

CRITICAL THEORY: A BRIEF GUIDE¹

Devin M. Garofalo
Assistant Professor of English
University of North Texas
devin.garofalo@unt.edu

What is Critical Theory?

Theory is a working through of epistemological challenges—a working through of questions, concepts, and problems with real, critical, material purchase.² Theory does not purposefully (over-)complicate or needlessly obfuscate. It is not confusion masquerading as understanding.³ But, it can sometimes feel this way! When you're frustrated, remember: theory is not here to confuse, or stump, or constrain you. It isn't here to make you feel stupid, or to tell you how much you don't know, or to make you feel like an imposter. It isn't a gatekeeper.⁴

So, what *is* critical theory, then? It's a lens, an aperture, a portal through which to think old thoughts in necessarily new ways or to think things which are altogether new, to reimagine extant worlds and to build new ones. Theory doesn't tell you what you already know. It doesn't follow the patterns of thought or argumentation or expression with which you are most familiar—which can restrain as much as facilitate thought and expression. What theory does instead is establish new ideational patterns. It does so in order to defamiliarize (self-)knowledge and (self-)expression, metamorphosing them so that you might see and articulate the world anew. Theory affords strange, transfigurative, potentially radical languages for communication and for confabulation—for the collective work of thinking and imagining and making *alongside* and *with* each other.⁵ Theory breaks the rules of syntax, logic, genre, and form so as to refashion those rules and, when necessary, to banish them altogether. Theory is, in this sense, a kind of poetry.

How Should We Read Critical Theory?

The following are good rules of thumb:

1. *Don't forget to close read.* Theory, like literature, requires interpretation.⁶ As an English major, you're already equipped with an incredible analytical skill set, so use it! Notice as much as you can and annotate your text. Attend to the different directions in which single words lean. Identify key terms and concepts, and try to define them as best you can. Practice thinking across part and whole. Ask yourself the following: if you were to summarize the argument or conceptual contribution of the theory you're reading, how would you do so? If you were asked to relate a particular paragraph to that argument—to articulate how one paragraph advances or unfolds the text's overarching line(s) of thought—what would you say?⁷
2. *Be agitated.* Theory is hard. Theory makes you work for it—it demands active reading and intense engagement. But the challenges of theory are also its rewards. Know that your agitation is valid. Know that you are not alone. If you are agitated, you are doing it right (whereas if you think you understand

¹ Teaching, like research, is collective work. I cite those who helped me create this handout in an effort to make visible one of the many collectives to whom I am indebted. Over the course of this semester, we'll create a collective of our own, learning from one another and flourishing together.

² Aaron Hanlon, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Colby College (Waterville, Maine).

³ Sarah Dowling, Assistant Professor, Centre for Comparative Literature and Victoria College, University of Toronto. Sarah also helped me articulate the ways theory is akin to (or perhaps a type of) poetry—an idea central to the aims and provocations of this course.

⁴ Melissa Gustin, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Henry Moore Institute (Leeds, UK).

⁵ I think here of Donna Haraway's writing about confabulation and rule-breaking and world-making in *Staying with the Trouble* (Duke University Press, 2016). We will read portions of this text in a few weeks.

⁶ Kyle Grimes, Professor of English, University of Alabama-Birmingham. I am also grateful to Kyle for reminding me to emphasize that there are no "true" readings, that "all readings rest on some theory," that multiple readings are possible and, indeed, necessary.

⁷ I think here of Alexander von Humboldt's interweaving of the particular and the universal—his account of the universal as burgeoning and blossoming with the particular—in *Cosmos* (1845-62). Literature, like theory, theorizes.

everything—or if you have no questions—you’re almost certainly doing it wrong). If you are agitated, you are going places. Remember: agitation is *transitive*—it’s an active state of being, a making, a working *through* and *toward* and *for* something (even if you don’t yet know what that something is!). Agitation is inevitable and it doesn’t always feel good. But it is also a vehicle, a drive, a mechanism for conceptual action. So, let yourself be agitated. Theory should get under your skin. It should fester and gnaw at and unsettle you. Those vexations you feel are ideas in formation.⁸

3. *Don’t give up.* Don’t let agitation get the better of you! Don’t stop reading! If you don’t recognize a term, that’s okay! Think of that term as a new lead—a call to further inquiry, a provocation to learn something new.⁹ If you don’t follow a particular line of discussion, don’t worry—this happens to every reader of critical theory! Work slowly through what you’re reading, focus on what you understand, and identify (and make notes about) the things you don’t. Approach critical theory like you would a lyric poem¹⁰ (the two have a lot in common!): read and re-read and re-read again (the more times you read something, the more you’ll notice and understand—as with poetry, you never read the same work of theory twice); attend to and preserve and embrace ambiguity (the things we don’t understand often become the things about and with which we are most excited to think—like any other type of text, theory gets most interesting where it gets weird and wild); ask lots of questions for further inquiry; and be kind to yourself—don’t beat yourself up.
4. *Get some friends.*¹¹ There is a reason we’re in this seminar together: the best way to read theory (or any text, for that matter) is alongside and with others. They will almost certainly be fascinated and confused by some of the same things as you. Their interpretations of theory will also be different from yours and that’s a good thing, because there is much to learn from those differences! By engaging conceptual multiplicity, you refine and rework and reimagine your ways of thinking. To cultivate discussion, brainstorm questions about both the things you know or think you understand and the things you don’t. Make your questions as straightforward and jargon-free as possible; ensure they are open-ended (as opposed to inviting “yes” or “no” answers); make them accessible (i.e. not dependent upon context or knowledge unfamiliar to your interlocutors); make them specific as opposed to vague—be as precise as possible, and tie your questions to relevant passages which afford something to grab onto as you and your interlocutors seek answers.¹²

Why Do We Need Critical Theory? What’s it For?

Imagine critical theory as a point of departure for *your* ideas, *your* voice, *your* inquiries. Envision it as a launchpad for jumpstarting, or expanding, or deepening, or specifying the questions, concepts, and problems central to your research. Theory should assist you as a thinker, not transform you into a cypher. In other words, theory should afford avenues for opening up (as opposed to dictating) your thinking.¹³ Don’t “apply” theory as though it were a prefabricated box—a rigid, pre-determined, mechanistic system of thought to which your own ideas

⁸ Thank you to Tobias Menely (Associate Professor, Department of English, University of California-Davis) for citing W. J. T. Mitchell’s interview with Homi Bhabha published in *Artforum* (1995) on this point: “the more difficult bits of my work are in many cases the places where I am trying to think hardest, and in a futuristic kind of way.” I also think here of William Blake: Romantic poet, theorist in verse, and unapologetic agitator. And of Steven Goldsmith’s brilliant account what it means to think conceptually and critically—to open oneself to ideas, to let them irritate and vex and incite you to things unexpected—in *Blake’s Agitation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). We will sadly not read this work together, because there is always too much to read and to think.

⁹ Kris Cohen, Associate Professor of Art History & Humanities, Reed College (Portland, Oregon).

¹⁰ Thank you, again, to Sarah Dowling. See also Barbara Johnson’s *Persons and Things* (Harvard University Press, 2008)—you’ll read some of this gorgeous book in a few weeks.

¹¹ Many friends—some of whom I know personally and others of whom I know only virtually, some of whom I’ve cited and too many of whom I have not—contributed in various ways, direct and indirect, to the making of this handout.

¹² Kyla Wazana Tompkins (Associate Professor of English and Gender and Women’s Studies, Pomona College, Claremont, California), “We Aren’t Here to Learn What We Already Know,” *Avidly* (13 September 2016). I am grateful to Mary Mullen, Assistant Professor of English at Villanova University (Pennsylvania), for pointing me to this resource.

¹³ Sandro Eich, MA student in English and Comparative Literature, University of Cologne (Germany).

must conform and which should replace your ideas altogether.¹⁴ Instead, think of it as a ground, a foundation, a terra upon which to *create* new readings, new concepts, new ways of knowing and imagining.

Don't limit yourself to mere application—don't think of theory as something you “apply” or of literature as a mirror that reflects the stuff of theory back to us unchanged. Theory “i[s] not makeup.”¹⁵ It is not artifice: you're not dressing up your ideas or playing a silly game of conceptual smoke and mirrors. And your task is not to find *the* “right” answer—to locate the definitively correct interpretation of a given theory—so that you might then show your reader how a piece of literature passively mirrors or “proves” that theory to be true. Theory, like literature, invites a plurality of interpretations. Your task, then, is twofold: (1) *analyze* theory as you would any piece of literature, exploring its convictions and ambiguities, possibilities and limitations; and (2) *explore* those possibilities and limitations, whether in and of themselves or as they take dynamic shape in conversation with a specific piece or body of literature. Keep in mind that theory and literature do not always agree. Don't force them into similitude. *Do* focus on identifying *conceptual crossovers* or *ideational constellations* that take shape between and across theory and literature, but also remember to preserve and treasure the disagreements between the two (for those disagreements almost always open onto new directions for your thinking). Keep in mind, too, that the relationship between theory and literature is not unidirectional. *Do* ask what possibilities theory makes available for your readings of literature, but also explore how literature might help us better understand theory. Don't forget, in other words, that literature constitutes its own kind of theory, that it too theorizes. Let theory and literature theorize together.

Remember that theory isn't here to tell you what to think—it's here for you to think *with* and *through* and *beyond*. Theory isn't here to keep you *here*—it's here to help you get *over there*. Theory isn't here to alienate you—it is here to make possible collective thought and work (indeed, it is the product of such work).¹⁶ Theory is not here to help you decipher authorial intent, or to make literal connections, or to box you into “schools” to which you must wholesale subscribe.¹⁷ Understanding those “schools” or fields—understanding the genealogies of (your) ideas, where they come from and why, is important—but what theory is really good for is helping you go rogue: it's here to help you think *across* fields and to interweave genealogies, to bring together ideas and methodologies that might otherwise never converse (or that some say should not be permitted to converse!). Theory is here, in other words, to facilitate renegade *conceptual* inquiry—to explore *questions* and *problems* that concern or cut across seemingly disparate fields of study, and which are best thought between and outside the lines of nation, periodization, and discipline.¹⁸ Theory isn't meant to be read in isolation—it's meant to be read with others. Theory's precondition is conversation: it is shot through with broader constellations of thinkers and thoughts, with shimmers of intimacy and friction and difference. Theory is here to offer you a way into those constellations, to help you identify familiars in thought, to undertake the challenges of *working through*, to make visible new and potentially transformative avenues for *speculation* and *imagination*.

Theory is, in short, an invitation.

¹⁴ Michelle Dougherty, PhD in English from Marquette University and English Instructor at Ohio Dominican University (Columbus).

¹⁵ Manu Samriti Chander, Associate Professor of English, Rutgers University-Newark. I am also grateful to Manu for reminding me that readers must acclimate to theory—that it takes time to “ge[t] one's bearings” and that frustration is an inevitable but ultimately rewarding part of that process.

¹⁶ This very handout is a collective effort: it would not exist without the many scholars cited here. I am indebted to the V21 Collective, who helped me solicit ideas for this handout on Twitter and whose name emphasizes the very kind of collectivity which is *the* precondition of conceptual inquiry. I am also grateful to those who re-tweeted the V21 Collective's re-tweet—I cannot name them all here, but I thank them as well for the many generous responses received. When we learn from one another, we flourish together.

¹⁷ Anna Kornbluh, Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Illinois-Chicago and Jeffrey R. Villines, PhD in English from the University of Houston and English Instructor, Houston Community College.

¹⁸ Alan Liu via Matthew Hannah, Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities, Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana).