

## Who Shall Teach African American Literature?

To the Editor:

Nellie Y. McKay's "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) struck a dissonant chord in me. Believing that there is yet "a place to begin *another* conversation" (366; italics mine), I hope that an account of my personal dilemma will add a different dimension to McKay's argument.

For me, there has never been a moment of doubt that African American literature "is one of the world's pre-eminent literatures," as McKay challenges us to acknowledge (364). When I started my doctoral work at the State University of New York, Albany, in 1990, I knew that I would focus on African American literature, because I was fascinated and inspired by it. In my enthusiasm, I gave no thought to the fact that as a Chinese woman I would have everything against me when the time came to find a teaching job in the field.

It would be a gross understatement to say that the road to my degree was bumpy. Fulfilling the required course credits was a hurdle since barely two courses in African American literature were offered in the English department, which had more than fifty faculty members—only one of whom was African American (she has remained my mentor to this day). As a result, I had to beg faculty members to supervise my independent studies. When it was time to form my advisory panel, my next hurdle was to get faculty members to serve on it. "I am not familiar with African American literature," they told me. In fact, I had to replace a member of my panel who, though he agreed to be a reader when I approached him, later told me that for unspecified reasons he did not feel that he could make up the qualifying examination questions from my reading list—a list that contained both literary works by African American writers and theoretical writings on literature in general and on African American literature in particular. There were more hurdles to jump in the form of three panel chair changes in less than a year. With each replacement I had to beg and plead again, for someone to serve as panel chair and for the support and commitment of the panel members.

The effort to secure myself a position in African American literature was even bumpier. I responded to every announcement of a faculty position in the subject, but not even a phone interview materialized. After many rejections and nonreplies, a painful knowledge dawned on me: I had been judged on the basis of my ethnicity, not my credentials; I had become a victim of what Mc-

Kay calls "a faceless entity" that is "the [job] market" (365), and this market did not know how to categorize me, a trained African American scholar and a Chinese citizen as well. Am I the right person to teach African American literature? You bet. But when I surprised myself and others by landing a college teaching job, it was not related to African American literature.

McKay is right when she claims that "the Wheatley court remains in session" (366). The experience I have had is by no means isolated. I can easily imagine non-black scholars from other countries falling in love with African American literature, studying it in the United States, and then, like me, trying to share their love by pursuing a teaching position in this country. Likewise, scholars of many ethnicities and from various countries fall in love with, say, Asian American, Chicano, and Native American literature. Is our profession going to use ethnicity and country of origin to dictate who teaches what literature? That would be an unfortunate mistake. I believe that it is high time we disband this biased and unjust Wheatley court. We are on the threshold of the next millennium. National societies are becoming global. Academia as a whole needs to be "on guard and to assume the responsibility of raising its voice against all attempts to misappropriate intellectual authority over any area of our discipline" (365). Western literature can be better opened up and diversified by nontraditional sources if our profession is willing and ready to respond to the supply and demand that are surely occurring in American educational institutions today. Modern language and literature scholars of different ethnicities and nationalities can complement one another and make learning more well rounded for our "millennium generation."

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To the Editor:

Having read Nellie Y. McKay's Guest Column for the second time, I still find myself with rather mixed emotions, although I am certainly less angry than I was after I read it for the first time. There is much in the column that McKay is to be applauded for. Her analysis of the reasons for and the results of the dearth of black PhDs is accurate and perceptive; her discussion of institutions that won't hire non-African Americans to teach African American literature is also right on the mark. These are issues that need to be talked about, and I'm glad McKay has done so.

At the same time, however, something about the argument greatly disturbs me. The problem centers on a conflict between McKay's second major point (that white