watery blue eyes”; “flabby cheeks” / “pink face.” The interest in intertextuality, we finally concluded, is not, as it may at first seem, in what looks like copying, but in shared use of material.

And it is with this thought in mind that the exercise could be developed or adapted to help students think about genre (revenge tragedy, the epic, the western, the sentimental romance); about the way individual texts can talk to each other across genres; about many of the basic building blocks of character and narrative. You can use the exercise to teach plot or theme or character or language, depending on your needs and interests. You can even use it to teach style (most style exercises focus on stylistic differences between writers; this one plays on their unexpected harmonies). But in each case the point is to put together one or more texts and invite students to take them apart and wonder why the job is so easy or so difficult. And then, with practice, you can ask them to make their own collations from texts they have read for the course.

Is It in Your Body?

*Kathryn Bond Stockton*

An exercise in recall that helps students think about how—and why—texts get “inside” us.

**Genre:** fiction  
**Course Level:** intermediate or advanced  
**Student Difficulty:** moderate or hard  
**Teacher Preparation:** low  
**Class Size:** any  
**Semester Time:** any  
**Writing Component:** in class  
**Close Reading:** medium  
**Estimated Time:** 50 to 60 minutes

**EXERCISE**

Assign a ten- to twenty-page scene from a novel for students to read outside of class. Choose something juicy, even upsetting. Make sure it is rich in detail and word choice. Ideally, it should be interpretively dense—for
example, the scene from Jean Genet’s *Querelle* in which the sailor Querelle murders Vic, or the scene in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* where Humbert has a wiggling Lolita in his lap. Passages less salacious but lush include the protagonist’s drug-dream scene in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* or the emotional “shipwreck” scene between Dorothea and Rosamond in George Eliot’s monumental *Middlemarch*. Instruct the students, when you assign the passage, to expect an in-class written exercise that will require them to have read carefully.

When class convenes, divide students into groups of three or four. Ask each group, with their books closed, to record on paper as many details as the students can remember about the scene they’ve read. (Have one student serve as group recorder.) Tell them first to list only the words or phrases they recall verbatim. Then have them sequence the general happenings and features (dialogue, descriptions, and so on) of the scene, using the left-hand part of the paper for verbatim details and the right-hand part for sequencing and summarizing. Allow about twenty minutes for the students to work in their groups. State the time limit. You want to convey a bit of excitement, even urgency, but also allow for the students’ thoughtfulness.

In the next twenty minutes, assign two scribes to each side of the board at the front of the room (chalkboard or whiteboard). Call on each group in turn to offer a single detail or a happening, the student-scribes writing these on the board: verbatim details on the left, paraphrase/summation on the right. The point is to get a snapshot of how much text and what of the text students have internalized. Ideally, the groups keep adding details one at a time, until all their details appear on the board. (This part of the exercise can also be shortened or even skipped; it’s fun to compare different groups’ recall but not required for the lesson’s overall force and effect.)

Once the students have established how much of the text is “in” their bodies, invite the class to reflect on these results: To what extent did groups (and individuals in groups) recall the same details or features from the scene? For details recalled in common (which ones?), what is the reason: Shock value? Salaciousness? Beauty? Repugnance? Unusual word choice? (Un)familiar concept? Do we as readers all have the same novel in us while discussing it? Is the novel functionally reducible, then, to the bundle of words and summations we extract from it and carry in our bodies? Why or why not? Wind up the conversation by encompassing the work students and their teachers perform in the classroom. Is our differential recall a problem for proffering interpretations or readings—in short, for doing literary criticism? How or how not?
REFLECTIONS

Students have serious fun with this text-in-the-body experiment. With the right passage, they’re intrigued to think deeply about why certain details got inside them and then remained verbatim or became altered or just petered out. As you can imagine, most undergraduates have never thought of words having penetrative force—and never thought of readers having different novels “in” them after they’ve read the exact same text.

For example, in my class Theories of Gender and Sexuality, I taught *Lolita* and had a riotous but truly illuminating time with this exercise. I assigned the famous lap scene, along with short chapters that precede and follow it (chapters 12–14, nine pages total). Images commonly recalled verbatim: “Eden-red apple” (with a few students adding from memory the critical adjective “banal” that Humbert attaches to this phrase), “hidden tumor” and “gagged, bursting beast” (phrases describing Humbert’s erection), “tactile correspondence” (euphemism for his penis being rubbed by her monkeyish movements in his lap), “innocent cotton frock” (indicating innocence attributed to Lolita’s dress, not to her), “safely solipsized” (for Humbert’s confidence that he’s preserved her innocence), “Turk” and “slave” (Humbert’s tumescent sense of their positions), “bruise. . . on thigh,” “huge hairy hand,” “thumb. . . reaching. . . groin,” “giggling child,” “shrill voice,” “squirmed,” “crushed against buttock. . . throb,” “man or monster,” “[her] cheeks aflame, hair awry,” “Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing!” (all from the crucial sequence leading to Humbert’s climax).

Who does what to whom and to what effect (Is Lolita aroused by Humbert’s “beast”? Does she, too, ecstatically arrive?) caused intense debate—and laughter—demonstrating how much hangs on what of the text gets “in” us. Many students sheepishly admitted that they wanted to commit to memory this “beautiful” passage, despite their being repulsed by its content. Given what students did and didn’t memorize, even in the face of enormous effort, we as a class decided that the passage positions the reader as both attracted pedophile and distracted child. That is to say, like Humbert, we ourselves experience a strange attraction that time will erode—our attraction to the very words on the page (dense, lyrical, rhythmic, funny, euphemistically fresh, and clearly antinormative)—and these words distract us (much as Humbert tries to distract Lolita with his Carmen ditty) from the bewildering goal being sought. We were left wondering which and how many of these words would still be in us at semester’s end.

For a greater challenge in a more advanced class, especially in a literary theory class, launch this exercise after you have taught Ferdinand de Saussure’s concept of the sign from his treatise *Course in General Linguistics*, Jacques Derrida’s notions of difference and deferral, or even Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” (which views the reader as the text’s
“destination”). The exercise helps to show and explore the materiality of the signifier. In my class, our discussions kept turning back, for example, to the sound of the words, to their rhythmic flow. In some instances, the signifier’s satisfying sound (“plop,” “safely solipsized,” “gagged, bursting beast”) aided students’ recall. But we also noticed that certain sentences were so precise and dense that we were defeated in committing them to memory, despite our intense desire to do so (“Lola, the bobby-soxer, devouring her immemorial fruit, singing through its juice, losing her slipper, rubbing the heel of her slipperless foot in its sloppy anklet”), making us like Humbert, who can’t keep hold of what he has only momentarily possessed. In addition, you can illustrate how the text inside us (only ever partially there, due to its tendency to drain from us) contributes to meanings being plural and partial but not subjective in the way many students think the text can mean anything they think or say it does. Of course, you don’t need Saussure or Derrida to make such points. You can simply use the exercise itself to stage these questions in ordinary discourse any undergraduate is bound to understand.

Mapmaker

Kenyon Gradert

A cartographic adventure that helps students visualize plot, themes, and literary place.

Genre: fiction
Course Level: any
Student Difficulty: easy
Teacher Preparation: low
Class Size: small to medium
Semester Time: any
Writing Component: none
Close Reading: medium to high
Estimated Time: 50 minutes

EXERCISE

Choose any extended work of fiction that has a strong element of place. After your students have read the entire work, spend a final discussion day in class by collectively drawing and annotating a map. Begin by drawing a giant rectangle