

Redefining America: Literature, Multiculturalism, Pedagogy

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In *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), bell hooks tries to stake out some middle ground on the issue of whether or not a teacher's identity ideally ought to correspond to the "identity" of a given subject or text. She writes,

Though opposed to any essentialist practice that constructs identity in a monolithic, exclusionary way, I do not want to relinquish the power of experience as a standpoint on which to base analysis or formulate theory. For example, I am disturbed when all the courses on black history or literature at some colleges and universities are taught solely by white people, not because I think that they cannot know these realities but that they know them differently. Truthfully, if I had been given the opportunity to study African American critical thought from a progressive black professor instead of the progressive white woman with whom I studied as a first-year student, I would have chosen the black person. Although I learned a great deal from this white woman professor, I sincerely believe that I would have learned even more from a progressive black professor, because this individual would have brought to the class that unique mixture of experiential and analytical ways of knowing—that is, a privileged standpoint. It cannot be acquired through books or even distanced observation and study of a particular reality. To me this privileged standpoint does not emerge from the "authority of experience" but rather from the passion of experience, the passion of remembrance.¹

I have quoted this passage at length because hooks is very careful here to explain her position: she acknowledges that white professors can successfully teach black history or literature if they do their homework (through books, observation, study), but she also asserts that the ideal situation is for black professors to teach black history and literature to black students. I think most of us would agree with hooks that the position of white scholars and black scholars regarding this subject matter is necessarily different: most black scholars probably do have a kind of engagement, a personal passion for the subject matter that would give them the "privileged standpoint" that hooks speaks of.

Looking more closely at hooks's wording here, though, I think it is important to note some significant qualifications in her remarks. First of all, she describes the ideal teacher as "*a progressive black professor*" (emphasis added), subtly recognizing that racial identity does not ensure that an individual black professor will be politically progressive.² The question might arise, then, of how to judge between a conservative black professor and a progressive white professor: who would be the ideal teacher in this pairing? Also, hooks's argument hinges on who would be the ideal teacher for black students, such as herself, which raises related questions: if all or most of the students are white, is the ideal teacher still someone who is black? Or what should be the case if the students and teacher are black but the subject matter is literature written by whites? Furthermore, hooks's remarks assume that in most universities there is only one person who specializes in black literature or history, which means that the identity and engagement of the professor teaching the subject matter become even more crucial. But an even more ideal situation, to my mind at least, is a university setting that allows for more than one professor to be invested in black literature or history so that white and black students could be exposed to analyses of race (gender, class, and so on) from more than one perspective, so that race does not come to be seen as the responsibility of blacks alone.

The separatism that seems inevitably inherent in the arguments for

identity politics troubles me. While I agree with hooks that every university ought to have black faculty members who work on black sociology, history, literature, and so forth, and I remain adamantly committed to the need for institutional safeguards concerning the hiring, retention, and promotion of minority faculty,³ I am also suspicious of recent policing strategies designed to discourage white scholars from teaching or publishing on African American literature.⁴ The concern of black feminists regarding the co-optation of black women's literature is understandable and necessary. hooks argues for working toward a space of sisterhood between white and black women, while also noting that "[i]t seems at times as though white feminists working in the academy have appropriated discussions of race and racism." Specifically, hooks finds objectionable the fact that a focus on race almost always means a focus on *blackness* and not a focus on *whiteness*:

Curiously, most white women writing feminist theory that looks at "difference" and "diversity" do not make white women's lives, works, and experiences the subject of their analysis of "race," but rather focus on black women or women of color. White women who have yet to get a critical handle on the meaning of "whiteness" in their lives, the representation of whiteness in their literature or the white supremacy that shapes their social status are now explicating blackness without critically questioning whether their work emerges from an aware anti-racist standpoint. Drawing on the work of black women, work that they once dismissed as irrelevant, they now reproduce the servant-served paradigms in their scholarship.⁵

It is no small irony that the intensive interest of white feminists such as myself in issues of race and racism was sparked by the brave black feminists of the 1970s and 1980s who spoke out about racism in the women's movement, who made us aware of how much it was a white middle-class women's movement. Because of the important 1982 collection on black women's studies edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, as well as the work of writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, to name just two, white feminists were forced to do some searing soul-searching.⁶ One bittersweet measure of

the success of these black feminists is the situation we have today in the 1990s, where black feminist scholars feel uneasy about the number of white women focusing on African American literature. I want to underscore hooks's judicious stance on this issue: even as she suggests that white women ought to focus on the meanings of whiteness, hooks also sees the potential for white women to produce work "from an aware antiracist standpoint."⁷

Extremely significant scholarship that crosses identity lines is already being produced. One of the most profound analyses of whiteness in literature, for instance, is Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.⁸ Morrison breaks the mold for previous analyses of black characters in literary texts authored by whites: rather than seeing black characters as mere decoration or offensive stereotype in such texts, Morrison argues that these characters reflect significant anxieties, desires, and dilemmas that white American culture cannot articulate directly. What I find inspiring about Morrison's book is that she avoids racial separatism: first, by being a black woman writing about whiteness, and second, by arguing that issues of black and white American identity are inextricably intertwined. At the same time, Morrison's approach does not allow white Americans who displace their own anxieties onto African Americans off the hook. *Playing in the Dark* is an exemplary model of scholarship that articulates a painful relationship in such a way that racial divides can be crossed.

Another work that has been particularly influential is Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Examining her own identity in this mixed-genre text (encompassing autobiography, theory, essays, and poems), Anzaldúa realizes she must create a new model for herself, a model that can allow all her multiple allegiances to come to voice: being Chicana in an Anglo-controlled country; being feminist in a male-dominated world; being lesbian in a homophobic society; being a poet in an economy that devalues such labor; being a Spanish, Spanglish, Tex-Mex speaker in an English-first culture; and

so on. In articulating these identities, Anzaldúa's text powerfully requires readers to move beyond fixed, simplistic concepts of identity politics. Furthermore, although Anzaldúa acknowledges the incredible traumas of being marginalized in these various ways, she ends up turning this situation into an empowering position in her concepts of *la mestiza* and the borderlands. She describes and enacts this situation of being at the crossroads of various identities and cultures in a poem called "To live in the Borderlands means you," where the title leads directly into the first lines:

are neither *hispana india negra española ni gabacha*, eres *mestiza*,
mulata,
 half-breed caught in the crossfire between camps while carrying
 all five races
 on your back not knowing which side to turn to, run from.⁹

A poem a few pages later develops the positive aspects of this ambiguous multiplicity. Addressed to her niece, Missy Anzaldúa, "Don't Give in *Chicanita*" is a poem of encouragement, which ends with a look at the future for *mestizas*:

Perhaps we'll be dying of hunger as usual
 but we'll be members of a new species
 skin tone between black and bronze
 second eyelid under the first
 with the power to look at the sun through naked
 eyes.
 And alive *m'ijita*, very much alive.

Yes, in a few years or centuries
 la Raza will rise up, tongue intact
 carrying the best of all the cultures.¹⁰

But in Anzaldúa's view, it is not only Chicanos or women of color who will be able to evolve into this new species. Elsewhere she argues that "[l]umping the males who deviate from the general norm with

man, the oppressor, is a gross injustice," and she asserts that "we [people of color] need to allow whites to be our allies."¹¹ Using texts such as Anzaldúa's as a guide, progressive people can learn to build bridges across racial—and other—divides.

Learning to build bridges is the principle that has guided my approach to teaching American literature from a multicultural standpoint. I teach American literature at a state university in the Midwest whose student body is predominantly white and generally conservative. We offer courses in African American literature specifically, as well as more general courses in American literature. One of my goals for teaching American literature to undergraduates has been to give them the sense that American literature has been and continues to be written by a fascinating range of authors (for example, I always include African American and Native American literature in the typical undergraduate American literature survey course, and I also attend to considerations of gender, class, and sexual difference).¹² Sometimes I have a class composed of undergraduates who are afraid that they will know nothing about the "canon" if they take my course, so on the first day I point out the various "great" authors on the syllabus and then "sell" students on the fact that in my section they will also read some remarkable texts that scholars have recently (re)discovered. By presenting the syllabus in this way, I introduce the idea of fluid and shifting definitions of "American" and "literature." This is strategic, because I consider the representation of American literature on my syllabus to be one significant way I can influence my students' ideas of what an American is and what kind of country America might be. As Mario T. Garcia has written, "We have always possessed a multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural society," and I try to enable my students to recognize this alternative vision of America.¹³ Moreover, I hope that my syllabus and class will challenge my students' often narrow visions of normativity along the lines that African American historian Elsa Barkley Brown has described:

How do our students overcome years of notions of what is normative? While trying to think about these issues in my teaching, I have come to understand that this is not merely an intellectual process. It is not merely a question of whether or not we have learned to analyze in particular kinds of ways, or whether people are able to intellectualize about a variety of experiences. It is also about coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm. What I have tried to do in my own teaching is to address both the conscious level, through the material, and the unconscious level, through the very structure of the course, thus, perhaps, allowing my students, in Bettina Apthekar's words, to "pivot the center," to center in another experience.¹⁴

Trying to teach the literature of a multicultural America places me in the problematic position of speaking about experiences I have not had: I speak about Native America, for instance, when I teach Zitkala-Sa's autobiographical essays, and I speak about black America when I teach Langston Hughes. I also speak about white America when I teach *As I Lay Dying*, and I speak about lesbians when I teach Adrienne Rich's poetry. In the debates about who is entitled to publish articles about and teach African American literature I have been struck by the fact that these identity-centered arguments have not been applied more broadly to all texts. Why does no one question my ability to teach Faulkner, even though I have never been to Mississippi and am certainly not a white male? Should I be allowed to teach any literary text that does not reflect my own (white/feminist/middle-class/heterosexual) background and experience? What an impossible situation we would work ourselves into if we took the identity argument to its logical conclusion.

And yet I do not want to dismiss the problem of speaking about and speaking for. Although most progressive white feminists would claim to speak *about* rather than for experiences of people of color that we have not had, I am skeptical about the usefulness of this distinction. In some part, the distinction offers us a palliative, becomes a sign

that we have interrogated our own privilege and have now arrived at a nonimperialist position regarding such material. But feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff compellingly deconstructs this distinction, arguing that

when one is speaking for others one may be describing their situation and thus also speaking about them. In fact, it may be impossible to speak for others without simultaneously conferring information about them. Similarly, when one is speaking about others, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, that is, speaking for them. One may be speaking about others as an advocate or a messenger if the persons cannot speak for themselves. Thus I would maintain that if the practice of speaking for others is problematic, so too must be the practice of speaking about others, since it is difficult to distinguish speaking about from speaking for in all cases.¹⁵

Alcoff's analysis moves us to a position where we must acknowledge that even speaking about experiences we have not had is a potentially dangerous situation fraught with the possibility of committing what Alcoff terms "discursive imperialism" or "discursive violence." In the face of these dangers, progressive white feminists might decide that silence is the only ethical stance to take. But even as she underscores the necessity of considering this option, Alcoff calls it into question: the retreat into silence, first of all, "significantly undercuts the possibility of political effectivity" because it "allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance."¹⁶ Furthermore, Alcoff points out that a retreat into silence may be a kind of cop-out, "motivated by a desire to find a method or practice immune from criticism" or motivated by "a desire for personal mastery, to establish a privileged discursive position wherein one cannot be undermined or challenged and thus is master of the situation."¹⁷ Clearly, then, silence as a strategy is not necessarily politically efficacious or morally defensible.

Alcoff goes on to propose a double strategy to address the problems of speaking for/about and not speaking at all. Influenced by Gayatri

Spivak's work on the subaltern, Alcoff advocates first of all that we "strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than speaking for others."¹⁸ Following such a principle, as I see it, might entail reshaping teaching assignments so that classes in race, gender, and sexuality could be team-taught by professors of different positionality. Or it might mean following hooks's example of enacting an ethic of dialogue in conversational essays; she crosses differences and builds bridges between them in her dialogues with Cornel West, Mary Childers, and Ron Scapp.¹⁹ The possibilities of speaking with and to have as yet been undeveloped, so Alcoff pragmatically addresses ways to lessen the dangers of speaking for: first, "the impetus to speak must be carefully analyzed and, in many cases (certainly for academics!), fought against."²⁰ Alcoff's point here is not to advocate a retreat into the silence that she deconstructs earlier in her essay, but to allow the time and space for a critical interrogation of our location, the context of our speaking, our openness to constructive criticism. The most significant thing to consider, however, is the effects of speaking for: "will it enable the empowerment of oppressed peoples?" is the question Alcoff formulates.²¹ Although syntactically simple, this question introduces a complex framework by which progressive white feminists can consider seriously when our desire to speak for less privileged people might be appropriate and politically effective.

Part of my investment in teaching what I am not is to motivate students to be interested in the many parts of America that may not have any direct relation to their own lives. One of the reasons I continue to be passionately engaged in teaching American literature is that books allow us access to aspects of experience and history that might otherwise be unavailable to us. In my American literature classes, I try to use the texts to engage students with conflicting and competing ideas of Americanness and to envision an America in which it is possible to dialogue across differences. I have to admit that I cannot answer Alcoff's challenging question with a resounding yes

concerning my American literature courses, but I would claim that if my courses help explode my students' concepts of normativity, then they might create the conditions under which students could begin to see themselves as willing to engage in practices that would undermine systems of inequality and privilege.²²

I have found in my own classroom, in fact, that it is sometimes very productive for me not to be the same identity as a given text. I teach Adrienne Rich's work in both American literature and women's literature classes. The American literature undergraduate survey attracts mostly white, middle-class students from a wide range of backgrounds; many of them are disconcerted by class discussions that veer from analyzing technique, character development, patterns of imagery, foreshadowing, and so on. Introducing a productive discussion of lesbianism into such a context can be risky. I have found that students have even a great deal of difficulty saying the word "lesbian" in our discussions of Rich—often using the less-forbidden term "feminist" instead. As I do when I teach American Indian texts or African American literature, I have tried to be self-conscious regarding my own difference in positionality when I prepare to teach Rich. In fact, I used to focus on trying to foresee the ways my heterosexuality inevitably distorted Rich's ideas and words. I don't dwell solely on my negative qualifications anymore, though, because of a fortuitous accident. I taught Rich's work one semester when I was in the last trimester of pregnancy; for the first time, more than half my class at the end of the semester pointed to Rich as the one author who should definitely remain on the syllabus, and almost all the students could at least write—if not speak—the word "lesbian" by the end of the semester. As I have since analyzed this situation, I have concluded that my visible pregnancy signified to my undergraduates that I was not a lesbian; maybe even some of them typed me as a "family values" kind of person just like "normal" Americans.²³ On the one hand, someone might argue that I inevitably neutralized the subject matter by being heterosexual, that in order to teach such a radical challenge

to what Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality,” I too must be outside the system of heterosexuality. On the other hand, because I was teaching material that the students did not identify me with, I was able to model for them what all of us—not just lesbians—might learn from reading Rich and her critical views of heterosexism. They, I hope, began the work of confronting their own homophobia by first allowing that “normal” people such as myself resist it.

By taking this position, I am not suggesting in any way that I can teach lesbian and gay literature better than or from the same point of engaged experience as a lesbian or gay scholar; what I am claiming is the possibility of *joining* in the struggle against heterosexism. I find Rich’s widely debated idea of the “lesbian continuum,” introduced in her influential essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), helpful in making a space for such an alliance. In this essay, Rich distinguishes between “lesbian existence”—identified with women who desire “genital sexual experience with another woman”—and the “lesbian continuum”—which includes “a range . . . of woman-identified experience.” Rich eloquently explains why she insists on such a broad view: by

embrac[ing] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support . . . we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of *lesbianism*.²⁴

Rather than totally conflating lesbians and feminists or totally separating them, Rich establishes a middle ground on which lesbians and feminists join together in a common struggle. Hers is a model that does not erase difference but also does not allow difference to be unbridgeable.²⁵

In the classroom, we have to work diligently to create those bridges—not only between our own positionality and the text at hand, but also between the diverse kinds of students we have in class.

Recently I taught a semester-long class on Toni Morrison to upper-level undergraduates. Five out of the thirty-five students in the classroom were black women; the remaining students were white, a majority of them women. For most of the white undergraduates, this was perhaps the most racially mixed classroom they had ever been in at my institution; they were uncomfortable at first even bringing up issues of race and racism—not because they weren’t aware of them, but because they didn’t have the language (or perhaps the courage) to discuss the issues. The first few weeks of the semester were too silent; the white students in particular wanted me to be the authority and initiate the discussion of the tough issues. I gently refused to be put in the position of speaking for them and instead began a discussion of our class dynamics. This discussion was halting at first, but eventually led to a mostly productive classroom. I also found that I had to assume a very complex role in this class: I had to try to discern instantaneously when to speak up from an ethical oppositional stance and when to let the discussion play out among students. I intuitively adopted what Chela Sandoval has described as “tactical subjectivity,” the ability “to choose tactical positions . . . to self-consciously break and reform ties to ideology, activities which are imperative for the psychological and political practices that permit the achievement of coalition across differences.”²⁶ In other words, I had to adopt different subjectivities based on the differing needs of my students: the black students certainly didn’t need me to make them more aware of race and racism; instead, I tried to make spaces for them to amplify Morrison’s novels with their own experiences or to take issue with Morrison’s ideas and my interpretations of blackness. The white students, however, needed me to show them how it was possible to speak about their/our areas of ignorance concerning texts that presented unfamiliar experiences. I found Morrison’s novels to be especially useful in challenging both black students and whites, for they are directed so explicitly to a black audience and centered so earnestly in the black community that white readers are powerfully immersed in a

worldview that contradicts many of the assumptions they take for granted; and yet the novels also present extremes of black experience (Sethe killing her baby girl rather than allowing her to be returned to slavery, Eva Peace burning Plum to “save” him, Pilate’s birthing herself so that she has no navel), so that my black students found some of the content unfamiliar and challenging too. By using Morrison’s texts as our common ground, I tried to avoid creating a classroom where “a comfortable set of oppositions” could be maintained, which Chandra Mohanty has described as a situation where people of color are “the central voices and the bearers of all knowledge in class” and white people are “‘observers,’ with no responsibility to contribute and/or with nothing valuable to contribute.”²⁷

I have no doubt that if bell hooks had been the teacher of this class, many of my students—black and white—would have been immeasurably enriched by her presence, wisdom, and engagement. But I have also come to recognize that there is important work in such a classroom for white feminists and white progressive professors to perform too. White professors who are willing to examine and question their own standpoint of privileged whiteness (to extend hooks’s idea of standpoint) can help engage white students in similar kinds of critical analyses as well as demonstrate to black students that allies can be found to fight the war against racism. Again, I do not mean to suggest that white feminists exclusively ought to be teaching Toni Morrison; neither do I think that black faculty exclusively ought to teach her works. We need to be able to engage the issues of race, class, gender, and cultural difference from a variety of perspectives; we need to allow for multiple strategies of resistance to oppression. Those of us who find ourselves “teaching to transgress,” to quote hooks’s provocative title, need to forge alliances with one another even as our individual positionalities and transgressive strategies may differ.

This belief in multiple ways of engagement and resistance has transformed my pedagogy. Undergraduates in my Morrison class spent the first half of the semester doing various short writing assign-

ments requiring them to do some extracurricular reading: one assignment asked them to read, summarize, and evaluate a scholarly article on *The Bluest Eye*; another invited them to adopt Morrison's voice explaining to an interviewer some ways in which Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man* influenced one of her novels; I also asked them to follow a current news story about race or gender and relate it to some aspect of Morrison (an especially timely assignment, since the KKK held a public rally in our community that semester and the O. J. Simpson case was constantly in the news); another assignment asked students to explore contextual material—they chose one text from a list encompassing black women's history (Paula Giddings, Jacqueline Jones), philosophy (Cornel West), feminism (hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins), and so on, which they read, summarized, and evaluated, and then related to Morrison. Through these kinds of assignments, I tried to show white students how to be responsible participants by doing their homework (like I do) so they could speak from an informed perspective.²⁸

In addition, the skills these assignments called for—close reading, critical thinking, making connections, pinpointing issues—were important in giving all students a new respect for intellectual activity, and I hoped black students in particular would feel empowered in an American literature classroom because the work of key black intellectuals was placed at the center. Henry Giroux argues that a responsible and ethical progressive pedagogy necessarily involves a discussion of the politics of representation: “cultural workers” must work against “pedagogical practices which support a voyeuristic reception of texts by providing students with a variety of critical methodologies and approaches to understand how issues regarding audience, address, and reception configure within cultural circuits of power to produce particular subject positions and secure specific forms of authority.”²⁹ I tried to create the conditions for such recognition through the multiple vantage points offered by the short papers. One effect of these assignments was to deconstruct monolithic concepts of blackness, to enable

students to see that we were not dealing with racial essences but various, sometimes conflicting ideas of blackness. The assignment calling for them to analyze the representation of blacks in a current news story, at the very least, enabled many of them to comprehend something about representational politics.

During the second half of the semester, my students focused on one longer project of their own design: they could write a traditional literary analysis if they thought doing so would best get them to engage in the aesthetic and political issues we had discussed, but they were also allowed to propose a creative project that responded in some way to the issues of our course. If they chose to do a creative project, students were asked to turn in a three- to four-page statement explaining what their project was, why they chose to do this particular project, and how it related to the works we had read during the semester. Two-thirds of the students in the Morrison class chose to work on creative projects, and most told me at the end of the semester that it was the most meaningful, exciting assignment they had worked on in their undergraduate careers.

Like Paulo Freire, I wanted to motivate students to begin to relinquish their belief and dependence on the banking system of education, where the professor is the authority who deposits knowledge into students. Instead, I hoped that I could act less as an authority and more as what Kenneth Mostern calls “a critical pedagogue”:

someone who teaches from where the student is at, rather than from where the teacher is at. This does not mean that the teacher denies his or her pedagogical intentions or specific expertise, but merely that s/he respects the myriad expertise of the students that s/he does not share. Second, the critical pedagogue works for social justice, and, living in a world of injustice, not only attempts to enact change in his or her classroom, but develops the strategies and confidence of students to work for social change beyond the classroom.³⁰

The projects my students chose embraced a wide range of approaches, and outlining a few of them will, I hope, illustrate the

beneficial effects of such a transformed pedagogy. One (white female) student, influenced by *Beloved*, researched slave ships and slave captains and used this information to create a watercolor rendering of African souls escaping the torment of the ship holds and flying back to Africa. Another (white male) student wrote a short story based on a family conflict about race, and in his statement, he not only gave credit to Morrison for enabling him to analyze the dynamics of this situation, but also self-consciously reflected on the meaning of his own privileged whiteness. A creative writing major wrote a story trying out Morrison's lyrical prose and sharp eye for contradiction and disparity; a white male, he found that a black woman writer offered him the most inspiring example of the kind of fiction he would like to be able to write. A (black female) student, gripped by *Sula*, chose to analyze the sometimes liberatory, sometimes threatening meanings attached to black women's sexuality in Morrison, Cornel West, and Spike Lee. A white woman studying English education used her project to plan a syllabus for teaching images of race, class, and gender in works by Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison, specifically targeted for white rural high school students; motivated by two examples of progressive white female teachers from rural Indiana whose contracts had been terminated (implicitly) for bringing "radical" texts into the classroom, she was careful to design a syllabus that gradually offered more significant challenges to her students' preconceptions.

This last project brings up an important consideration that I think has gone unnoticed in the debates about who is entitled to teach and do scholarly work on particular kinds of texts: it may be the case that we are unfortunately abetting conservative defenders of the traditional American literature canon (and Western cultural hegemony, more generally) by focusing too concertedly on identity politics. When the call for black teachers exclusively to teach black subject matter, American Indians exclusively to teach American Indian texts, and so on coincides with arguments against multiculturalism as "political

correctness," the stakes become almost too high for progressive white professors who want to engage in such issues. I am not suggesting here that racism even among progressive white professors ought to go without criticism; nor do I mean to dismiss the criticisms of a vapid classroom (or Bennetton) multiculturalism that allows our students to "celebrate difference" without interrogating the painful conflicts and power inequities that attend a deeper understanding of cultural and racial difference.³¹ What I am calling for is an acknowledgment of an important role progressive white scholars can play in redefining America so that race, class, gender, and sexuality become personalized and politicized for everyone and are not always displaced "over there" onto "minorities."

Michele Wallace has similar thoughts on this controversy. Although she readily acknowledges various problems with "current left cultural and art world versions of multiculturalism," she also believes that "the link that multiculturalism is trying to establish between discourses on feminism, sexual preference, and ethnicity could be more usefully viewed as a pragmatic political coalition: the cultural left version of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition against the rising tide of the conservative Right." In fact, Wallace, almost anticipating the controversy associated with such a position, goes on to spell out her reasoning in a full paragraph:

While multiculturalism's inclination toward unrestricted inclusiveness as opposed to hierarchical exclusiveness doesn't automatically lead to significant structural changes in existing aesthetic and critical priorities and institutional discourses of power, it could and thus far has offered more opportunities for critical discussion outside the dominant discourse, and dissent and debate within, than its present aesthetic and critical alternatives. These alternatives I see as 1) a "color-blind" cultural homogeneity which originates in liberal humanist ideology; 2) separatist aesthetics and politics such as "Afrocentrism"; and 3) racist/sexist aesthetics, which range from the cultural fascism of a Hilton Kramer in the *New Criterion* to the gangs that attacked Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst and the female jogger in Central Park. Thus, despite my reservations about multiculturalism, I have become a reluctant supporter of it. At the

same time it is crucial to its usefulness that we view multiculturalism not as an obdurate and unchanging ideological position, but as an opportunity for ongoing critical debate.³²

I hope that we will take up this debate, learning to begin a dialogue and work together. For if we do not, if we remain distracted or if we keep silent, we will lose our chance to speak out against critics of multiculturalism who talk about "a cult of ethnicity" and see "the melting pot" of America "giv[ing] way to the Tower of Babel,"³³ or who unfairly characterize multiculturalism as an "ethnic separatism" that "fosters sensitivities, resentments, and suspicions, setting one group against another."³⁴ These are sentiments that would prove offensive not only to many African Americans, Native Americans, and other minorities, but to many white Americans as well. We must not concede to cultural conservatives the discussion of what a real American is or what an ideal America is. Moreover, we should not allow our internal debates to draw our attention away from conservatives' increasingly successful challenges to affirmative action policies and curricular revisions in universities across the nation.³⁵ Joan W. Scott has argued that now is the time for progressive university professors to begin "the reconceptualization of community in the age of diversity."³⁶ By joining together across race and other boundaries as critical pedagogues, by using diverse strategies to accomplish similar goals in our classrooms, we can help bring into being a multicultural America where critical debate and dialogue thrive.

NOTES

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1. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 90.

2. Elsewhere hooks has argued against assumptions of a monolithic black identity. See especially the essays "Postmodern Blackness" and "An Aesthetic of Blackness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990).

3. The recent decision of the University of California Board of Regents to dismantle affirmative action programs is the most visible attack on such safeguards and is extremely disturbing in its suggestion that a level playing field exists today in America and in the American academy.

4. It has become an unfortunate occurrence at some literature conferences, most recently at some sessions of the Toni Morrison conference held in April 1995 at Bellarmine College, that black feminists leave a session when they see that white feminists will be talking about African American texts. See also Katherine Mayberry's column in *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 12 Oct. 1994, A48, and Malin LaVon Walther's letter in response (26 Oct. 1994, B3).

5. hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 103-4. Hooks includes a particularly pointed comment from one black woman on this issue: "It burns me up to be treated like shit by white women who are busy getting their academic recognition, promotions, more money, et cetera, doing 'great' work on the topic of race."

6. Adrienne Rich was also helpful in pointing out this issue to white feminists; as she collected her essays into volumes, she added notes and prefaces at times questioning her former positions and bringing attention to the developing awareness of her own class and racial privilege. See, for example, her 1978 essay "Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 275-310. *This Bridge Called My Back*, rev. ed. (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), edited by Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, was another widely influential text.

7. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks also admonishes black women: "The presence of racism in feminist settings does not exempt black women or women of color from actively participating in the effort to find ways to communicate, to exchange ideas, to have fierce debate" (110).

8. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992. See also Morrison's influential essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken" for a brilliant analysis of whiteness in Melville and the American romance. *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28 (winter 1989): 1-34.

9. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters-Aunt Lute, 1987), 194.

10. Anzaldúa, 202-3.

11. Anzaldúa, 84, 85.

12. I want to acknowledge here that I am in complete agreement with various scholars who have argued against an "additive approach" to "correcting" the canon. In our discussion of texts, gender is a construct that affects not only Emily Dickinson but Ernest Hemingway too; race and culture are issues not only for Leslie Marmon Silko but for Kate Chopin as well. See Gayatri

Spivak's theoretical analysis of the kind of curricular transformations that are necessary, "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Cultural Studies," in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 255-84. Peggy Pascoe, "At the Crossroads of Culture," *Women's Review of Books*, February 1990, 22-23, discusses some of the pitfalls and possibilities of the practical effects of integrating "minority" texts into an American history survey course.

13. Mario T. Garcia, "Multiculturalism and American Studies," *Radical History Review* 54 (fall 1992): 50.

14. Elsa Barkley Brown, "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History," *Signs* 14 (summer 1989): 921.

15. Linda Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* 20 (winter 1991-92): 9.

16. Alcoff, 17, 20.

17. Alcoff, 22.

18. Alcoff, 23.

19. See *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) for her dialogue with West; "A Conversation about Race and Class," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990) for her conversation with Childers; "Building a Teaching Community: A Dialogue," in *Teaching to Transgress* for her exchange with Scapp.

20. Alcoff, 24.

21. Alcoff, 29.

22. Hazel Carby is much less optimistic about the possibility of extending such insights beyond the classroom. In fact, she has argued that "[f]or white suburbia, as well as for white middle-class students in universities, these texts are becoming a way of gaining knowledge of the 'other': a knowledge that appears to satisfy and replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation"; see her essay "The Multicultural Wars," *Radical History Review* 54 (fall 1992): 17. I cannot share this particular stance, at least not yet, because "multiculturalism" is such a recent phenomenon that I don't think we can evaluate its impact fairly; the current generation of college students who have been influenced by it has not yet come of age in terms of entering into public discourse.

23. My students' identification of pregnancy with heterosexuality is understandable, but of course not necessarily true.

24. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 51-52.

25. Rich's model also allows us to recognize that very effective models of

lesbian and gay scholarship may come from heterosexual scholars. The work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick comes most immediately to mind.

26. Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (spring 1991): 15.

27. Chandra Mohanty, "On Race and Voice: Challenges for Liberal Education in the 1990s," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Henry A. Giroux and Peter McLaren (New York: Routledge, 1994), 154.

28. I have found Gayatri Spivak's analysis of this issue helpful. Concerning white bourgeois students who feel they lack the authenticity to discuss the Third World, she writes, "you will of course not speak in the same way about the Third World material, but if you make it your task not only to learn what is going on there through language, through specific programmes of study, but also at the same time through a historical critique of your position as the investigating person, then you will see that you have earned the right to criticize, and you [will] be heard. When you take the position of not doing your homework—I will not criticize because of my accident of birth, the historical accident—that is a much more pernicious position. In one way you take a risk to criticize, of criticizing something which is other—something which you used to dominate. I say that you have to take a certain risk: to say 'I won't criticize' is salving your conscience, and allowing you not to do any homework"; see "Questions of Multi-culturalism," in *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 62–63. Spivak focuses on earning the right to criticize in these remarks, but they also may be extended to analyze the difficulty of speaking for and about more generally.

29. Henry A. Giroux, "Living Dangerously: Identity Politics and the New Cultural Racism," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Giroux and McLaren, 49.

30. Kenneth Mostern, "Decolonization as Learning: Practice and Pedagogy in Frantz Fanon's Revolutionary Narrative," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Giroux and McLaren, 256.

31. For a flawed but provocative leftist critique of multiculturalism, see Jeff Escoffier, "The Limits of Multiculturalism," *Socialist Review* 21, nos. 3–4 (July–December 1991): 61–73. Cornel West has also criticized unexamined, simplistic calls for multiculturalism in *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993).

32. Michele Wallace, "Multiculturalism and Oppositionality," in *Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Giroux and McLaren, 181–82.

33. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1992), 15, 18.
34. C. Vann Woodward, "Equal but Separate," *New Republic*, 15–22 July 1991, 43.
35. Joan Scott presents a similar argument in "The Campaign against Political Correctness," *Radical History Review* 54 (fall 1992): 67–68.
36. Scott, 77.

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