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Who's Afraid of Toril Moi?: Long Feminist Theory and Raising Student Confidence

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Ironically, I knew we had made progress about ten weeks into a seminar on feminist and gender theory when Leslie slapped the table and lamented, "But . . . don't stupid people need feminism, too?!" Leslie voiced what I had suspected several of her friends were feeling. I heard in that plea "Isn't it hard enough to just *be* feminists without exhausting ourselves with *thinking*?" This group of twelve undergraduates at a Christian liberal arts college were a little tired. They were weary; tired of untangling complex sentences and even more complex arguments; tired of wrapping their heads around new concepts that changed the way they saw the world; tired of presenting their ideas on topics that often touched closer to their hearts than was entirely comfortable; mostly, tired of reading late into the night when most of them were just weeks away from needing full-time jobs, needing independent housing for the first time, finding community away from campus, and facing their student-loan debt. They were even more tired in Spring of 2018 because they had already been evacuated by fires and floods multiple times that school year. Some of them were also feeling the emotional weight of living in a "#metoo moment" when they had seen their fears faced by strong women, and felt the strength of solidarity in feminist commitments mingled with the bitter taste of how long the struggle for women's workplace safety might go on. Even in the privileged surroundings of late afternoon light in the windowed seminar room on

our leafy campus, there was some sense in their skepticism about making time for Judith Butler, or Michel Foucault, or Julia Kristeva, or Gayatri Spivak, or Kimberle Crenshaw.

Along with Leslie, though, they knew they wanted what theory had to offer, and they were coming to realize they had what it takes to engage with those thinkers. These undergraduates had proven their existential need for what they were finding in the theory, and the theory was giving them the confidence to understand how far their intellectual skills could take them in addressing many of their own concerns about life in community, both on campus and in the years after graduation. As argument for feminist-theory's life-skill utility for undergraduates in a culture of increased student anxiety, I offer a case study of students' engagement with Toril Moi's essay "'I am a Woman': The Personal and the Philosophical" in an seminar at a Christian liberal arts college. In the relational-learning ethos of a liberal arts setting, challenging reading may prompt short-term unease in undergraduates, but it also offers a genuine path toward well being.

Twelve junior and senior students enrolled in the seminar, ten women and two men. On our campus of about twelve hundred students, with an English major population of about fifty, our ability to jump right into difficult conversations was helped by how well they already knew each other when we met for the first week--an advantage of a small, liberal arts college environment. All of them were English majors, with second majors or minors in theatre, business, biology, political science, and religious studies. Six of them had been in at least one class with me before; most of them had been in more than one class with each other, including nine who had spent a semester abroad together in the United Kingdom the previous year. It became clear in the second week that their conversations about feminism and gender were spilling over into many of the other spaces where our residential campus brought them together on a daily basis. The majority of the students were staunchly self-identified feminists, leaders in the campus Feminist Society who contributed pieces on gender and feminism to the

campus newspaper and student theater festival. They were not ideologically homogenous, however; about a third of them were in the exploratory stage of feminist understanding and commitments, often unsure of how feminism integrated with their Christian faith.

We met for a three-hour session late every Wednesday afternoon. I designed the course with the hope that students would be able to speak across any differences by grounding discussion in the theorist they were reading for each session. My own reservations about an undergraduate theory course grew from my concerns that the specialized vocabulary might tempt students into more cleverness than wisdom. My aspirations were for them to understand the reading in ways they could translate into conversations with their friends and family who had not encountered feminist theory. The syllabus included one or two essays each week, with a heavy focus on second-wave feminists (including Gayle Rubin, Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Mohanty, the French feminists, bell hooks, Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, Donna Haraway), also including critical-race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw, queer/gender theorists Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Michael Cobb, with a week on feminist theologian Sarah Coakley. Montecito's natural disasters that semester disrupted our face-to-face conversations twice while students were evacuated, and we carried on over the campus electronic discussion forum. One of those disruptions happened in the first week of class, so they watched Chimimanda Ngochie Adichie's TED Talk "Why We Should All Be Feminists," and posted responses to the forum. While Adichie's compelling arguments are not theory, students' initial comments to her talk left me hopeful that we would bridge the gap between their lived concerns and the abstract concepts of the weekly reading. When we were evacuated again later in the semester, you can imagine my delight when they opted to meet in small discussion groups they could gather in evacuation areas to read materialist feminism together and to post collective responses to our electronic forum.

During sessions when we met normally on campus, I would provide twenty to thirty minutes of context for that week's reading, and then two student discussion leaders would present an outline of the theorist's argument with questions to engage the other participants with the details of that theorist's contributions to feminism or gender studies. We worked diligently in the early portion of a session to stay with reading comprehension before we moved on to more general explorations of the theorist's application to current events or their lives. For the second half of the seminar, each student came prepared with one discussion question that they knew they might be called on to contribute. Those questions often connected the reading to their experience on campus, in the church, with their friends, or with the larger culture where they found themselves negotiating patriarchal habits and structures.[1] As likely, though, the questions were attentive investigations of meaning, or efforts to put the theorist of the week in conversation with someone we had read earlier. Some of my most encouraging teaching of this highly encouraging seminar happened in the office-hour sessions before class when I would meet with presenters and listen in on their conversations about the week's reading and watch them finish their presentation plans, occasionally offering context or clarification. In my office, the three of us would wrestle out their questions about the legal specificity of Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality or what the implications are for Rubin of unpaid labor. For the most part, in those preliminary sessions I watched them clarifying passages for their discussion partners and becoming articulate and confident presenters of complicated intellectual arguments.

In week thirteen (about two weeks after Leslie's lament), we turned our attention to Toril Moi. A little more than ten years after Moi's pithy, ground-breaking text in feminist literary criticism *Sexual/Textual Politics*, she published "I am a Woman: The Personal and the Philosophical," her theory of "the personal," a phenomena she describes as both central to and highly divisive for late twentieth-century feminism. Moi

[1] See the appendix for a sample of discussion questions for the week we read Toril Moi.

stays clear of grounding her thinking in autobiography, but she does build the theory from her inability to understand her valued colleague Jane Tompkins' essay "Me and My Shadow," which claims that men and women ought to avoid writing theory because it is a 'patriarchal gesture' (121). Moi narrates her deepened perplexity with Tompkins' charge that theorists' silence female experience because Moi herself had been so emotionally energized and intellectually strengthened by her early encounter with the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's theoretical work. Moi could not understand how an academic friend like Tompkins could seem so dismissive of the ideas Moi personally loved. That misunderstanding led to a long spell of tension in the colleagues' relationship and to Moi's existential and intellectual need for a clearer articulation of what theorists can productively mean by "the personal."

> Moi outlines her theoretical project in disarmingly fervent terms:
>
> This essay is an attempt to think through the relationship between the personal (subjectivity) and theory. I *hope* that this investigation *will help me to find a way* to write theory *without neglecting or repressing* the claims of the personal, the local, and the specific, but also *without dismissing* or *diminishing* the claims of the impersonal, the objective, and the universal (122). [emphasis added][2]

In stating her "hope" and her desire for "help" in finding a middle way through one of the central theoretical controversies that have defined her career and her friendships, Moi makes an early move in a series of moves that demonstrate her commitment to using her intellectual gifts to ease the anxieties of her personal life and her psychological states. Equally, resistance to "dismissing" and "diminishing" the work of others marks her investment in sustaining not only ideas but also the integrity of her relationships with people. These commitments sustain her as she explicitly identifies conflicting meanings of "personal" at work in some arguments against theory as not only

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[2] In "Some Concluding Thoughts," Moi returns to the last portion of this sentence verbatim before making her final claims about subjectivity.

patriarchal, but also disdainful to feminine voices (131). After engaging several contemporary thinkers, and reading Simone de Beauvoir closely for several pages, Moi comes to a clear conclusion about anxiety over theory:

> The worry is that by speaking or writing theoretically, I will falsely subsume the point of view of others under my own. In the frequent expression of this anxiety I hear a recurring fantasy: the fantasy of being able to speak in a way that would genuinely be all-inclusive (249)

Bringing together her final thoughts, Moi speaks directly to the anxieties I was beginning to hear in my students about whether or not they had a right to voice their ideas, or whether that voice would always be somehow silencing, or inconveniencing, or disturbing some other. How, in short, did they presume to insert themselves into any important dialogue? Her final paragraph makes the modest but inspiring political claim that she can spend her "life feeling guilty about having more opportunities to express" herself than her primary-school-educated mother did, or she can find "the courage to write about things that matter . . . in the hope that they will also matter to others" (250). The personal for Moi is not the individualistic, but the engaged--engaged both in the concrete details of the intellectual task and in the awareness of the presence of her readers.

While returning to explorations of postmodern identity theory, that's to say, Moi both calls for and models a personal engagement that drew my undergraduates into her careful and highly theoretical arguments. Importantly for this undergraduate seminar, as Moi explores "the personal," she also rehearses many of the central theories of second-wave feminism and twentieth-century philosophy. As our seminar worked through Moi's engagement with others' words, students began to realize how much more they knew than they had in week one about female identity, feminist thought, conflicts under patriarchy, theoretical constructs, and the history of ideas. They were reaching that understanding in part because Moi writes with a clarity that eludes some

theorists, but also because they had gained a familiarity with the material that helped them to navigate her arguments. They had spent three months working with concrete instances of theory around a table of people they respected, and their efforts were paying off collectively.

From her point of disagreement with a much respected colleague, Moi is adamant that a claim to theory never excuses "off putting obscurity," but equally adamant that a heavy reliance on personal example as deeply isolates a feminist in her own small experience as would the most jargon-riddled essay intended for a wider audience. While lauding the resistance to arrogance and oppressiveness that a critical turn toward personal voices often attempts to undo, Moi incisively responds to claims of feminists represented by Nancy Miller who advocates for "unveiling her own lack of mastery in class" (151). As Moi sees it, those gestures toward humility, while well meaning, frequently leave students without clear models or paths for finding a way past their own limits in answering their genuine questions, let alone questions about a text or a social phenomenon (151). As Leslie's lament had prompted us to talk about earlier, hiding behind jargon is an unethical (and ineffective) approach to engaging someone who resists an argument grounded on identity. Leslie and her intelligent friends were also beginning to appreciate how few people really do lack intelligence as much as they might lack desire or energy for theoretical claims. They were also beginning to see how equally futile it is to hide behind false claims for ignorance or speechlessness when those same arguments call for deeply thoughtful responses. Along with Moi, students became more ready to assent to the claim that "systematic thought" need not be "the enemy of emotion" (128) or the opponent of the causes of justice and mercy. They were beginning to see the life of the mind they engaged on campus, in other words, as a tremendous emotional and political asset.

Moi's long chapter goes directly to their concerns about campus experiences speaking from a position (141) as females or feminists, even when they were not yet all

entirely comfortable describing themselves as feminists. The female students had sufficient collective experience with the campus public forum to be able to recount particular situations when they knew that someone had failed to take them seriously because of their gender; and both of the men in the seminar were always ready to confirm those anecdotes from their own experiences. Simultaneous with their frustration about being silenced for speaking as females, they sometimes voiced the anxiety that their speech would silence or offend, or unjustly characterize others even when they were speaking as feminists. At this point in the semester their anxieties about their own privilege were also coming to the surface. How could they speak as feminists when so many other females lacked the privileges they enjoyed as educated, middle-class Americans?

In many ways, Moi's essay is luxurious. She takes the page length she needs to develop clear responses. Her most marked instance of engagement is the seventy pages she dedicates to a close reading of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex.* She also includes attentive engagements with lesser know theorists such as to Linda Alcoff on the position of the speaker (141-146) and of Cora Diamond on personal and impersonal knowledge (156-159). Throughout the one hundred-and-thirty-page chapter, she repeatedly cites not only Jane Tompkins who inspires her dive into "the personal," but also Judith Butler (144), Luce Irigaray (144), J. L. Austin (146), and Stanley Cavell (*passim*). She makes clarifying statements with technical precision, such as a footnote that points "to the core of the difference between a Wittenstinian and a Derridean account of language" (n146), but no student felt the need to charge her with "name dropping" as they had with several earlier theorists. Moi earned their respectful attentiveness as readers. In another section, Moi surveys several contributions in a 1996 *PMLA* special issue on "the Place of the Personal in Scholarship" (148-49), but despite that article appearing in the oldest students' infancy, they didn't respond to Moi as if she were blinkered without the benefit of more recent third-wave feminists, as they had done with some other second-

wave theorists. They heard her speaking to them, personally, even as she interrogated the meaning and the importance of the idea of the personal. They even began to raise questions about what it meant to expect crystalline prose from Toril Moi at her stage of the profession, as opposed to demanding the same polish from Margery Hennessey, a materialist feminist who was at the tenure stage when she wrote the chapter we read. "I am a Woman" took Moi eleven years from initial questions formed by reading the work of her friend Jane Tompkins to publication (246), and those were eleven years in the life of an endowed chair, with resources for productive reflection that many can't imagine. Moi makes no effort to hide her privilege of time for thought. Like other students (and, I hasten to add, faculty) my seminar students don't usually feel that privilege, but they began that week to see how they might enjoy it in comparison to many others.

They also got some glimpses of how time passes in long durations, not just in hours of a day, or days of a week, or semesters of a college career. Crucially, Moi demonstrated for them the extended view to life's urgent questions, and what it might mean to hang in there with questions for a decade or more. Of course, she also demonstrates the hope of that long duration in examples and asides throughout the essay that testify to her on-going life: in the midst of serious work and questions, one keeps one's friends, continues to enjoy reading, holds down a job, and occasionally finds time for a yoga class. Not all is perfect in that life, as Moi makes clear with gestures like a footnote when she discussing conflict to a "private conversation" with her even more academically famous former spouse (n158). Learning, maintaining relationships, exploring problems, Moi models, all happen over extended time and in the midst of living life. Her work in the personal and the philosophical marks a distinction between the important and the immediate. Like many undergraduates (and most at liberal arts colleges), while they know too well what it means to live with the anxiety of the urgent, my seminar participants simply because of their youth had less life experience with the long-running significant questions that demand repeated thought and rethinking. Moi

makes no effort to hide her long struggle with "the personal," and that authenticity of intellectual engagement is a valuable model for younger minds. Moi makes it readily clear that their coursework can give them models in dealing with conflict, or with discomfort. Moi also represents the possibility that one can go on and experience other moments of success while this anxiety lingers. Coursework, she showed them, has tools for coping with the anxiety about their real lives while they're learning.

Moi's essay models for students how to live in what they might call the struggle--the struggle for identity, for community, for stability. That struggle will confront female students and students of color in different--and often deeper--ways than it will confront white male students, and Moi never hides from that injustice. She also makes clear that they will need all the tools they can collect to face those challenges well, and to endure the longest lasting challenges. Moi's work and life affirm that intellectual skills take a prominent place in that toolkit for well being. We can extrapolate from Moi to claim that lowering intellectual standards will not decrease student anxiety. One of the many benefits of reading her work is the confidence it gives students that they have the intellectual capacities that will help them toward well being, not only for the end of the semester, or the end of their college career, but more importantly, for the long haul of their personal lives. When they, or anyone they care about, is treated unjustly because of their gender, these students can move well beyond the first step in a discussion about gender justice. They've also engaged in conversations that help them see that their sense of gender injustice does not put them in conflict with the faith they hold dear, even when it might but them in conflict with some who share that faith. Their competence, in other words, builds their confidence. And they have models, and language, and listening skills for the conversations when conflicts arise.

Works Cited

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Appendix

Student Discussion Questions for Toril Moi

Moi talks a lot about the way feminists put things in black and white, specifically "impersonal = good, the personal = bad" or the other way around (167). Recently male feminist friends have been talking about how they feel shut our from feminist conversations no matter how hard they try--they aren't given the chance to learn and listen because they're "bad men." In a movement so opposed to gender roles and binaries where does this black and white dichotomy come from? How do we go about complicating our understanding? --Leslie

Moi says that "to ask for 'transparent language' then, is to ask language to efface itself as a living, material structure" (135). Can 'transparent' language ever really not be a living material structure? Perhaps I'm misunderstanding, but I think any language carries with it connotations and meaning simply by being language. Is this true? --Kasey

Moi talks about and to some degree refutes the criticism of writing as exclusionary, saying that guilt over exclusionism should not stop people from writing because the real point is what you intend to do by writing (249-250). While I agree that getting bogged down in guilt and giving up is pointless and unproductive, is there a way of finding a balance between feeling too guilty and becoming too arrogant? Does it just take being aware of your opportunities to make up for your privilege? --Hannah

On page 53, Moi attempts to tease out some of the problems with language, suggesting that to use clarity and precision to express a difficult topic would not necessarily simplify the thought or make it any less meaningful than it is. How might Cixous and Irigaray who write about writing the female body respond to this lien of reasoning? How does that conversation deal with the debate over whether or not theory is inherently exclusionary of women? --Karly

Moi references Linda Alcoff's quote concerning the fixed mindset placed on others when one "reduces evaluation to a political assessment of the speaker's location" (143). Is sound judgment the only way to refrain from doing this? What does this look like? Also is it not necessary to point out how one's location has led them to make certain decisions or say certain things if those lead to systemic patterns of injustice? Or, is it only possible to avoid this type of *ad feminam/hominum* by not questioning another's location?--Caleb

Moi draws attention to Beauvoir's statement "I did not think of myself as a 'woman': I was me" (215-16). Where/how do we see this in our own society (such as having to point out that a professor or doctor is female)? What might it take to change this? *Or* Moi discusses the binary opposition between the personal and theory (147), and how the personal is always seen as emotional and theory seen as objective. Why can't theory involve experience if it makes the theory more relevant to the world? Is this just another strike against 'the binary'? --Jessica

In what ways have we in this class fallen victims to "the straightjacket of binary oppositions" (167)? What positions or alternatives have we failed to consider? Have we skewed closer to the personal or the impersonal? Are certain theorists we've read trapped in the objective or the personal? -- Olivia