist, pastor, or teacher rationalizes having sex with someone in his or her care by adhering to one or another of the following ideas, which are self-deceptions: “the sexualization of our relationship will do you good and is really for your benefit”; “we’re basically equals here”; and “in transgressing my role of professional detachment I’m treating you like a human being.” Second, Gallop’s book and the new article support these benign construals by using what one analyst has described as a “trance logic” characteristic of boundary transgressions, a quasi reasoning consisting of syllogisms whose logical flaws, though often glaring, are overlooked by both participants. My third point takes the form of a parting polemical assertion. Our profession, by exposing its young initiates week after week to articles and books whose theoretical daring or “exorbitance,” whatever the content, is sustained by something that looks a lot like trance logic, conditions students to accept irresponsible thinking as a part of their everyday intellectual diet. This is not just an incidental failing of the discipline, to be attributed to the fact that we’re a human community and of course will produce badly reasoned theoretical articles along with powerful and illuminating ones. I have come to believe instead that it is part of a largely unconscious regime of emotional violation by which we disqualify our students’ intuitions about what is right and soften them up for an embrace of demoralized professional ideals and goals—itself a slow and almost imperceptible boundary violation, uncannily literalized and theatricalized for the moment in the spectacle of Gallop’s eroticized relationships with students.

Of the three common rationalizations I’ve just cited, the one that is the linchpin of Gallop’s theoretical position is “the sexualization of our relationship will do you good and is really for your benefit.” Across the professions, this is a typical distortion used to rationalize violating a client’s, patient’s, or student’s boundaries: “frequently, the behavior is justified by the professional who contends that his or her actions are for the client’s benefit.”1 Gallop’s defense of her eroticized relationships with stu-

1. Marilyn R. Peterson, At Personal Risk: Boundary Violations in Professional-Client Relationships (New York, 1992), p. 77; hereafter abbreviated PR. This cognitive reversal hap-
udents rests on a claim that these relationships are essential for good pedagogy. According to Gallop, to banish expressions of sexuality from the pedagogical relationship is to let students down by banishing good teaching or, indeed, teaching itself:

At its most intense—and, I would argue, its most productive—the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is, in fact, a “consensual amorous relation.” And if schools decide to prohibit not only sex but “amorous relations” between teacher and student, the “consensual amorous relation” that will be banned from our campuses might just be teaching itself.2

This startling conclusion rests on a flawed syllogism involving the concept of transference. The word at which a logical slippage occurs is amorous. Gallop has just pointed out, with justice, that good teaching necessarily builds on students’ transference, “the human tendency to put people in the position our parents once held for us.” Because erotic longing is a crucial component of childhood wishes that get imported into the new relationship, “transference is undoubtedly an ‘amorous relation’” (again, true) (FA, p. 56). Thus the syllogism runs:

1. Transference, which enhances teaching, is an amorous relation.
2. My university, in response to the harassment suit against me, has banned me from pursuing “amorous relations” with students in the future.
3. Therefore, the university has denied me access to the erotic energies that make good teaching possible.

There is a silent alteration in the meaning of the word amorous between the first proposition and the second. Transference is “amorous” in the sense of including erotic desire, often unexpressed and unconscious. Gallop’s relationship with one of the students who complained of sexual harassment was judged by her institution to be inappropriately “amorous” in the different sense of involving flirtation, open discussions of sex, and a “torrid” kiss (FA, p. 91). The second meaning of amorous is a subset of the first—since flirtations do ordinarily involve transference—but is not coextensive with it. What is elided is the large category of meaningful transferential relationships that do not move on to touching and kissing. Through a seemingly rational excursion into Freudian theory that blurs pens, according to Peterson, in instances of boundary violation as diverse as a doctor’s keeping patients waiting and a minister’s sexually abusing a parishioner.

2. Jane Gallop, Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment (Durham, N.C., 1997), p. 57; hereafter abbreviated FA.
the boundary between the two senses of *amorous*, Gallop creates the impression that she has been barred from being a teacher.

This distortion is particularly alarming to find in a scholar who represents herself as “at heart a Freudian” (FA, p. 87). Freud himself was adamant about distinguishing therapeutic transference from flirting; this is not an arcane point of Freudian theory. He famously had to insist that his students learn to restrain themselves from sexualizing the transference, warning Ferenczi for example to stop trying to help his patients by kissing and hugging them. The common wisdom among psychiatrists is still that “when you touch the patient, therapy is over.” I noticed in reading current analytic articles that terms such as *eroticized transference* are used to refer to moments when something has gone wrong and the therapeutic frame has been broken. A reader of Gallop versed in psychoanalytic theory would think that eroticization and transference were the same thing.

Teaching, like therapy, mobilizes transference. When one is confronted with another person's erotic transference, one engages with it by ignoring it; by playing freely with it (flirting, falling in love); or, third, by using one's expertise to harness the transference in the service of the other person's growth. All three settings involve an erotic dimension, so the question is, How much eroticism in the pedagogical relationship is enough, and how much is too much? This is the puzzle for all of us who teach, but a good rule of thumb is that if your tongue is in the student's mouth, you've broken the frame.

In a book that explores, in a way that makes sense to me, the experience of “Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process,” bell hooks uses the word *romantic* (Gallop's word as well) to describe some of her students’ feelings for her. But hooks also gives a sense of the secure frame that ideally “expands and embraces everyone” in the classroom; no one gets singled out for sexualized attention. In fact, to sexualize freely is to risk an intensely stressful and damaging role confusion for the student because, more likely than not, the student comes to the classroom socialized already to accept a teacher’s framing strategy.

The student whose relationship with Gallop was judged inappropriately amorous described a version of this painful role confusion in her suit: “[Gallop, by] introducing a sexual element into our working relationship, created an environment in which my intellectual performance

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5. See ibid., p. 601.

was not the only performance for which I was being judged.”

Incidentally, students in this position may initially experience the introduction of a second, erotic role as a high: “Like a mood-altering drug, the change in status from what [the student, patient, or client] expected feels wonderful” (PR, p. 78). This is the cat-that-ate-the-canary phenomenon that Gallop equates with feminist empowerment.8 But there is often an ultimate experience of loss, disillusionment, and damaged trust.9

I am suggesting that the slippage in the word amorous that distorts the concept of tranference and obscures all these problematic considerations, creating a seemingly rational defense of fully sexualized teaching, is quite like what the psychiatrist Richard S. Epstein has described as a trance logic that structures thinking in instances of psychotherapeutic boundary violation, a toxic reasoning that spuriously reframes an exploitative situation by “blurring the boundaries of logical categories to create an illusion.”10 Though teaching isn’t identical to therapy, a student’s admiration and dependency create similar temptations to step into the transference, enjoy a narcissistic surge, and reason away the ethical considerations. In the psychotherapeutic contexts Epstein describes, trance logic serves the purpose of standing in for the therapist’s observing ego, which under whatever stresses (for example, attraction to a patient at a time of personal vulnerability) is for the moment weakened.

Trance logic operates through flawed syllogisms, such as: “It will be helpful for you [as a matter of your growth] to be considerate of others. I am another person; therefore, you should be considerate of me by making me feel good” (KB, p. 100). Here the category “consideration” is artificially fused with an overlapping but not identical category, “making others feel good,” occluding the possibility of considering another person’s needs yet declining to meet them because of some need of one’s own.

The same sort of category confusion structures Gallop’s elaboration of the second of the three common rationalizations I mentioned earlier.


8. “Bursting with the sense of having possessed me but a few hours earlier, [a student who had seduced Gallop one night and come to her major lecture the next day] looked like the proverbial cat who’d eaten the canary” (FA, p. 47).

9. See, again, PR, pp. 100–114. For a poignant account of the difficulties therapists encounter in building safe therapeutic spaces for patients or clients whose ability to trust has been damaged by a sexual relationship with a former therapist, see Roberta J. Apfel and Bennett Simon, “Patient-Therapist Sexual Contact I. Psychodynamic Perspectives on the Causes and Results,” Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics 43 (1985): 57–62. Though a student’s vulnerability is not nearly as intense as a patient’s, the issue of violated trust (even where the relationship is consensual) emerges as a motif also in Peterson’s accounts of teacher-student boundary violations.

“we’re basically equals here.” In a thoughtful and empathic book on professional boundary transgressions, the psychotherapist Marilyn Peterson says that this denial of the power differential is in fact widespread among professionals such as teachers whose work has a caring or growth-producing dimension but is not classed as therapy. “Professionals—except for therapists—mentally banish the actuality of the power that derives from their clients’ emotional truth, [though] its existence is pervasive and strongly influences the reality of professionals’ authority in clients’ lives” (PR, p. 40). Gallop denies the extent of the power differential by asserting that unlike the power that men have over women, her power over her students is a function of her “mere institutional position” and thus does not have “deeply rooted social and psychological reinforcement” (EA, p. 25). The slippage here is in the meaning of institutional, from, say, “institutional in origin” to “institutional in feel.”

My relationship with the person who helps me at the Staff Benefits Office is “institutional” in origin as well as “institutional” (impersonal, businesslike, not psychologically elaborate) in what it summons in me. But by conflating the two meanings of the word, Gallop occludes the category of institutional relationships that are at the same time emotionally commanding or “psychologically reinforced,” for example, our relationships with teachers, whom we’re conditioned from childhood to admire, trust, and obey. Gallop’s position is like that of a woman therapist who believes that it is all right to have sex with a consenting patient because the relationship is merely formal or contractual and can be terminated at any time.

Finally, the third rationalization: “In transgressing my role of professional detachment I am treating you like a human being.” This one sounded plausible to me at first, or at least hard to argue against, though again it’s a common distortion. Gallop’s reasoning is that “telling teachers and students that we must not engage each other sexually ultimately tells us that we must limit ourselves to the confines of some restricted professional transaction, that we should not treat each other as human beings” (EA, p. 51). On reflection, there’s a conflation here of self-limiting behavior with the observance of merely formal or professional limits, as if there were not all sorts of reasons to restrain oneself sexually with someone besides the need to complete a coldly professional “transaction.” (If one exercises restraint with the desirable romantic partner of one’s friend and

11. In a recent conversation with Gallop, Lauren Berlant points to the real-world consequences of Gallop’s fantasy that the institutional context can be minimized: “Sometimes ... people see their intertwined romantic subjectivities as in a little autonomous bubble protected from the particular world of power and value it nonetheless floats in. When the bubble breaks, it’s a nightmare” (Our Monica, Ourselves, ed. Lisa Duggan and Lauren Berlant [forthcoming]).

12. “Your parents didn’t treat you as a full human being. Unlike them, I am here to help you learn about human respect and dignity” (KB, p. 99).
decides not to initiate an affair, is one failing culpably to treat the desirable person as a human being?)

As counterexamples to this sort of thinking, I would turn, again, to bell hooks, as well as to Jane Tompkins, whose *A Life in School* articulates a similarly impassioned yet not sexualizing view of what teaching is for. These teachers, both of whom see themselves as experimenting with new forms of pedagogical intimacy, express what amounts to a deeply humanizing regard for their students, experienced within the ordinary institutional limits. “Think: How can I love these strangers, these others that I see in the classroom?” “Life is right in front of me in the classroom, in the faces and bodies of the students. They are life, and I want us to share our lives, make something together, for as long as the course lasts, and let that be enough.”

Gallo's essay would not have provoked me to respond if it were not for a sense I have that the article expresses some systemic problem within our discipline. Like many other people, I have been troubled for some years by the high incidence in our field of theoretical thinking that relies on unrecognized slippages within logical categories. Identifying these logical lapses has largely been the province of the political right, but two recent works that come from the left put their finger on the problem; one of them, Eve Sedgwick's introduction to *Novel Gazing*, argues that the “strong theory” organizing, for example, post-Lacanian psychoanalysis and New Historicism sometimes relies on the collapse of like-but-not-identical phenomena into homogenizing categories, “with however distorting results.” The other book, Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Fashionable Nonsense*, exposes what amounts to the trance logic of some influential poststructuralist thinking—the category confusion, for example, that gets Lacan to a place where he can say that “the erectile organ” is equivalent to $\sqrt{-1}$, where the assertion depends on a slippage in the meaning of *irrational* from its mathematical meaning (the square root of a negative number) to its commonplace meaning within the domain of psychology.

What is going on? As a supplement to Sedgwick's compelling notion of paranoia as an emotional posture conditioning some of our methodological choices, here is a hypothesis. It is not that as a group we are too


unintelligent to see the flaws in some of the thinkers we publish and cite; maybe we are somehow emotionally served by giving prominence to some thinking that is over the top or out of bounds. Epstein writes of “the ‘amused tolerance’ exhibited by the otherwise ethical colleagues of sexually exploitative therapists,” and speculates that like “wayward adolescents,” the misbehaving colleagues are tolerated because they are acting out the unconscious wishes of their more self-restrained colleagues (KB, p. 9). What unconscious wish might we be expressing by our relative tolerance of the lapsed thinking of Jacques Lacan, or (going down the line) Jane Gallop, or then James Kincaid, who in his response to Gallop makes a linked case for sex with students without even much of a pretense of libidinal or conceptual self-regulation—“I, who find myself unable to distinguish anything from anything else”—and sounds as if he is positively trancing out (James R. Kincaid, “Pouvoir, Félicité, Jane, et Moi (Power, Bliss, Jane, and Me),” Critical Inquiry 25 [Spring 1999]: 610)?

I think that this laissez-faire attitude gives us a way of reassuring ourselves of the power of the various theoretical models (the relatively sound as well as the relatively unsound ones) to which we have committed so much of ourselves. If “exorbitant” theorizing can make it look good in ethical terms to have sex with your students, whether or not you deeply agree, then theory must be a very big thing. At the same time, we are reassured of our students’ dependence on us, because whether it’s ethical or analytical integrity that’s compromised by some of the articles we assign them, they are going to have to take it. For professors to deny this fact of life by asserting that it’s a free universe and students can respond as they wish is to fall into what Peterson says is the universal habit of denying our students’ vulnerability relative to us, at the same time that we must be getting a kick out of the freedoms we enjoy. The unconscious wish may be for total, irresponsible license with respect to these people who have already granted us so much authority and material power in their lives. If so, the explanation is not necessarily that professors are specially grandiose but that we’re human and get stirred up by the authority our students do invest us with.

A material threat to students who might wish to object to Gallop is embedded not just in Gallop’s essay but also in the two responses published alongside it. Let us say that a graduate student decided to respond in print to the three Critical Inquiry pieces that criticize general university policies against sexual relationships between teachers and students they are grading or advising. Each of the three pieces supplies in advance a way of stigmatizing such a student’s thinking as an outcome of bourgeois normativity or the state. The student’s perception that there should be rules against teacher-student sex would be automatically classifiable as “erotophobic moralizing” (p. 601); the student would become one with “the ministers of virtue” (p. 616); her or his ethical judgment would not be autonomous or valid but merely an emanation of “moral pieties” (Ann
Pellegrini, "Pedagogy's Turn: Observations on Students, Teachers, and Transference-Love," Critical Inquiry 25 [Spring 1999]: 625). In practical reality, no student will respond to the articles, because of fears connected with the job market. If Gallop, Kincaid, and Pellegrini would all class one's positions as offensive, what can one expect when one's writing is in front of a hiring committee? It never comes to this because students tend to opt for survival, but we should be more aware of the cost in emotional terms of our students' everyday awareness that their feelings about what they are reading or hearing are always susceptible to a cold scanning and punishment. They carry this awareness as depression.

Some of my speculations in this response emerge from reflecting on choices I've made myself in the service of my students' "professionalization." The following remark, then, is not about Jane Gallop but about our profession, whose betrayals I have felt viscerally and been a party to: there is a lot of disavowed sadism around here. If our discipline is to move in the direction of greater health, it will be a matter not of our developing new and more finely tuned theoretical models but of our engaging in the humbling and actually painful work of building up compassionate self-awareness in our day-to-day dealings with one another and in our published conversations.