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## **Deep Shit: A Dialogue about Rhetoric, Pedagogy, and the Working Class**

**Setting:** Graduate course in the Histories and Theories of Rhetoric and Composition

**Sara:** Masters student in Literature/Teaching Assistant

**Rick:** Doctoral student in Rhetoric and Composition/Teaching Assistant

**John:** Graduate instructor on loan from a regional campus

**Action:** A listserv after-class group

Within 48 hours from the end of each session, we (the instructor and students) would post responses to an email listserv, asking follow up questions, adding comments we didn't have time for during class, elaborating on issues we talked about. The dialogues listed below are excerpted passages drawn directly from these after-class conversations. For clarity, we've smoothed out some rough sentences and slipped in some contextual information here and there. We've also grouped our conversations under specific headings to help us better convey the unfolding narrative and the theoretical and pedagogical discussions that transected it; otherwise, the posts appear basically in their initial form. The only exception here is the article's concluding section, which Sara authored after our course was over in an attempt to add some closure to the action.

We were a class of three, two students and one instructor, who all, within the first 15 minutes of our first class meeting, self-disclosed as working-class academics, closed the classroom door, and started saying things like, "We're not going to do what they tell us." And, of course, we started talking about shit: shit we put up with, emerge from, steer clear of, dive into, and dish out. Talking about shit, using the word "shit," seemed to signal for each of us that we were somehow stepping outside but alongside the scripts and counterscripts that too often shape student/teacher discourse, signal for us "third space" moments when we were stepping out of shit we'd just as soon do without and stepping into deep shit that we needed to trod in to be more critical and more humane educators.

We talked about other readings and issues in our "after-class group," but frequently circled back to themes represented in the selections offered here. We sometimes began,

sometimes concluded, each session with a discussion of our listserv conversations, so we consistently returned to our dialogue in light of other texts we were reading (not necessarily those that had been assigned) and new issues that had arisen in our lives outside of the course. As a result, our reflections on our roles as critical pedagogues in light of Sara's struggles to define her responsibility toward a troubled student preoccupied us throughout the semester. Because we offer here our actual dialogue, we've left ourselves no room for any kind of substantial revision and, as such, left ourselves open for shit—even, in a way, invited it. We didn't have all the answers then, and we certainly don't have them all now. What we can stand behind is the truth of the struggle represented here, the struggle to find a language we could make meaning with, one that could ensure a productive place in academia for ourselves and for students like Sara's, first-generation students whose life circumstances don't always meld easily with campus life at public ivys.

## **1. What Kind of Shit Is This?**

**John:** I'm noticing that shit is becoming one of our generative themes (related, of course, to the broader one of working-class pedagogies/rhetorics). One person might think they are taking no shit while they are in the act of giving shit. I'd say, there's "not taking shit" and there's "not taking shit." In the context of an authoritarian, anti-dialogic approach, taking no shit has a limiting function—it steers students back into the realm of expected behaviors and conclusions. In the context of an augmentative approach, taking no shit provides for just what Sara suggests—everyone's chance to voice. Augmentative no-shit-taking, in other words, facilitates. And even along these lines, we can take no racist, sexist, elitist shit, and not take this shit in ways that spur dialogue and reflection, or we cannot take this shit in ways that bury anti-democratic views, leaving them fester.

As for the word itself, I'm thinking "shit" carries an edge; if you come from a background sensitive to rhetoric about shit, as we do, you can sort of unite around the word. When at any given moment we deem something shit, we all kind of understand what the other is talking about because as teachers, as academics, as working-class individuals we face a lot of the same shitty challenges—competitive peers, the strange rhythms of committees, etc. "Shit" depends on and invites a kind of community, a kind of cultural identification.

However, I can see someone looking at our posts and reading shit as a kind of "X" in an algebraic equation, or even a mark of our own laziness, our fatigue in the face of issues and concepts that require much more precision. Indeed, there are times I could plug in words much more specific than "shit" to describe the circumstances I find myself in, the rhetorics I contend with, but then again that kind of precision might very well be reductive: "shit" allows for an interplay of varying forces that come into play in any institutional/pedagogical event,

and as I said before, the word invites those of us for whom it has a lot of utility (as well as takes a shot at those who'd prefer their academics a little more genteel).

**Sara:** Shit is looking at a student's breasts rather than her face when she makes a comment in class—something I took too much of as an undergraduate.

Shit is turning in a reading response (that deals with a piece about Black English) entitled, "Wahut' wrong wit us. I don't need no helb. I be doin' fine" that goes on to add, "We need to reduce the ghetto influence and only have the white society to be productive as a society." That's racist shit-directed towards minorities, the class text, and me as the teacher. It's something that I refuse to take and that I give back to the student by refusing to play head games with him.

Shit is assuming that a woman in graduate school must be working on a master's degree in elementary education—something I get from my husband's family and their friends.

Shit is skipping five of the first six classes of the semester, ignoring the attendance policy on the syllabus and the written warning the teacher gave that one more absence would result in being dropped from the class, and emailing the teacher, saying, "I have to be enrolled in this class in order to play sports!" Not taking shit is reminding the student that he had been warned that he would be dropped and that he now has to accept the consequences of his actions.

Shit is receiving an email that states, "Should you really be telling your students about those kinds of things?????", written by the above student who accidentally received an email forwarded to current students that publicized an event sponsored by the university's gay, bi, and lesbian alliance. Giving it is returning the email to that student and telling him that it's entirely appropriate to tell students of that event. Taking it is not telling the student that since I don't tell him how to play his position on the athletic team, he shouldn't tell me how to teach or relate to my students. Giving and taking it (giving to the current students, taking from this student) is not telling the student that undoubtedly there are gay students in the class who appreciated receiving this forward.

Shit is interrupting a graduate student in the middle of a formal presentation by questioning the pronunciation of a feminist theorist's name. Giving it back is smiling sweetly, telling the professor, "The other professors I've worked with pronounce it this way," and returning to the presentation.

Shit is writing this email—giving it, that is.

**Rick:** From various theoretical standpoints, linguists have sought to understand terms, phrases, etc. in language by means of context. For linguists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, the value of any given term is "accordingly determined by its environment," so that even the value of a word signifying "sun" is impossible without first considering its surround-

ings. For sociolinguists, as well as philosophers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, it is purely the social environment (and its inherent ideology) that gives meaning to words and to language as a whole. In terms of rhetoric, Aristotle defined logos as an argument that appeals to reason, pathos as the use of emotion in relation to the subject, and ethos as trust in a speaker's character or credibility. For the purpose of understanding "shit" as a word, term, or concept, I thought it would be useful to examine several contexts in which shit is used, recognizing the positive and negative uses of shit, as well as the instances of ethos, pathos, and logos, expression of empowerment, rebellion, excitement and/or joy as expressed by shit. Thus:

- Shit! (expresses frustration, excitement, fear, anger)
- Bullshit! (contradiction, negation of request, exposure of a lie—a challenge to the ethos of a speaker)
- I'm not going to take this shit! (expression of defiance; also an example of pathos—emotion as in anger in an attempt to persuade, resolve)
- I've had enough of your shit! (confrontational, challenge)
- This shit is ridiculous! (challenge to argument/enthymeme/syllogism by use of logos)
- Don't give me your shit! (interpreted as an order or command, challenge, defiance)
- This is shit! (descriptive indication of negativity towards object, concept, ideology, challenge to logos)
- I don't believe this shit! (emotional expression of shock, confusion; also an ironic expression or expression of sarcasm)
- Eat shit! (verbal attack or abuse)
- Might as well take the shit in stride (acceptance of unpleasantness, expresses attitude of resignation)
- Man, she really knows her shit (positive indication or recognition of talent, work performed, positive reflection of a person's ethos or credibility)
- Man, this is good shit (expression of delight or joy towards an object)

Obviously, this can go on (and there's probably more to do here by means of further connecting shit with rhetoric, or with ideology in a Bakhtinian sense), yet in attempting to contextualize "shit," we are now in a better position to define shit in relation to our own particular environment in the university/comp department. From this perspective, how can we define shit in relation to our own social positions within the academy? How are grad students the "Janus Coin" of shit, both giving and taking shit, as well as refusing to take shit? How do our words reflect our shit?

In *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Bakhtin claims that the natural or social ideological product known as the "sign" is material and possesses meaning. Through the laws

of dialectic materialism (which entail growth, change, and development), Bakhtin describes that which the ideological sign represents as something material that lies outside itself, acting as a “Janus Coin” in that it both reflects and refracts material reality (a “naturally occurring struggle of opposites” in dialectic materialist thought). Signs, Bakhtin says, occur as natural phenomenon and as a reflection of consumer culture (9-11).

But Bakhtin didn't name all aspects of the material sign, such as the shit that both reflects social ideology and creates social reality. Shit as ideology/Shit as identification. Working-class folks can certainly identify with shit as an ideology—the shit one is born into, the shit one absorbs from the social and physical environment, the shit that's unfair, discriminatory, hurtful, and unyielding. The shit as lies, as ideology, as propaganda. Shit as reification of the same old shit.

## 2. In Deep Shit

**Sara:** Tuesday I was reminded of just how much my gender and class affect the way I “take shit” from students, and for that matter, how I define the term. Unit Project #3 was due in my mailbox by five. When I picked up the projects, I found a note from one student stating that she would like to turn the paper in after spring break. The note ended with a rather cryptic comment about a recently diagnosed “medical condition,” effusive apologies, and a request for me to call her at home.

When I called her, she told me she thought she was pregnant, that she was afraid to tell her mother, and that she was fearful of the response her boyfriend threatened should she have an abortion. My heart broke for her. She is a first-generation college student—a characteristic that makes her different from the middle-class “norm” here on this campus. And, she is from the same working-class neighborhood and city where many of my relatives live, so I definitely know “where's she coming from,” literally and metaphorically. She'd come so far by being in college, all expenses paid. She had frequently told me how proud her mom was of her, how she couldn't let her down, and how she wanted to prove herself to all her “friends” who said she'd never make it in college.

Since my high school “friends” had said the same thing to me, and since I've always felt, and still feel, a similar pressure from my mother to “make it” and do all the things she could never do as a 1950's farm girl from northeastern Kentucky, I could really empathize with my student's feeling that she'd let down her mother and herself. So, when she began sobbing I had a split-second decision to make. Should I handle the situation by giving her a couple phone numbers and wishing her luck, as some of my colleagues would in their “professional” manner, or should I react as a feminist, as a friend, and as the big-sister-type figure I often feel when around my students? I could hear my education professors from

college warning me not to get “too close” as I decided, “Fuck it.” My student needed me, not some mythical, unfeeling “professional.”

I told her, “This is what we’re going to do. We’re going to get you tested and have you talk to some people so you can make an informed decision.” I gave her the number for the local Planned Parenthood and told her I’d take her, adding that she may not even be pregnant—home tests are notoriously unreliable—and that if she would be pregnant, I would support any decision she made.

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The more we talked, it became clearer and clearer that she wanted to have an abortion but didn’t know what she could tell her boyfriend, how she could pay for it, or how she would be able to get to a clinic (the nearest abortion clinic is 35 miles away). We discussed how she could talk to her boyfriend (including the use of lies), how she could pay for the abortion (sliding scale fees, loans, credit cards), and how she could get there—I told her I would take her if the local Planned Parenthood clinic didn’t have transportation to the abortion clinic. I finally gave her my home phone number, and after about an hour, we hung up.

Did I cross the mythical “line” that some of my colleagues refer to? These same colleagues would probably think that this student was giving me shit by missing class for “personal” reasons, not having

work done, asking me to make a long-distance call to her from my home, and “involving” me in her personal life. In response, I’d argue that “the line” needs to be crossed sometimes, ESPECIALLY when a student comes to me with a personal crisis. I’m the only person over eighteen she has told about any of this—she told me she had nowhere else to go, and sadly, I think she’s right. As a working-class woman, I’m not about to give her any grief, and I know there’s only overwhelming need behind her recent behavior and her motives for coming to me. How can that be shit? It can’t. I’ll tell you what is: the notion in the academy that we shouldn’t get “too involved” with students. Maybe my “fuck it” response to my internalized academic values is giving shit back to the source.

**John:** Sara! I can't believe how quickly you've gone from considering whether you should take shit to getting into some deep shit. I hope I'd have the wisdom and compassion you're showing toward your student to help even one of my closest friends should one of them get in such a situation, let alone help a student in one of my classes. What you're in personally points out to me the deep shit of students' daily lives in this culture of violence. It's what we have to let into our classrooms if we want our teaching to be relevant. It's also, as you indicate, what the academy in its traditional sense can write out of the curriculum. We want a curriculum that's responsive to such shit, that can sensitize students and colleagues to the sexist, racist, and economic realities that can generate such situations to begin with, and we want to help students and colleagues and ourselves develop the means to challenge and change society where need be.

If your story follows the lines of a traditional take-no-shit story, you never get to deep shit. Thinking of the kind of backgrounds students at my open-admissions campus come from, I often cringe when I hear colleagues talking about not taking shit from students. I've got to confess I cringed a little at first when you first brought up "taking no shit" early in the semester, that is, until I got to know you better. And this is the point here, if you don't know your student, don't respond to her as a person, you never get to the deep shit of her life—and I'm sure there's still a lot of teachers out there who'd say you're in shit too deep—but just think of the difference if you took no shit in a conventional sense, in a sense where this person appears only as a student (a working-class student in a public ivy, at that) who's missed a due date and a class session.

Another angle to all of this involves keeping students around. We didn't think this was such a big issue here on the main campus, where students have been successful throughout their school careers and are pretty much determined to earn their degrees one way or another. At worst, they'll drop out of our school only to attend another—one that will put up with their shit or one that won't give them shit, I guess. Your student's a different story, and I think her background almost demands you get to know her beyond the generic student/teacher roles. Since we started talking about shit, I've used it to scrutinize my students and my curriculum more carefully, wondering: What did I do to get shit? Do I deserve this shit? What does this shit mean? What does it tell me about the student who's giving it to me? Is this shit I can work with? Is this an instance where I need to give some shit?

**Sara:** John, I remember your cringe when I said that I don't take shit. I could tell from the look on your face that I scared you—"Oh, shit, I've got one of *those* teachers in my class." But, I also knew that my version of "taking no shit" was very different from what you expected (the conventional sense that you described in your post).

As a woman, and particularly as a youthful-looking, female graduate assistant, I get



different kinds of shit than either you or Rick get, and I may even get more of it at times. Because of those factors, I have to think about shit; it's a self-defense mechanism for me. I have to be prepared for students like Robert, the student I discussed in last week's class, who, by refusing to sit down and invading my personal space in a conference, try to "one-up" me and change the power dynamic inherent in a conversation about grading. I won't take that, for a variety of reasons. I don't want the shit-givers to think that what they're doing is acceptable, I don't want male students to think it's okay, and I don't want my female students to think that they should take it. I know that as first-year students, the majority of them are not used to any measure of reciprocity in the classroom, and it takes time for them to get used to the idea that the teacher is not the only adult in the classroom, that their words and actions can impact the teacher as much as the teacher can impact them, etc. They need to learn, though, and that learning starts with my refusal to take or give what I define to be shit.

There's shit like sexual harassment and sex crimes—issues I've dealt with personally—that specifically affects women even if we haven't been harassed, molested, or raped, because these acts create a climate of fear that works to control all women. This violence can limit our movement at night, our housing choices, the way we dress, the things we do for entertainment—in short, everything in our lives. Then there's shit that specifically affects women but falls disproportionately on working-class women, such as reproductive issues. My student's predicament illustrates this shit, and I understand it as well.

Growing up, there was so much family anxiety about my sexuality. Almost every family member assumed that I was having

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sex and was a "bad" girl because of it—my mother even told me I was promiscuous when I was fourteen. At thirteen and fourteen, I was warned that if I did become pregnant, I would have to drop out of school and my life would be over—the reality of a working-class family. By sixteen and seventeen, it was, "You'll never be able to go to college if you get pregnant! You're going to ruin your life!" (with a subtext of "you're going to ruin our lives, because we've put our hopes on you to be the one who 'makes it'"). With almost every boy I dated in college there was the articulated fear that I was going to drop out of school, have babies, and get



married. So many attempts to control my “unruly” sexuality, with the central irony being that I never did any of the things of which my family accused me. And here I am, twenty-eight years old (at this writing), married for five years, and my mother still panics at the mere mention of my friends’ pregnancies: “Well, you can’t have any babies yet! You’d have to drop out of school! It’d all be over! Greg’s just gonna have to wait.” It doesn’t matter that neither my husband nor I want children right now or that having a child would not force me to drop out of school. What matters is my mother’s fear that I won’t “make it” after all and her personal reality that marriage and children meant, in many ways, that life was over. This is the reality of working-class women; we literally can’t afford to make certain sexual choices or “mistakes.”

John, you referred to the forces that limit students like mine a “culture of violence.” I don’t think that phrase goes far enough to describe what we as women (not to mention those of us who are working-class, of color, or lesbian) deal with every day of our lives. It’s not violence; it’s total destruction, and I’m sick of it (I can’t take any more of this shit!).

**Rick:** Wow! This student’s story really does bring it all home as far as working-class reality is concerned. I couldn’t agree more with John’s observation of the “deep shit of students’ daily lives in this culture of violence.” A culture of violence amply describes the context of shit-reality that is imposed in a general way towards the working class as a whole and *in particular* ways towards women, the gay and lesbian community, or people of color. For students like Sara’s, it seems the violence is imposed initially by the shit that all working class students face—economic pressure and the demands this places on a student (increased shit-load). And in regard to this student’s possible pregnancy, the shit plays itself out in the continuing struggle for women’s reproductive rights. If the social context surrounding women’s reproductive rights was indeed social and democratic, instead of patriarchal and reactionary, how would this impact the violence of blackmail and economic hardship (both logistically—35 miles from an abortion clinic, and economic) imposed on Sara’s student? Is this a context from which to pull some rhetorical uses of shit—“Shit!”; “This shit is ridiculous”; “This is shit!”; or “I don’t believe this shit!”? This culture of violence imposed on working-class students is shit, it’s ridiculous shit, and it’s shit that, were it not for the harsh reality that confirms its existence, is truly unbelievable.

### 3. The Usual Bullshit

**Rick:** Working-class kids are expected to adopt the attitude of “Might as well take the shit in stride.” And of course when working-class children aren’t prepared to think conceptually, and when they have little space and little voice, they don’t become leaders. They struggle to survive; their shit is silenced. I remember the first composition class I taught, a 101 class at the

University of Louisville. Either the first or the second day I asked the students to form groups and write a little about themselves and their expectations for the class. One group of students wrote that they weren't looking forward to the class because all it would do would be to reinforce what they already felt, and that was that they all "sucked" as writers. The class was composed of mostly working-class students who had to work to make ends meet. I read and heard some of the most conservative views and attitudes coming from young people at a time of their lives when you might expect open-mindedness or idealism. Homophobia, hostility to gains made by marginalized groups in society, cynicism towards the women's movement, towards Affirmative Action, welfare, and so on. Yet these views were always quite unexamined in their essays. Some issues, such as race, they didn't even want to discuss. They thought the real discrimination was against Christians who were silenced in the "liberal" education system. They were angry. They thought it was the work of liberals, feminists, the gay movement, or commie teachers like me who were responsible for stirring up the shit. For so many of my students, problems such as racism, sexism, etc. wouldn't exist if the discourse were silenced.

**John:** Wish I had more of a working-class conscious as an undergraduate. I'd have been more aware of the kinds of shit students probably put up with on a daily bases. I'd have been able to sail some of it back, hopefully to make my teachers more aware of the unnecessary and debilitating shit they were slinging (hopefully unconsciously). Then again, I might have been run out of town.

Of course, memories come back to me now in new contexts, but at the time I was taught that teachers had all the answers. And I believed this to the point of distrusting my own feelings. One example of the kind of shit I took involves my English teacher my freshman year. I started off pretty slowly in his class, but eventually put together a string of "A" papers. One day after a session he stopped in the hall to tell me how impressed he had been with my work. He followed up by asking me if I liked sports and if I ever considered being a sports writer. A sports writer? Where did he make that connection? I'm standing in front of him with my long hair, paint-stained jacket, and holey jeans, and this guy thinks I should look into sports writing—not creative writing, not graduate study, but sports writing. I wonder what he would have suggested to me had I been a woman.

**Sara:** He would have suggested that you become a high school English teacher. That's what I heard as a high school and college student. I do have to say, however, that some of these people (most notably my family) had little to no understanding of what it meant to be a graduate student or a professor (my family still doesn't understand what I do—and they'd die if they read this essay). My parents didn't go to college; my mother's parents and two of her brothers didn't make it past eighth grade. Going to graduate school,

becoming a professor . . . these things just didn't exist in my family's world, so they didn't exist in mine for a long time.

I remember thinking about graduate school during spring quarter of my junior year of college. I was taking "junior block," the nickname for the methods courses education majors take. While the courses weren't terrible, they didn't appeal to me the way they did to the other students; I felt that I was being led into a life that didn't quite fit, and I became even more convinced of that fact as I began my pre-student teaching. I began to wonder if I should apply to graduate school, something my best friend (a man) was going to do.

I decided to talk to one of my instructors about my doubts. She had just found out she had been accepted into a Ph.D. program, so she would be leaving at the end of the year. Given her experience, I thought she would be able to understand my concerns, and because we had developed a friendship outside of class, I really respected her opinions. She told me, "You don't want to go to graduate school! You'll never be able to get a job." I didn't understand her reasoning; after all, fear of not getting a job wasn't going to stop her from going back to school, and I knew she hadn't advised my friend against graduate school. "But he's different," the professor said. "He can't teach high school. Trust me, Sara, you're doing the right thing," she said as she led me out of her office. "This way you and Greg can get married sooner."

At the time, I was grateful for the professor's advice; now, I really question her motives. Was she really concerned about my economic stability, or was she engaging in a little gate-keeping? You both know the answer to that question, and deep down, I guess I know it, too.

**Rick:** I had no idea as to what I wanted to do when I graduated from dear ol' Southern High, a working-class school in southwestern Louisville that had the largest student population at the time. The high school took in students from several working-class neighborhoods, where kids' parents mostly worked at the Ford, General Electric, or International Harvester plants (I. H. later closed down and thousands were laid off). I didn't go to college until I had been out of high school almost 5 years. I always worked at some shitty job—I had absolutely no support from my parents. My father left the family and I rarely saw him. During the divorce, my mother took shock treatments at the local mental health facility where she met some guy from G.E. who was a substance abuser (alcohol). It was no time before he moved in with her and they eventually married. But he wasn't very generous. My first experience with college was at the downtown community college, where I was accepted into a two-year program for an Associates Degree in Applied Science. Although I had always loved literature and writing, I never thought I could make a living at it. For some reason, I didn't want to teach at the time (too many negative experiences from high school). I began working as a respiratory therapist at the hospital at night, the nursing home in the morning,

and taking classes in the afternoon. A lot of times I would go almost thirty hours without sleep. Years later, I decided I was tired of hospitals, and being around so many sick people always had me thinking I had cancer or something. I wanted out, so I began taking undergrad classes at U of L.

Of course, the shit I took and saw is quite different from what women, African-Americans, or gay students take. Hell, I'm the gender and color of the oppressor! But I did experience shit as a full-fledged member of the working class, and I remember the attitude those in power had towards the likes of scruffs like me. Towards the end of my undergraduate degree I decided to minor in philosophy. The chair of the philosophy department was my advisor.

"I remember the attitude those in power had towards the likes of scruffs like me."

During my first meeting with him, I was a little nervous. After all, this was a tenured doctor of philosophy who was also the department chair. I was a little undergrad grunt. At one point, we both started to say something at the same time and he angrily told me NOT to interrupt him again, looking at me as though he wanted to kill me. And I remember internalizing so many of those

class myths—never acknowledging on the outside that I thought I was inferior, but internalizing it just the same. Even after the objective working class shit of having no money and no security, it's the subjective, psychological shit that lingers—the psychology of class warfare.

#### 4. Stepping in Your own Shit

**Rick:** Shit does seem to work as rhetorical/operative term, conveying a meaning here, absorbing a feeling there, playing emotive, angry, excitable, fearful and sometimes joyous dialogic roles. Shit is quite democratic. It plays all sides and is there for all people in almost every type of situation. In essence, shit is a hero—a "genuine rhetorical force" (as Charles Schuster defines hero in "Mikhail Bakhtin as a Rhetorical Theorist"). In "The Bildungsroman" chapter of *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Bakhtin describes the hero as a "point moving in space" having "no essential characteristics." In literature, he says, the hero's movement in space "enables the artist to develop and demonstrate the spatial and static social diversity of the world." (Aren't we constantly taking on shit? Shit is *mierda* in Spanish, *merde* in French, *sranje* in Serbo-Croatian.) Shit is social, and as such, is ideology. But shit isn't confined to any particular ideology.

Shit is a chameleon. Shit is a trace. It picks up here and changes form there. Shit is in our classrooms and in our heads. It's the inevitable work we must finish before the end

of the semester. Shit is in final exams, papers, and grades. As John mentions, shit bounces back and force, giving and taking from both speaker and audience. Shit is on both sides of the binary and I'd be willing to bet that it also acts as a destabilizing force on the binary. Shit is a moving force that is at once definable and indefinable (this is shit; what is this shit). Like Bakhtin's definition of the hero as subject, shit moves in space but is not essentialized. Shit is social and diverse. And again, as John mentions, shit is both a locator of contested ground (this is the shit; the shit stops here; look at this shit; check your shit) and contests ground (I'm not taking this shit; bullshit; the hell with your shit; no more of this shit). Shit is a dynamic hero in time and space. Shit is in constant dialectical motion because as we see all around us and on a daily basis, shit happens. Shit is the prime force in Sara's student's tale.

**Sara:** Can you give yourself shit? I think I am in this whole situation with my student. The more and more I think about this whole thing, the more and more uncomfortable I'm getting. I'm glad I didn't tell her that her work was due on the due date, period. I'm even glad that I offered to take her to the doctor to confirm her pregnancy. But, I think by telling her that I'd take her to the clinic if she didn't have any other way to get there, I got myself way in over my head.

You're right, John; I'm in some deep shit, and right now, I feel as if I'm drowning in it. I responded to my student with my heart, trying not to give her shit, but now my head is responding, too. If she does decide to have an abortion, and if she tells me I'm her only way to get to a clinic, I don't know what I'm going to do. What if something would go wrong afterwards and she would start hemorrhaging in the car? What if I had a car wreck and she was hurt? What if either one of us would be hurt by protestors?

I don't want to deal with an angry boyfriend. And I don't want to deal with an angry mother either, and that could be very likely, especially if (God forbid) something would happen to her daughter. She could sue me and the university. Even if nothing "went wrong," I could still be in deep. It wouldn't matter that I've been encouraging my student to explore ALL of her options; it wouldn't matter that I've told her not to rush into having an abortion that she could later regret. The only thing that would matter would be the perception that I used my power as a teacher to manipulate a student. The bottom line of all of this is that if the shit hit the fan, I could lose my assistantship, and let's face it: if that happened, my academic career would be over. What graduate program would accept me with this type of controversy swirling around me?

I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't. Just thinking about all of this in theory, not dealing with it in reality, has made me a mess: I'm not sleeping, I'm having trouble eating, I'm not getting any of my own work done—and at this time of the semester, I'm absolutely

swamped. What will I be like if this situation becomes real? In my attempts to not give shit, am I giving myself shit?

**John:** We talked about the intricacies of keeping students around, and certainly your student's story speaks to this, but the challenges of taking no shit involves keeping ourselves around too. I don't know if you're giving yourself shit so much, Sara; I think you saw the shit you would need to take on, and then had to make a decision about how much shit you were willing to take. I'm not saying this necessarily means you need to compromise your principles—there are indeed reasonable limits to what you can do with your student—but the shit you do end up taking can point to the limits and possibilities of progressive pedagogy. It certainly points to what democratic aims are up against.

Since practicing a critical pedagogy means using the classroom to scrutinize cultural forces that intimately impact our students' lives, your story shows how this pedagogy challenges the borders of classroom walls. Practicing a critical pedagogy means taking on shit/taking no shit for sure, but it also gives you quite a glimpse of just how much there is, everywhere.

**Sara:** I just found out my student is pregnant. She came out of the test this morning determined to have the abortion, and somehow I'd gone from "last resort" to first and only option. Tonight I called my teaching mentor, MaryAnn. I knew that I had to get out of this mess, but I needed to hear it from somebody else—especially a woman who has far more teaching experience, is a committed feminist, and is someone I respect a great deal. That's MaryAnn, definitely.

MaryAnn "absolutely forbid" me to take my student to a clinic (her words). She pointed out all the dangers I mentioned in my earlier post: lawsuits, loss of assistantship, safety concerns, the works. She said she was thinking of my needs "because somebody has to, and you're only thinking of your student's needs." She told me I have to talk to my student immediately and tell her I can go no further with her. MaryAnn's right. I know she's right. But, God, I dread that conversation.

One thing MaryAnn kept telling me was that no matter what happens, it's not my fault. If my student stays in school, it's not because of me. If she drops out, it's not because of me. She chose to have unprotected sex, she'll choose how to deal with the repercussions of that, and she'll choose whether or not to stay in school, here or elsewhere. I know that in my head, but God, it's hard not to feel that if she fails, it's all my fault. The stakes for her are so high. I think the lure of the hero narrative is apparent here: if only I could make everything all right, she would be "saved." But I can't make everything all right. I don't have that kind of power.

Besides, even if some degree of that type of power was possible, would I really want

it? It seems to me that the type of teacher who could “make everything all right” would be a banker-teacher, someone I don’t want to be. I’d be the type of teacher who manipulates students into taking certain actions. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire writes, “The teacher cannot think for [her] students, nor can [she] impose [her] thought on them” (58). I’d add: The teacher cannot save her students, nor can she force them to save themselves. I can’t “save” my student and “keep her” in school anymore than I can force her to drop out, no matter what the hero narrative suggests.

**John:** Your identification of your intentions toward your student with banking and with the hero narrative hit home for me, Sara. It looks like you did script a conclusion for her (or perhaps were being manipulated into the one she scripted for you) that you were prepared to make a reality. I’m still in awe of your sensitivity toward shit and how the more we used rhetoric about shit to discuss your situation the more emotional and more righteous your intervention seemed. But I’m also seeing your script more critically now in light of the terms you suggest. I’m thinking about Elayne Rapping’s critique of local news programs, how news teams will oftentimes intervene in an individual’s life—get a sewer pipe fixed for an elderly

“It’s even hard to say if your view of the fix was really the right fix at all, given all the potential damage—the risk to your well being and career, among other possibilities.”

man or get food in the mouth of a homeless woman—as a way of convincing people that the system works, that repairs to those elements that falter are forthcoming. In other words, this is ultimately a conservative venture—no real changes take place in the system that delayed reparations to the sewer pipe or allowed homelessness. Your initial impulse to fix things might be seen in the same way: maybe as a commercial for the feasibility of radical intervention. I think rescues are often necessary (I don’t underestimate the value of a meal to a homeless person, and I agree that you need to address your student’s ordeal somehow), but we’ve got to keep our eyes on big changes as well.

Your immediate fix to your student’s case would have left all of the same threatening forces in place—her boyfriend could still threaten both of you, for example. It’s even hard to say if your view of the fix was really the right fix at all, given all the potential damage—the risk to your well being and career, among other possibilities. Hero narratives don’t allow you room to consider all of this—they focus on the “successful conclusion,” kick all the shit to the side.



Whatever could have happened or still might happen, though, I think you've resisted the lure of the hero narrative in a productive fashion. You've chosen instead to look at all the shit you've stepped into (and once you abandon the tried and true of the standard curriculum, once you step out of the cover of shit, you are sure to step into it), you've discerned multiple sources of it, and you are considering what to do with it to become empowered, critical, and more humane.

**Rick:** I'd like to comment on some of the psychological shit relating to Sara's experiences with her student—psychological shit that seems to be a recurring theme: fixing shit, getting involved/not getting involved in other people's shit, and “professional distance.” I remember as a child seeing my grandmother work so hard and knowing the difficulties of her life. My goal as a little boy was to grow up and become a doctor (my grandmother always said that because she worked in a nursing home that I should grow up and be a doctor—it was sort of a little fantasy game we had going). If I grew up to be a doctor, I'd be able to help people, including my grandmother. I could fix things for her so she wouldn't have to work so hard again. Of course, that never happened. I always helped my grandmother, but I was no more capable of fixing her life than she was. But I grew up wanting to fix things, go the extra nine yards and do things for people that other people would never consider doing. I got involved in some people's lives. Occasionally some good things happened, but more often than not, nothing was fixed, and I ended up emotionally hurt (god, the emotional pains of being working class, particularly if there's not a strong family network, which in my case, there wasn't). Being poor, I tried to “gain entry” (and for me, then, gaining entry was just being accepted and loved. Really didn't have anything to do with status or money) by taking care of things and people—showing my loyalty. Was I full of shit or what?

By the time I was older and working as a respiratory therapist in the hospital, I had learned the meaning of “professional distance.” I was so overwhelmed by all of the sick patients I dealt with. Most of them were terminal, in ICU or CCU. I always tried to be a good therapist and to be an advocate for the patient. But to get involved in their shit beyond the bounds of my field was too much for me. I couldn't handle it.

So when Sara questioned whether to give her student “a few phone numbers and wish her good luck,” the way most “professionals” would do, or to take an active role, I thought, you're so right. In the back of my mind I wondered about the implications of it all, but I tried to downplay all of that because I felt like a traitor or a “petty professional.” Of course now, after hearing what MaryAnn said (definitely a voice of reason and wisdom), I realize now what that “professional distance” means. As Sara mentions, to be rigid about the due dates for assignments and not work with her student at all is pretty cold and unfeeling—definitely a petty professional. But to get too involved in trying to fix someone's shit only

seems to sink another person deep in shit. Deep shit, as John said. So what does it mean to want to fix things? How can we as educators go farther than our banking colleagues in helping our students without getting too mired in shit? And how do we as working-class folks, women, etc. achieve solidarity with other working-class folks without getting too deep into fixing everything in their lives?

I tried to fix things for my grandmother until 1994 when she died. And yet—when she died, although it was never stated explicitly, I had the feeling that I hadn't done enough. I'd concentrated on my own life and happiness too much and not grandma's. I didn't become a doctor, and I couldn't fix it. Are there any answers here?

**Sara:** Rick, you bring up a really interesting point that I hadn't thought about in this way before. I, too, have always had this desire to "fix things" for people; when people ask me why I teach, I usually respond with, "I enjoy helping students," and I do. I enjoy watching students' transformation over the first year of college. I like seeing them grow as writers, and it makes me feel good to know that my teaching played a role in that growth. But, I do think part of it goes beyond the desire to "help" and instead becomes the desire to "fix."

I'd always thought this feeling came from my socialization as a woman. As women, we're taught to be caretakers; in my family in particular this is the case. I've watched my mom put everyone else's needs before her own my whole life, and it's hard not to absorb the notion that somehow, that's what it means to be a woman and a mother. I've always related this tendency to being a woman, but I've never thought of it in terms of class. Frankly, I never knew there were men out there that felt similar kinds of pressures.

After reading your post, Rick, I'm thinking my desire to fix is class *and* gender-related. Perhaps it's a way of gaining control in a world where we don't have much control, as fixing a few things gives us the illusion that we have more power than we do. When you grow up not feeling very powerful, feeling that you're just getting stepped on time and time again, the idea that somehow you can stop shit from happening to other people is very tempting. On one level, we can stop it: we can fight against classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and all the other evils out there. But on another, more personal level, we can't stop it. We can't stop students from making bad choices about school and their personal lives. We can't rush in and "fix" the repercussions of those bad choices. I think my experience with this student shows we'll only give ourselves and our students shit if we try to "fix" their problems.

**John:** I identified a lot with Rick's reaction to Sara's story. I've got to admit I was sucked into the hero narrative. I couldn't believe that Sara was taking the risks she was, that her compassion was compelling her to hop in a car with a student whose career was in jeopardy and to take on so much shit head on. Your critical commentaries about "fixing" things and your paralleling these heroics to banking really make me look at the situation differently.

One particular way I've looked at it differently, especially in light of MaryAnn's reaction, is to come to terms with the ways I, in my initial responses to what Sara was telling us, evaded the issues MaryAnn brought up in favor of the hero narrative I saw developing. I commented on Sara's actions, expressed my appreciation for her risks, for the love she was showing her student, for the courage and wisdom she showed in her willingness to take on the shit surrounding her student's pregnancy. But I stood short of endorsing Sara's actions. I know I was protecting myself. I wonder now if I have developed some sort of shit barometer, so to speak, that tells me just what kind of shit I'm willing to take on, challenge, and how much shit I'm willing to take. I don't think this is necessarily a bad barometer to have in my head—but now that I'm in touch with it, I've got to be willing to interrogate it. In some situations, probably in this one, my shit barometer was blocking me from helping Sara sort out this problem, examine her options. I was cheering on the sideline all the while I was protecting my own ass from shit. If I'm going to practice a critical pedagogy, I've got to be suspicious of such moments. As we're learning, there's much more to taking no shit than leaping into it (or watching others do it for you).

## **5. Getting Your Shit Together**

**Sara:** I had "the talk" with my student after class on Wednesday. I explained to her how I could be held liable if anything would happen to her, and I told her how much I'd been affected emotionally by trying to deal with all of this. I told her that as her teacher, I could only go so far down this road with her, and I'd gone as far as I could go.

We did, however, talk a bit about how she could tell her mother. We also talked about her feelings of letting her mother down. Letting her mother down was her greatest fear, the thing she kept stating over and over again. I told her that fact wasn't going to change—she's still going to be here next year. Pregnancy and/or an abortion won't change that. She seemed to have a fear that the university would take away her scholarships if her pregnancy was discovered. I stressed to her that no matter what she did—continue with the pregnancy or terminate the pregnancy—it was none of the university's business, and even if she screamed the news from the rooftops, the university couldn't revoke her financial aid. Once that information sank in, she was really relieved.

Before she left my office, I did two things: I gave her the number for the campus therapy center, and we worked out a plan to give her an incomplete in my class. She needs to talk to someone who is trained to listen; I can't be everything to her, and I think that's what she wanted me to be these past weeks. She needs a support system, not just a support person.

This may sound petty, but I've been sleeping a lot better since we had this conversation. I know I did the right thing by re-establishing some distance between us. I think I

went too far in the other direction and lost sight of the fact that while I had certain responsibilities to my student, I also had responsibilities to myself. And, I think I lost track of what my responsibilities to her really were—informing her of resources, showing her how to acquire information in order to make informed choices, not “fixing” things for her. “Fixing” isn’t critical pedagogy—it’s banking at its worst because it feeds into all of the hero narratives we’ve discussed in class.

**Rick:** It’s funny as to how we tailor our shit for the audience: John and I didn’t want to give you shit for helping your student, perhaps because we would have felt like shit in doing so, so our textual comments to the “audience” were positive. When you were first having doubts about your role with your student, you didn’t include that as part of the “text” because you didn’t want to look like a “shit-giving teacher” to the audience. And yet as each of us critically examined ourselves, we altered our text and included different/additional information for the audience as part of the dialogue. That seems about as dialectical as you can get. One of us comes to a realization concerning some issue related to the/our shit, and the others in turn analyze their shit in light of that revelation. In this sense, I certainly don’t see shit as pejorative, but very much dialectic.

As our dialogue reveals, shit is bounced around, interpreted, reinterpreted, and subject to further investigation. What appears as truth in one phase of the dialectical inquiry is rendered false in the next. Thus, our truths appear not as truths at all, or at

least not absolute truths. Rather, our truths appear as threads, links, vertical and horizontal lines, dots, dashes, dust. Things come into being, change, and pass out of being not as separate, individual units, but in essential relation and interconnection. Therefore, they cannot be understood as separate but only in terms of their relation and interconnection. As we’ve seen in our dialogue, we’re interrelated in the forces of shit. So what power do we really have as individuals over the directional force of shit?

Shit positions us and reshapes us, and as soon as we think it’s us that makes a deci-

“our truths appear as threads, links, vertical and horizontal lines, dots, dashes, dust. Things come into being, change, and pass out of being not as separate, individual units, but in essential relation and interconnection.”

sion, a choice, or exerts control over our own actions, we need only to look aside and observe the shit that shapes our struggles, positions us, and develops us, and potentially determines our thoughts and actions. So where are our truths? How do we see the truth behind shit that is constantly breaking down and reforming, producing quantitative and qualitative changes? What is our role as academics who attempt to form truths? Do we see truths or constant motion—dialectical motion that passes through stages like a pot of boiling water?

**Sara:** How about truths AS constant motion?

**John:** In the context of our studies of the history of rhetoric, you two make me wonder whether there might be a kind of transcendence implied in “shit.” I mean, the realities of factory closings and the personal turmoil that Sara’s student is entering surely mark the deep shit of material reality. But when we decide to call it shit, do we also suggest a world where there is no shit? Calling something “shit,” in other words, can imply hope for a better day, can draw cages around all the clumps of shit we face every day. In this sense, is shit operating critically? On one hand I can see where it can represents a critical view—it dumps on current situations; on the other hand, unless we talk about ways to contend with it, we’re just resting passively on nostalgic hopes that some sort of non-shit state will (again?) gain prominence.

Still, on the other hand (I think this would be my third hand), “shit” can mean essence—not a metaphysical essence but a place, a third space, perhaps, where it’s all at, where it’s all possible. Rick, your description of truth reminds me of Homi Bhabha’s “third space,” which, he says, “constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew . . . [It is] the precondition for the articulation of cultural difference . . . It is in this space that we will find those words with which we can speak of Ourselves and Others” (208-209). When we get to something that says what we mean, when we find ourselves connecting, or even disconnecting, changing, that’s the shit.

**Rick:** This “third space” that Bhabha discusses relieves us of the dualism inherent in Western metaphysics, in which an “Original cause” exists. I don’t think in terms of a time to which we return when there was no shit. I think the way shit operates culturally also implies “good” shit. And whatever is conceived as good shit is conceived in such a way by and for specific cultures or persons in which this particular shit passes for good. Same with us, same with Sara’s student. Our shit differs, intersects, and varies. Shit is good or bad depending on what it is or who it affects.

Our roles as working-class academics are shaped within a different/same sphere of production than the one Marx wrote about. Marx identified a moment in which it might have been possible for the working class to affect revolutionary social change. With the theory of

the dissolution of the capitalist state evolving into communism, Marx was positioned and located in a moment that appeared ripe for revolution and emancipation. The shit was ready to hit the fan! But our moment occurs where the expansion of capitalism positions us differently, changes our cultures and ideologies, and yet also creates new conditions for resistance—or this Third Space to which Bhabha refers. It's anybody's guess as to how the shit will be stirred in such a space, as different cultures intersect, as capitalist technology and expansion re-territorializes peoples and cultures, imposing its values and technology. Both as an academic and a worker, I've remained convinced of the usefulness of Marxist methodology and dialectic materialism, or as Lukas defines it, a "materialist dialectic" that is the "road to truth" and "can be developed, expanded and deepened only along the lines laid down by its founders" (1-2). It's open to criticism, puts theory into practice, but also relies on essentialism and universals ("truth" in method, "truth" in science)—and, as Edward Said demonstrates, dialectic materialism itself is a *Western* philosophy that often clashes with the values of the masses in the East. I still hold Marxist philosophy as a valuable component of my own beliefs. Capitalism will always create antagonism between abstract notions of capital and "real" human beings who constitute labor in some form or another. But I'm also looking at theoretical "truths," in much the same way Barry Allen does, that pass for truth at a particular moment only to be disregarded in the next (4). Shit is uncertainty, and for now, it seems that uncertainty characterizes the shit that's brewing in the Third Space . . .

## 6. Whose Shit Is This?

**Sara:** Endings are always difficult. I'm always a little sad at the end of a term—after spending so much time with students and getting to know so much about them through their writing, suddenly, they're gone. We may never even see each other again. Ending this dialogue is hard, too.

I saw the student I wrote about on our listserv once after that term ended, and fortunately, her story had a "happy ending." She went home and told her mother about her pregnancy, and her mother was extremely supportive. Apparently, her immediate reaction was, "You're not dropping out of school," and she went with her daughter to an abortion clinic. My student also broke up with the boyfriend and turned in all of her work on time; in fact, she even made the Dean's List for that semester. While I was definitely happy for my student, I feel a little uncomfortable with ending this story here, with the good news about my student's academic success. As we discussed on our listserv, I'm afraid this could be read as some sort of hero narrative, which it's definitely not.

Yet I'm also troubled about ending this dialogue here due to the kind of moralizing we got into toward the end of this piece. One of our reviewers noted that it sounded as if we were

devaluing my emotional labor on behalf of this student, and I have to say, I think that is an accurate assessment. At the time of our listserv exchanges, I was a young graduate student and T.A. struggling with how to develop a feminist, critical pedagogy. Given my training as a high school English teacher, I was steeped in the tradition of teaching the “whole student,” giving care not only to students’ academic development, but also their social and emotional development as well. I was acutely aware of the ways in which that care is gendered, however, as it draws on traditional notions of mothering and can reinforce social norms for women. Reading work by Susan Miller and Eileen Schell made me question further the “ethic of care” (to use Schell’s phrase) that dominated my teaching philosophy and practices.

Thus, when I started to feel that I was up to my ears in shit with my student, it was all too easy for me to discount the labor of caring. I plugged that experience into the scripts I was learning as a graduate student: I had allowed myself to get sucked into the hero narrative; I was aiding women’s oppression by practicing a feminist, critical pedagogy based on an ethic of care. I thought I was theoretically and pedagogically naïve—one of the most cutting criticisms an academic can give or receive.

Looking back on this experience now, as a new PhD and assistant professor, I still think I was theoretically and pedagogically naïve, but not for the reasons I articulated above. My naïveté evidenced itself in the ways in which I analyzed this experience, by being so quick to undermine my emotional labor and to force myself into particular scripts that circulate in our field. At the time, it seemed to me that I had to abandon the ethic of care in order to be a “good enough” feminist, critical teacher—a misreading of the scholarship, to be sure, but one that strikes me as typical of graduate students early in their schooling. I established for myself a binary that situated feminist and critical pedagogies on one side (the “good” side), with pedagogies of care on the other.

During the years since this exchange, I’ve learned—and am still learning—how to complicate these scripts and move beyond the reductive binaries I fell into here. I think part of this learning was rooted in my becoming a mother three years ago. After my daughter was born, I reflected more earnestly on women’s work and the devaluation of the caring labor women perform not only as mothers, but also in their work outside the home. This devaluation was even more troubling to me because I felt it coming not only from the dominant culture—where I fully expected it—but also from feminists in the academy. I again began to feel somehow “less” feminist because I esteemed and even enjoyed the labor I did for my daughter. As I struggled with these feelings, I was reminded of my work with this student and the ways in which I undermined and discounted that emotional labor as well. I began to question just how “feminist” or “critical” it was of me—or anyone—to devalue this work that is so often gendered as female. While we can and certainly should critique the ways in which women’s

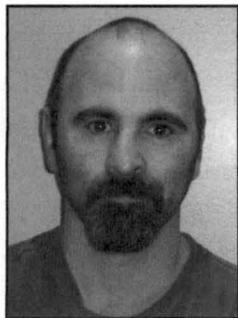


roles are circumscribed, we must also be careful not to reinforce traditional "women's work," such as the labor I did with this student, as somehow necessarily "less than": less theoretically and pedagogically aware, less valuable, and less worthy.

So I'm left wondering if there are ways after all to value and represent the type of emotional labor that my student and I went through here without uncritically reproducing gender norms. I question if what I worked through here really was self-serving hero bullshit alone, or if other shit was mixed in: about gender, about traditional roles, about women's work. Were the three of us on the listserv all sucked into the same narratives in the same way, to the same degree, to the same aim? Who, in the end, was slinging the shit?

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