Forum

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Who Shall Teach African American Literature?

To the Editor:

I had mixed feelings about Nellie Y. McKay's guest column "Naming the Problem That Led to the Question 'Who Shall Teach African American Literature?'; or, Are We Ready to Disband the Wheatley Court?" (113 [1998]: 359–69). Reading it, I was reminded again and again of the deep and enduring necessity of "inventing and reinventing the wheel," especially when it comes to the teaching and learning of African American literature and, by extension, perhaps other minority literatures in the United States.

McKay correctly and accurately takes to task the easy authority that passes for scholarship and the willful appropriation of arguments against essentialism by white scholars for purposes of their own; she rightly suggests the dangers in territorializing scholarly areas by ethnicity and race and affirms that black scholars, too, need to be wary that such attempts on their part may lead to tunnel vision of sorts. Certainly, Ann du Cille has given us a powerful and eloquent dance through the minefield of this territory in an essay that raises some of these issues in the context of disciplinarity ("The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies").

What troubles me is the tremendous binary of black and white in McKay's essay, even if it is a mere rhetorical strategy, as I suspect. While it is true that African American studies in the academy has historically been both deeply influenced and compromised by the presence and the work of white scholars, I find it troubling that her article makes no mention of scholars who are neither black nor white but who are committed to researching and teaching black literature against the odds of complete erasure of their scholarly presence by both black and white colleagues. I am thinking here not only of the Asian presence in this severely black and white world but also of Chicana women—the mestizaje of Gloria Anzaldúa's formulation—and Native American women. Not only are innumerable white graduate students turned away from black studies, but a lot of others have been turned away from doing black studies for the same persuasive and wrongheaded reasons that the so-called market dictates. My persistent refusal to classify myself as anything other than an Americanist with African American as my specialty has meant the loss of jobs and of authority in my chosen field and has caused many in the black and white worlds to see as specious my claim to be a scholar and teacher of black literature.

McKay points out that "[c]ontrary to much of the angry rhetoric associated with ideologies of essentialism that some black scholars engage in, there is noth-

ing mystical about African American literature that makes it the sole property of those of African descent" (366). While this may be theoretically sound as an argument, I am far more skeptical of what I see as the complicated interplays of essentialisms and authority in the academic marketplace. What I am afraid of is simply that what has so far been something of a market injunction is rapidly becoming a disciplinary injunction and that the color coding is becoming institutionalized as a disciplinary requirement. And therefore we live now in an America with a multicultural population, but we are all placed in clearly color-coded and color-matched academic boxes—where we only know not what we learn or are taught but what we are genetically wired to know and to learn.

To stand fully and freely in Wheatley's court requires us to pay full and complete attention to what Countee Cullen's pained announcement meant when he said that he wanted to be a poet, not a black poet. As long as we persist in the racialized binary black/white, I am not quite sure how we can ever move toward the disbanding of Wheatley's court. I am not the first nonwhite, nonblack scholar to point this out. Chandra Mohanty eloquently points out that she "has defined what it means to be South Asian by educating [her]self about, and reflecting on, the histories and experiences of African American, Latina, West Indian, African, European American, and other constituencies in North America. Such definitions and understandings do provide a genealogy, but a genealogy that is always relational and fluid as well as urgent and necessary" ("Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America").

Black literature and black scholars have been my most abiding spiritual mentors, but I am not convinced anymore that black and white scholars see me as their spiritual heir or progenitor. The walls of my study are lined with the works of Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Angelina Weld Grimké, Mae Cowdery, and Helene Johnson, and I have a large number of files on black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Some years, however, I have been unable to pass on this legacy to any generation of American students, black or white, because I am Asian and brown.

McKay has raised what I see as the most important dialogue in the profession today—a dialogue that will determine what will be taught and by whom for generations to come. It would be painful indeed if Du Bois's formulation that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" was also valid and in place for the twenty-first.

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Reply:

I thank Sivagami Subbaraman and the many other MLA members who have taken the time to offer serious responses to "Naming the Problem." I am also gratified to know that, in spite of the differences of opinion that separate some of the respondents from me, almost everyone seems to agree that my essay opens up one of the most important dialogues in the profession today. That is immensely reassuring.

Subbaraman takes issue with me over "the binary of black and white" in the essay. Unfortunately, that binary was not my creation. True, today most of us are aware how much more complicated the racial structure of our society is than it was in 1865 or even as late as the 1950s and 1960s, during the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, in the face of the complex history of the African past, the Middle Passage, and American slavery and its racist aftermath, the three-hundred-year quarrel that is specifically located in black-white relations in this country still raises its ugly head and ever defies us to ignore it. That said, it was not my intent, in my focus on black and white scholars in relation to African American literature, to marginalize further the efforts of scholars of other races and ethnic communities who wish to work in African American literature. It is as abhorrent to me as it is to those who suffer the experience Subbaraman describes that any scholar in American literature, of any group, should be excluded or dissuaded from participating in any area of our field that she or he wishes to teach in or undertake research in. And it certainly has always been a part of my professional agenda to do whatever I can to help eradicate such debilitating practices.

Because blacks were the largest nonwhite racial group in the United States for most of its history and were the first to protest successfully their separateness from the social and economic advantages available to American whites, "Naming the Problem" not only takes on the old quarrel but also, by implication, addresses more broadly the insidious effect that the minuscule number of black faculty members in the academy and specifically in English studies has. I identify this problem as a direct result of admitting only a few black students into graduate programs each year, while administrators wring their hands and offer volumes in lip service to their commitment to diversifying college and university faculties. My essay suggests there is enormous disingenuousness on the part of the academic establishment, which maintains the status quo. In our field's large-scale dissuasions of white (and other nonblack) students and young scholars from pursuing careers in African American literature, even while it sanctions a small number of unqualified white scholars who appropriate this work, and in its unsatisfactory