

unspoken, a default drive that brooks no challenge. Black institutions are as desperate for black faculty members as are white institutions—though campus talk frequently has it that whites can always have their pick of jobs. White-authored titles like Cary Nelson's *Will Teach for Food* would be thought comic if not downright offensive. The educational and social purposes historically served by HBCUs cannot be gainsaid, but insofar as times have changed and some of these institutions are technically public, perhaps policies should be reexamined. Some of my students want the best-qualified faculty, and they often discover faculty agendas that bear little connection with the scholarly life per se. Most students need exposure to literature of any and all types. Of course, it is true that as a white man I may be seen to have access to a larger world in which my colleagues are not similarly privileged and to be able to leave the university if I do not love it, but here I am writing about my actual life, my career, my desire to have a career, the psychological strategies needed to combat what Subbaraman calls "erasure" (1105).

Within my discipline the same essentialism prevails. In teaching American literature (I never teach the African American literature course per se, it goes without saying), I oddly enough feel pressure to focus on every writer except those of the ethnicity of nearly all my students. The thought that a subject might exist no matter who walks through the door to teach on the first day of class has few adherents among administrators and faculty members. A wide and inclusive interest in African American literature is not seen as validation in these turf wars. An old-fashioned faith in the universal is displayed by academics who contradictorily label black writing ethnic while denying ethnicity to white writing—thus unwittingly privileging white writing as universal and enabling other-race professors to teach it. Since those who teach have to be considered either black or white and placed accordingly, the writers studied have to be either black or white and consequently compartmentalized, no matter the resulting distortion of the subject or of the self-image of writers like Charles Chesnutt. Few question what Zora Neale Hurston calls "the gods of the pigeon-holes" (*Dust Tracks on a Road* [New York: Harper, 1996] 25). I do include individual African American works on my syllabi, but the thought of a white African Americanist would locally be considered laughable and a contradiction in terms. All I can explain to concerned students is that the subject is important, whereas I am not. The blind review practiced by reputable academic journals has allowed at least that venue for my writing about a major aspect of American literature.

We all have blind spots, and I would be the first to admit that we essentialize when we gain from doing so. "We all want the breaks, and what seems just to us is something that favors our wishes," as Hurston writes (228). After all, my being selected to teach American literature

abroad had a connection with the fact that as an actual American I must have been seen to possess some almost mystical insights into the subject—British, Finnish, and Dutch expertise to one side. (By the same token I was taken as a representative American—and thus lectured on Frederick Douglass at University College London, for example). Our lives are enriched by many experiences, are complex tangles of many elements defined by race, class, gender, and much else—including our individual pasts. It seems a shame and a waste not to be allowed to share and profit from these realities in academic as well as other settings. McKay writes of a subject's not being anyone's sole property: for everyone some subjects are grounded in experiences past forgetting.

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Valuing Nonacademic Jobs

To the Editor:

Elaine Showalter is right: expanding career opportunities for literature PhDs is a better way to resolve the job crisis than restricting graduate studies to a tiny elite (Presidential Address 1998, "Regeneration," 114 [1999]: 318–28). Yet it seems foolish to expect potential employers to recruit us without some kind of reciprocity. It would be wonderful if PhDs had a wide variety of jobs to choose from, in and out of the university. It would be wonderful if literature departments offered internships and encouraged their most talented students to pursue nonacademic careers. But nonacademic jobs will not be valued or viable options for literature PhDs until nonacademic professional achievements begin to count in the academy where it counts—in hiring and tenure. Having spent nine years on a PhD in literature (and loved every minute of it), I am faced with a grim choice this year: do I crack my way into a rare tenure-track position, or do I exile myself from literary scholarship forever? In a different universe, I might pursue my scholarship while rising through the ranks of secondary education, writing poetry, designing innovative government programs, reviewing new literature for newspapers, or publishing fiction and then return to university teaching at a rank commensurate with my skills and experience. Until such a return is possible in the real world, however, nonacademic employers will continue—unfairly but with good reason—to view their applicants with PhDs in literature not as highly skilled members of a thriving profession but as overqualified academic failures.

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