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Br 177-574-1

# BEYOND PC



## TOWARD A POLITICS OF UNDERSTANDING



EDITED AND WITH AN  
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GRAYWOLF PRESS

1992

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century has been to throw off the self-satisfied hegemony of narrowness and ignorance that has crippled our nation for so long. Change is rarely smooth or free of rancor. Some stridency and moral rigidity can be expected from those long denied their voices, but those excesses can soon be corrected by the ordinary processes of rational discussion and debate.

There are cynical excesses in this situation, however, that arise exactly where you would expect—in the bastions of unchallenged privilege. Though it is quite disgusting for the president to cry, “Political extremists roam the land, abusing the privileges of free speech, setting citizens against one another on the basis of their class or race,” this is not surprising coming from a member of the former, exclusionary and secret Yale society, Skull and Bones. What is startling about the president’s utterance is that it so aptly describes Bush’s own manipulation, of Willie Horton and quotas, in the nation’s political dialogue.

For all its prominence in the recent drama of racial turmoil on U.S. campuses, Michigan is a far better place now than it was when I went there in the 1950s. This is largely attributable to the efforts made to diversify the student body, the faculty, and the curriculum—those efforts now labeled “PC oppression” by the snooty ol’ boys who long so for the good ol’ days.

## Canons to the Right of Them . . .



PAULA BENNETT



Canon building is Empire Building.  
 Canon defense is national defense.  
 Canon debate . . . is the clash of cultures.  
 And *all* of the interests are vested.<sup>1</sup>

**I**N “UNSPEAKABLE THINGS UNSPOKEN: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison observes that

what is astonishing in the contemporary debate [over the canon] is not the resistance to displacement of works or to the expansion of genre within it, but the virulent passion that accompanies this resistance and, more importantly, the quality of its defense weaponry.<sup>2</sup>

It is to the issues surrounding and generating this “virulent passion” that I wish to address this essay. Whatever its limitations, *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* is the first sustained effort on the part of America’s scholarly community to come to terms with the vast wealth of our multiracial, multi-ethnic literary inheritance. As my students have repeatedly told me, working with it has proved a profoundly enriching experience,

1. Toni Morrison, “The Canon: Civil War and Reconstruction,” *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. XXVIII, no. 1 (Winter 1989), p. 8.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

one that has brought them in touch not with the America that "ought to be" but with the America that was—and still is. They are grateful to read many of the recovered works and are sad—or, in some cases, angry—that they were not exposed to these works earlier in their lives.

But as I have also learned, for other students, working with *The Heath Anthology* is more threatening than it is enlightening, and for them, as for multiculturalism's opponents generally, this anthology is (or can be) a dangerous book. In opening up the canon to a multiplicity of voices from America's racially and ethnically excluded minorities, the anthology has challenged American identity at its core—in the dream of Adamic innocence that has historically sustained and justified it. Those who are vulnerable will see this challenge as an attack upon themselves—their values, their way of life—and they will fight it with everything in them. The virulence they bring to the canon's defense may prove, finally, the measure of the anthology's "success" in transforming our image of America's past, and present. But it also suggests that nothing is safe about the *Heath*, least of all teaching it in the charged political climate that now prevails both in the university and in the culture at large.

My students are primarily white middle-class returnees, housewives, or younger women who for one reason or another, usually economic, have gotten "off track." A good third, at least, are Roman Catholic. They are hardworking, intelligent, and interested, but their formal education has been uneven at best. When they began this course, a yearlong survey of American literature, they were familiar with the "Puritans" (always as a group), Jefferson, Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and a few others. The first night—the class meets one evening a week for two hours and ten minutes—I gave them a choice.

"This," I said, passing out copies of the table of contents of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, "is what—until this year—you would have studied. I want you to compare it with the

*Heath's* and tell me what differences you see." A list based on categories identified by the *Heath*, but missing from the *Norton*, took shape: native Americans, the Literature of Discovery, Women, the Literature of the Southwest, Spanish-American, Mexican, the Literature of Abolition. They halted. "You missed one," I said. After a few awkward moments, "African?" a voice queried.

I then explained the concept of the canon to them: how over time a sifting had taken place that reduced the vast body of American literature to a select group of authors, largely male, largely white, largely middle class, who are deemed to possess exceptional literary value. There is, I observed, another way to look at our literary inheritance, one based on inclusion, not exclusion, and that is what the *Heath* is about. It seeks to restore the voices of those who have been "disappeared." Did my students want to read them, or did they want to study primarily the authors of the mainstream? Curious and timorous at once, they voted to go with learning what they knew nothing about.

On the whole, they have not regretted their decision. But it has not been easy. Not for them, or for me. Early on a context evolved, as patterns began to emerge, and this context has, effectively, dominated everything since. It is a context that makes violence, economic exploitation, and racism, not innocence, central to the American experience and, therefore, to the evolution of American character and literature: Columbus (1492) urging his master and mistress to convert the native inhabitants of America to Christianity as quickly as possible "to gain to our holy faith multitudes of people, and to Spain great riches and immense dominions, with all their inhabitants; there being, without doubt, in these countries vast quantities of gold." Cabeza de Vaca, thirty years later, writing of the decimation "conversion" wrought: "We passed through many territories and found them all vacant: their inhabitants wandered fleeing among the mountains, without daring to have houses or till the earth for fear of Christians." Samuel Purchas, early-seventeenth-century Anglican cleric, justifying from his armchair Britain's right to colonial expansion in terms

that place the enterprise somewhere between gold-digging marriage and outright rape:

All the rich endowments of Virginia, her Virgin-portion . . . are wages for all this worke: God in his wisdom having enriched the Savage Countries, that those riches might be attractives for Christian suters, which there may sowe spirituals and reape temporals. (p. 140)

The vision informing this literature is capped in anno Domini 1637, when the Puritan settlement under William Bradford burns alive 400 Pequot Indians in a stockaded village which the Europeans had surrounded. "It was a fearful sight to see them thus frying in the fire," Bradford records, "and the streams of blood quenching the same, and horrible was the stink and scent thereof; but the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice." A note informs readers that Bradford "thus places the Pequot War in a line of great battles waged by God's chosen people." But, for us, Bradford's "holy" war cannot be separated from the 150-year history preceding it, 150 years in which Europeans "reaped tempora[ry]" what they "sowed spiritua[l]," by wiping out whole native populations in the interest of colonial expansion.

To read the Puritan account apart from this history is in some sense not to read it at all. Conversely, however, to read it within this context is to acknowledge that our country begins here—in this record of dispossession and slaughter (as well as of "discovery")—not in the "City on the Hill," let alone in the First Continental Congress.

What happens to the passage from Bradford happens throughout. Read against the writers who have been excluded from the canon, whether native American, Spanish American, black, or, merely, female, the mainstream authors become "politicized" whether one will or no. For now there is no avoiding the problems they skirt, or, even more important, ignoring the contradictions woven

into the very fabric of their lives and thought. It is the contradictions that haunt the most: Ben Franklin, decent enough to be appalled by the mindless massacre of the pathetic remnants of the Conestoga Indians, yet callous enough to preach a doctrine of hard work and parsimony that makes the acquisition of wealth (not virtue) life's greatest good. Thomas Jefferson writing "All men are created equal," yet keeping slaves. Even poor old Natty Bumppo, having eloquently thundered against the merciless and wasteful slaughter of pigeons, winds up killing one himself.

This contradictoriness becomes, it seems, an American way of being, permeating women's lives and works (a Margaret Fuller's as well as a Mary Chesnut's) along with men's. Eventually, in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, the capacity for self-contradiction will be openly celebrated. But by the time my students reach these nineteenth-century defenses, they have inevitably acquired a hollow ring and appear all too blatantly self-serving. Not surprisingly, men like William Apes, a Pequot, writing in 1837, felt baffled:

But reader, I acknowledge that this is a confused world, and I am not seeking for office; but merely placing before you the black inconsistency that you place before me—which is ten times blacker than any skin that you will find in the Universe. . . . If black or red skins, or any other skin color is disgraceful to God, it appears that he has disgraced himself a great deal—for he has made fifteen colored people to one white, and placed them here upon this earth.

Now let me ask you, white man, is it a disgrace for you to eat, drink and sleep with the image of God, or sit, or walk and talk with them? Or have you the folly to think that the white man, being one in fifteen or sixteen, are the only beloved images of God? (pp. 1756–57)

If Apes, an ordained minister in the Methodist Church, was perplexed by the heritage that the dominant society bequeathed him, so by this time were my students. Why, they wanted to

know, were authors such as Apes lost—authors from whom they felt they learned so much? “I know students I want to give these readings to,” said one woman, who works in a high-school library. She was referring to Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, David Walker, and Henry Garnet, as well as Apes, for all these writers were “new” to her and all had moved her—and most of the other students—profoundly. Even as we discussed the racial and ethnocentric biases inseparable from canonization (for what group will not “canonize” its own?), the president asked Billy Graham to the White House so that they could pray together before the United States began its counterinvasion of Kuwait. Without my inviting it, the possibility of another kind of holy war—this one in Democracy’s name—had entered the classroom.

Somewhere along the way, my students had begun to bring me presents. A bulletin on the upcoming quincentennial celebration of Columbus’s landing in America: some people, the bulletin warned, see this as an occasion for mourning, not for celebration; there could be protests from a variety of quarters. An article by Walter Myers, a black writer of children’s books, which observed that since Great Society funding dried up, publishers’ interest in literature aimed at black children had commensurately dwindled. A review of *Dances with Wolves* by Dianne Dumanoski, in the *Boston Globe* (January 14, 1991), which quoted Donald Worcester, a historian at the University of Kansas:

“We’ve never had good self-understanding. . . . Our national myth is an ‘imperialistic one’ that celebrates conquest of the land and of other people. . . . Our history has been driven by a powerful urge to acquire wealth and power, and that has had very destructive consequences at times.” Confronting and acknowledging the imperialistic strand in our culture “should help us mature as a people.”

The student underlined the entire quotation.

Like the presents themselves, her italics told me what I already

knew. That the issues raised by the literature collected in *The Heath Anthology* could not be confined to the classroom. They were part of the fabric of American society—the American way of life. They were there from the beginning and, as America launched its latest crusade, they were with us now. Angry—and no doubt out of line—I told my students about B.T.’s, a bar in Dearborn, Michigan, where on “Rambo Wet Panty Nights” men with black plastic Uzi submachine guns squirt water at the vaginas of scantily clad go-go dancers named Vietnam, Nicaragua, and now, I supposed, Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

For one student, the whole thing was too much. She vehemently objected to the way the anthology “turned the class into a political arena,” and she objected to my politics as well. She was, she pointed out, a “captive audience.” She was furious and I lost her. But her words touched off anxieties of my own and I worried both about my teaching and about the other students. Whether or not the war had forced this turn, the anthology—its principles, its gathered insights—had become our text, and running through it like a fiber of gold (or was it pyrite?) was Jefferson’s promise of equality, a promise whose betrayal spoke to the violated vision of America, to the dream that again and again was deferred, and to the constant resort to self-justification that resulted.

I could not treat the writers in this anthology as if they were “apolitical” if I tried. Indeed, to pretend they were, or that political issues did not lie at the heart of American literature itself, would be the worst—and most politically motivated—of lies. If Bradford and Jefferson are “American” literature, then so are Douglass, the Grimké sisters, and Apes. And if this is true, then the issues I was dealing with—and which so enraged that one student—were ones I could not in all fairness avoid.

“I can’t help but think of the irony in a country (*my country*) that professes to be concerned about human rights in view of its

3. See Jill Dolan, “Desire Cloaked in a Trenchcoat,” *Drama Review*, vol. XXXIII, no. 1 (Spring 1989).

history with Native Americans, blacks, women," one student wrote, speaking of the Gulf War. But by the nineteenth century we were mired in other, multiplying, ironies as well. "Man's warfare on the trees is terrible," Lydia Huntley Sigourney declares in "Fallen Forests" (1854), a poem I brought into class. In 1849, Caroline Kirkland helplessly protests the casual rapes of Western forests and the less immediately noticeable transformation of "our fields of golden grain into 'fire water'—a branch of business in which Michigan is fast improving." Meanwhile, back in Concord, America's "first" naturalist, Thoreau, lauds the "bush-whack, the turf-cutter, the spade, and the bog-hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed with the dust of many a hard-fought field." The future, he avers, lies in the West. As our continent is larger, so our "intellect" will be "on a grander scale." Predictably, my students, who, by now, have had their fill of self-contradiction, want to know why Thoreau is considered so great. Just as predictably, I want to know how he—so sensitive, presumably, to language—can not hear himself.

Yet ironically, it is in the work of one of F.O. Matthiessen's five "great" writers that the course, the anthology, and the present state of America do finally come together—in Melville's "Benito Cereno." For Captain Delano, the "innocent" American—whose dangerous opacity Melville saw so clearly—has never been innocent. We know that now. He has been implicated in the evil around him from the beginning.

But he has always managed to project his evil onto others: the Pequots, the Africans, witches, the wilderness, the White Whale, Russia, Vietnam, Iraq. The making of the "American Adam" requires that the rest of the world bear the burden of his sin, that the enemy always be other than himself.

No wonder, then, that the defense of the canon has been accompanied by such virulent emotion. To "open up" the canon, to include the voices of those who have been excluded, is to expose the "Adamic" myth for what it is: the impregnable shield of our

corruption, the singular vision by which we have been able to justify to ourselves the crimes we have committed in our own name. And what will we be without it? What kind of America will we forge from the knowledge that our idealism has not freed us (*pace* Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman) from Old World sin? That, if anything, our dreams of innocence have led us to commit further sins that are in some sense uniquely our own? How, in short, will we still love ourselves? How will we praise our "famous" men?

And yet a student writes:

It's funny that it's coming together in the "recognized" writers . . . but I don't think I'd be coming to the same understanding without the "unrecognized" writers as well. . . . [R]eading the recognized and un-recognized voices *together* makes up a truer reading of American literature—To understand the lack of cohesiveness, the apparent contradictions in Emerson and Thoreau[,] you need to understand what they were ignoring (subconsciously or unconsciously), as well as what they were protesting—To appreciate the clarity and certainty of Douglass you have to understand how rare it was, what a victory it was. To understand the richness of Hawthorne and Melville you have to see the underlying tensions. To see the confusions of Wheatley and Jacobs you need to understand the tightrope of cooperation and struggle they walked.

She is right, of course. There is no way to teach one set of writers without the other, however tight a rope this forces us to walk. For both are inextricably part of a whole, that whole, America. But insofar as inclusion of the "unrecognized" writers forces us to be aware that American literature is, in Hazel Carby's words, "centrally concerned with the formation of a national subjectivity and ideology that construct and simultaneously exclude a racialized other"—an "other" on whom, in turn, we have projected our "evil"—and whom we have chosen economically as well as spiritually to exploit—the teaching of American literature will never be safe. The men with the black plastic submachine-guns—or the black briefcases filled with "great books" and initialed, perhaps,

NAS (if not NRA)—will always be looking for some way to get back their own. “Virulent passion” will always accompany their resistance.

*Postscript:* Between the time I began this essay and the time I finished it, a spate of attacks on multiculturalism has appeared in the media. These attacks, ostensibly written in a “liberal” defense of free speech and free academic inquiry, have wildly misrepresented the goals, intentions, and methods of multiculturalism, identifying it, among other things, as a movement to throw out “major” authors in favor of a unilateral presentation of, presumably, third-rate (but politically correct) writers. This is nonsense, but it is dangerous and inflammatory nonsense. And its sudden and widespread popularity suggests that the real battle over the canon has just begun.

# IV

## BEYOND PC





action and friendship, the black student talking about the set of views the white student appears to hold.

It is misunderstandings such as these, arising in an atmosphere of fierce competition, in a setting of remarkable ethnic and racial diversity, that lead some critics to jump gleefully to the conclusion that diversity is not working. But there is another, more hopeful interpretation. Berkeley's students are grappling with one of the most difficult situations in the world: ethnic and racial turf. They are doing this, however modestly, over relatively safe issues such as what kind of music gets played or who sits where in the lunchroom. Perhaps they will learn how to handle conflict, how to divvy up scarce resources, how to adjust, fight, retreat, compromise, and ultimately get along in a future that will no longer be dominated by a single group spouting its own values as the ideal homogenized reality for everyone else. If our students learn even a small bit of this, they will be far better prepared than students tucked safely away in anachronistic single-culture enclaves. And what they learn may make a difference not just for their personal futures, but for a world struggling with issues of nationalism, race, and ethnicity.

## On the Virtues of a Loose Canon



TODD GITLIN



**I** UNDERSTAND THE "political correctness" controversy as the surface of a deeper fault line—a trauma in American cultural identity.

America's current identity crisis was precipitated by several events. First, the collapse of the Cold War denied the United States an opponent in the tug-of-war between capitalism and communism. When the enemy let go of the rope, the American "team"—constituted to hold the line against tyranny—was dropped on its collective ass. We are now on the prowl for a new enemy, something or someone to mobilize against: Noriega, drugs, Satan, Saddam Hussein, or the newest bogey: "political correctness"—a breed of left-wing academic intolerance and exclusion that ends up shackling not only free speech but free-flowing intellectual inquiry—a perversion of a sensible multicultural program of tolerance and inclusion.

Though political correctness is rightly condemned for its flights of excess, opponents often fail to separate multiculturalism from the PC version of tribalism. Indeed, some of the Right's intolerance is aimed not at the message but at the messengers: immigrants of color—mostly Asian and Hispanic—whose numbers have greatly increased on campuses since the sixties. These groups, along with African Americans and women, now want access—not just to the corridors of the academy but to its curriculum.

Let's face it: some of the controversy over the canon and the new multiculturalism has to do with the fact that the complexion

of the United States—on its campuses and in the country as a whole—is getting darker. In 1960, 94 percent of college students were white. Today almost 20 percent are nonwhite or Hispanic and about 55 percent are women.

It is the confluence of these events—the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the “typical American”—that appears to have stirred up a particularly vocal reaction at this time to the multicultural movement within the academy. Just note the degree of alarm, the alacrity with which the media have jumped on this issue. *Newsweek*, the *Atlantic*, the *New Republic*, and *New York Times* jumped up with cover stories on race, multiculturalism, and the politically correct movement on college campuses. The *New York Times* has given extensive coverage to the PC trend. And George Bush, knowing a no-risk issue when he sees it, gave the commencement address to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor on “the new intolerance” of political correctness sweeping college campuses, what he called “the boring politics of division and derision”—an ironic comment coming from the man who elevated race-baiting, through his Willie Horton commercials, to an art form.

In important ways, hysteria rules the response to multiculturalism. Academic conservatives who defend a canon, tight or loose, sometimes sound as if American universities were fully and finally canonized until the barbarians showed up to smash up the pantheon and install Alice Walker and Toni Morrison in place of the old white men. These conservatives act as if we were floating along in unadulterated canon until sixties radicals came along and muddied the waters. Moreover, the hysterics give the misleading impression that Plato and St. Augustine have been banned.

The tight canonists don’t take account, either, of the fact that the canon has always been in flux, constantly shifting under our feet. Literary historian Leo Marx made the point that when he was in school it was a fight to get good, gay Walt Whitman into the canon, and to get John Greenleaf Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and James Russell Lowell out.

Still, without doubt there *has* been a dilution of essential modes of critical reasoning, the capacity to write, and a general knowledge of the contours of world history and thought. And this is to be deplored and resisted.

Indeed, there is a side of the academic conservatives argument I agree with. There are a shocking number of students not only in run-of-the-mill segments of higher education but in elite institutions who are amazingly uneducated in history, literature, and the fundamentals of logic, who don’t know the difference between an argument and an assertion. There is a know-nothing mood in some quarters that refuses to understand that the ideas and practices of many a dead white male have been decisive in Western—and therefore world—history.

But the stupidification of our students cannot be blamed simply on shifts in the canon. Cultural illiteracy has crept into our educational process for a variety of reasons. In fact, America’s higher illiteracy—to call it by a name Thorstein Veblen might have appreciated—is largely a function of the so-far irresistible force of popular culture as the shaper of popular discourse. By popular discourse, I mean not only the way we speak on the street but the way we speak as presidents and presidential candidates. This is a culture in which “read my lips” or “make my day” constitutes powerful and persuasive speech.

We live in a sound-bite culture, one that has taken anti-elitism as its sacred principle. In the United States, to master a vocabulary that is superior to the mediocre is to be guilty of disdain, of scorning democracy. Though conservatives will not be happy to hear about it, this leveling principle has the full force of market capitalism working for it, a force that insists that the only standard of value is a consumer sovereignty—what people will buy. Since what people will buy are slogans and feel-good pronouncements, it is not surprising that schools and universities have degraded themselves in a frantic pursuit of the lowest common denominator.

This said, we must also condemn the bitter intolerance emanating from much of the academic left—steadily more bitter with

each passing Republican year as students who feel politically helpless go looking for targets of convenience. The Right exaggerates the academic left's power to enforce its prejudices, but is rightly appalled by a widespread self-righteous illiberalism. Academic freedom—the irreducible prerequisite of a democratic society—goes by the board when students at Berkeley and Michigan disrupt classes (whether of a prejudiced anthropologist or a liberal sociologist, respectively). With the long-overdue withering of Marxism, the academic left has degenerated into a loose aggregation of margins—often cannibalistic, romancing the varieties of otherness, speaking in tongues.

In this new interest-group pluralism, the shopping center of identity politics makes a fetish of the virtues of the minority, which, in the end, is not only intellectually stultifying but also politically suicidal. It creates a kind of parochialism in which one is justified in having every interest in difference and no interest in commonality. One's identification with an interest group comes to be the first and final word that opens and terminates one's intellectual curiosity. As soon as I declare I am a Jew, a black, a Hispanic, a woman, a gay, I have no more need to define my point of view.

It is curious and somewhat disturbing that this has become a position on the Left since, as Isaiah Berlin has eloquently pointed out in his essays on nationalism, adherents of these views walk head-on into the traditional nationalist trap—a trap that led participants of the German *Sturm und Drang* movement against French cultural imperialism, in the end, to fascism, brutal irrationalism, and the oppression of minorities.

But there is an interesting difference between the German *Sturm und Drang* and our own “Storm and Stress” reaction to monochromatic presentations of history and literature. The Romantics of that period were opposing a French-imposed imperialism. What imperialism is being imposed in the United States? Is it the hegemony of Enlightenment ideals of reason and equality, the values of universalism?

If America's multiculturalism means respect for actual difference, we should uphold and encourage this reality against the white-bread, golden-arch version of Disneyland America.

On the other hand, if multiculturalism means there is nothing but difference, then we must do everything we can to disavow it. We cannot condone the creation by the Left of separate cultural reservations on which to frolic. There *are* unities—to recognize, to appreciate, deplore, or whatever, but at least to acknowledge. There is America's strange admixture of individualism and conformity. There is the fact of American military, political, cultural, and—still—economic power on a world scale. There are shared myths that cut across tribal lines. We may deplore the ways in which America recognizes itself. Indeed, the Persian Gulf War, the Academy Awards, or the Super Bowl are not high notes in the symphony of civilization, though that is when our culture seems to collectively acknowledge itself. Nonetheless, the United States is also a history, an organization of power and an overarching culture. The world is interdependent and America is not simply a sum of marginalities.

Authentic liberals have good reason to worry that the elevation of “difference” to a first principle is undermining everyone's capacity to see, or change, the world as a whole. And those who believe that the idea of the Left is an idea of universal interdependence and solidarity—of liberty, equality, fraternity-and-sorority—have reason to mourn the sectarian parochialism of the academic left. To mourn and to organize, so that the Right does not, by default, monopolize the legacy of the Enlightenment.

We badly need a careful accounting of the intellectual, social, and cultural nature and roots of the new illiteracies and conformities—as well as the academy's high-level efforts to integrate hitherto submerged materials and populations.

It is not a contradiction to say that America has a real culture and also to say that this culture is conflicted, fragile, constantly in need of shoring up. The apparent contradiction is only its complexity. In fact, the identity we promote by way of giving lip ser-

vice to certain ideals about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is riddled with contradiction, or at least with tension. Ours is not a relaxed or natural ideology, nor was the French Revolution's program of liberty, equality, fraternity. The point is that we can't maximize all values simultaneously.

That is why part of the multicultural program is very important. What is required in a general multicultural program, which is *not* a program for group narcissism, is an understanding of one's own vantage point but also the vantage point of others. If we don't infuse multiculturalism with a respect for the other, all we have is American-style tribalism—a perfect recipe for a home-grown Yugoslavia.

## Defending the Gains



PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS



I AM ABOUT TO TURN forty years old. While I suppose that makes me a Baby Boomer, I have always thought of myself as a Little Rocker: my earliest memories include the integration of the schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, by children just about my age. My life's expanse has marked some of the greatest social movements in this country's history: the civil rights movement, the peace movement, the women's movement, the struggle for the rights of lesbians and gay men, children, the homeless, and the variously abled. My forty years have traversed oil crises, Motown, Vietnam, liberation from the female necessities of bra, girdle, garters, and straightened hair, and the entire span of Justice Thurgood Marshall's remarkable career.

My age also places me (along with Clarence Thomas) among the very first affirmative action candidates. In the fall of 1969, I entered college as one of fifty-nine blacks; the class ahead of me had only seven. In 1972, I entered law school in a class of only 12 percent women; the class four years later had 25 percent. While the numbers of blacks have suffered real declines with cutbacks in federal tuition support, very few universities in the country have retreated to pre-1970s levels. And while women's presence in universities remains largely ghettoized in many disciplines, most law schools in the country have student populations that are close to 50 percent women.

And yet forty years is still a perilously brief period in the history of social movement. If my life is representative at all of other

first-generation affirmative action Little Rockers, we are just beginning to make an impact; now is the time when our intellectual tenure and cultural power could mark or shake or shift or build upon that bedrock of consensus rather loftily called "civilization." Though women and minorities still make up a small percentage of this nation's professoriat (in law, for example, people of color account for 3 percent of the total, and all women for only 24 percent; in most other disciplines these figures are even worse), the benefits of such presence have been resounding. Women's studies and feminist theory have been profoundly stimulating. Latina and black women's literature is enjoying a popularity not seen since the Harlem Renaissance. Ethnic studies, Holocaust studies, multiculturalism, and global intercommunication could make this world a better place for all of us. As reactionary as the U.S. government is now, I have no illusions about it being worse than in the legally segregated, McCarthyistic, pre-legal-abortion 1950s.

At the same time, I am convinced we are poised at a dangerous political crossroads that could take us back much more than forty years. This threat is clear in the right-leaning direction of recent Supreme Court opinions and appointments, the battle over the Civil Rights bill, the rising rate of bias crimes everywhere, the technologizing of reproduction, and the slick commercialization of "formerly crude" hate-mongers from David Duke to Andrew Dice Clay. In academia, this trend has gotten an insidious boost in the right-wing attack on "political correctness." From the *Atlantic* to *Newsweek* to "This Week with David Brinkley," there has been a relentless assault on the views of those lumped together hyperbolically as "black activists, militant homosexuals, and radical feminists," charging them (us? could that really be me?) with "politicizing" curricula, pushing "intellectual conformity sometimes enforced by intimidation," and turning "whining" into the science of "victimology."

I think that what is going on in the attack on us liberals and Little Rockers is nothing less than *intellectual blockbusting*. I re-

member when I was little, in the late fifties, two or more black families moved into our neighborhood, where for fifty years my family had been the only blacks. I remember the father of my best friend, Cathy, going from house to house, warning the neighbors, like Paul Revere with Chicken Little's brain, that the property values were falling, the values were falling. The area changed overnight. Whites who had seen me born and baked me cookies at Halloween and grown up with my mother fled for their lives. ("We'd have to hold our breath all the time because colored people smell different," said Cathy with some conviction about the pending move. Cathy, who was always a little slow about these things, had difficulty with the notion of me as "colored": "No, you're not" and then, later, "Well, you're different.")

The mass movement that turned my neighborhood into an "inner city" was part of the first great backlash to the civil rights movement. I think we are now seeing the second great backlash, waged against the hard-won principles of equal opportunity (disguised as a fight about reverse discrimination and "quotas") in the workplace and in universities-as-feeders for the workplace.

On campus, the enemies of diversity are trying to make universities more like fortresses against the siege of those who are perceived to be uncivilized heathen. (Wherever 3 percent or more of us are gathered, it's a siege, I guess.) The cry has been sounded: the standards are falling, the standards are falling.

The story of my inner-city neighborhood would have been vastly different if Cathy and her family had bothered to stick around to get to know the two nice black families who moved in. Similarly, the future of U.S. universities—particularly in the hoped-for global economy—could be a fascinating one if campus communities chose to take advantage of the rich multiculturalism that this society offers. We face a quite disastrous intellectual crisis, however, if our universities persist in the culture-baiting that has brought us the English-only movement, the brazen presumption that any blacks seen on campus don't deserve to be there (in effect, the "Bensonhurstification" of the Ivy League), and the

mounting levels of verbal and physical violence directed against people of color, women, Jews, Arabs, lesbians, and gays.

Given this, it is all too easy to spend a lot of time being defensive. We've all heard the silly lameness of the retorts into which these attacks box us: "I am too qualified!" "Vote for me but not because I'm a woman!" But it doesn't work. Powerful cultural stereotypes are simply not dispelled by waving your degrees in people's faces. (That's precisely ultraconservative Dinesh D'Souza's whole premise in his much-touted book, *Illiberal Education*: that an Ivy League degree just isn't worth what it used to be now that the riffraff has moved in.)

So enough. Our hardest job in these times is not to forget *why* we (the effete lefty rainbow troublemakers who plot the demise of Dead White Canon-meisters are where we are. We cannot forget the strength and comfort of our coalitions, the sacrifice that went into our fragile presence in organizations from grass-roots level to the headiest groves of academe. And we cannot forget that our biggest task in all this is coming together—not merely to overcome the sense of personal diminishment, but to fight *collectively* the persistent devaluation of our intellectual contributions. Recently, for example, I guest-lectured in the class of a constitutional law professor who was teaching disparate impact cases. As I spoke about shifting demographics and white flight, the class grew restless, the students flipping pages of newspapers and otherwise evidencing disrespect. Afterward, the two or three black students congratulated me for speaking so straightforwardly, and for using the words *black* and *white*. I later asked the professor, how is it possible to teach cases about racial discrimination without mentioning race? I just reach the neutral principles, he replied; I don't want to risk upsetting the black students. (And yet it was clear that those most upset were the white students.)

This tendency to neutralize is repeated throughout the law school curriculum: "core" classes carve off and discard some of their most important parts—like welfare and entitlement programs from tax policy, consumer protection law from commercial

contract. And even though the civil rights movement was one of the most singularly transformative forces in the history of constitutional law, very little of it is taught in basic contract law classes. (When I took con law, we spent almost four months on the Commerce Clause.) Some schools—and by no means all—pick up the pieces by having such optional courses as Poverty Law, Law and Feminism, or Race and the Law. It is no wonder that the Rehnquist court can cavalierly undo what took so many lives and years to build: the process of legal education mirrors the social resistance to antidiscrimination principles. Subject matter considered to be "optional" is ultimately swept away as uneconomical "special" interests—as thoughtlessly in real life as it has been in law schools.

And the smooth bulwark of "neutral principles" is one way of avoiding the very hard work that moral judgment in any sphere requires, the constant balancing—whether we act as voters, jurors, parents, lawyers, or laypeople—of rules, precepts, principles, and context. I have always thought that developing the ability to engage in such analytical thought is the highest goal of great universities. Yet even this most traditional of educational missions is under attack. "Should [parents] be paying \$20,000 a year to have their children sitting there, figuring out how they feel about what they read?" asks James Barber, founder of the neoconservative National Association of Scholars at Duke University. His question underscores the degree to which the right-wing fear of Balkanized campuses is in fact the authoritarian's worst nightmare of a world in which people actually think for themselves.

But even assuming no hostility to the incorporation of issues of race, class, and gender into the curriculum, understanding their profound sociopathology in all of our lives will take years of patient unraveling. Consider the criminal law scholar who taught a class on rape law in an undergraduate seminar of about fifteen women. The professor asked them to write essays on their experiences with date rape, which they then shared in class. While I have much to say about the pedagogical problematic of such an

assignment in the first place, I will hold my tongue here, for by student account the exercise was a successful one that felt safe, moving, and empowering. The next semester, however, he took those same essays and read them aloud to the snickers of his largely male class of about 150 criminal law students. This time it was clearly an exercise in voyeurism and disempowerment. Several of the women in that class were so upset they cried or walked out. Facing complaints, the professor professed bewilderment: "Are you saying a man can never teach rape?" "I was just letting the women speak in their own voices." "This was no different from what I did last semester and no one complained."

Learning to see the differences, to understand the pernicious subtlety of what it means to live in a culture of pornography or racism—these are the issues we must be debating in universities. These are the considerations that will best humanize our pedagogy in lasting ways.

As a footnote to this vignette, I daresay it would not come as a great surprise if I mentioned that the real issue got sidetracked by a discussion of the professor's First Amendment rights to academic freedom. The First Amendment, however, has little if anything to do with the real crisis facing our campuses. I'm willing to assume that there's a constitutional right to say anything, anywhere, anytime. But this does not answer the dilemma of how to deal with the concerted propaganda of violence that is subverting any potential for creativity in higher education today.

I want to know, for example, what to do about a black female colleague who went into teaching after a distinguished career as a civil rights litigator. After one year she quit. Among the myriad horror stories she recounts (and that too many of us can recount): A student came to her and told her that there was a bullet with her name on it. At first I thought she was using some kind of awful metaphor, but it turned out that another of her students had actually taken a bullet, carved her name on the side of it, and was showing it to his classmates. (Although the dean of the law school casually promised to mention it to a psychiatrist friend, there was

absolutely no institutional response of any sort to this incident.)

Predictably, the ability to mount a campaign of harassment depends on muffling the cries of resistance. In campus politics, this has come in the form of right-wing efforts to disparage the language of resistance: attacks on "sensitivity" as "mental vegetarianism"; charges of sexism, racism, and homophobia as the products of whining immaturity, and victimization as the brewed concoction of practitioners of that dark science, "victimology."

Yet the ability to be, yes, dammit, *sensitive* to one another is the essence of what distinguishes the joy of multiculturalism or willing assimilation from the oppression of groupthink and totalitarianism. When I was visiting Durham, North Carolina, during the Helms-Gantt election last year [1990], a friend of mine said she wanted me to see something. Without any explanation, she drove me over to the Chapel Hill campus of the University of North Carolina and dragged me to the center of campus. There, right in front of the student union, was a statue titled "The Student Body." It was a collection of cast bronze figures, slightly smaller than life-size. One was of an apparently white, Mr. Chips-style figure with a satchel of books on his back, pursuing his way. Another was of a young woman of ambiguous racial cast, white or maybe Asian, carrying a violin and some books and earnestly pursuing her way. A third figure was of a young white woman struggling under a load of books stretching from below her waist up to her chin. Then two white figures: a young man holding an open book with one hand; his other arm floated languidly downward, his hand coming to casual rest upon a young woman's buttocks. The young woman leaned into his embrace, her head drooped on her shoulder like a wilted gardenia. In the center of this arrangement was the figure of an obviously black young man. He was dressed in gym shorts and he balanced a basketball on one finger. The last figure was of a solemn-faced young black woman; she walked alone, a solitary book balanced on her head.

It turned out that I was about the only one in the state of North Carolina who hadn't heard about this statue. A gift from the class

of 1985, it had been the topic of hot debate. Some students, particularly black and feminist students, had complained about the insensitivity of this depiction as representative of the student bod(ies). Other students said the first students were just "being sensitive" (invoked disparagingly, as though numskulledness were a virtue). At that point the sculptor, a woman, got in on the act and explained that the black male figure was in honor of the athletic prowess of black UNC grads like Michael Jordan, and that the black female figure depicted the grace of black women. The university, meanwhile, congratulated itself publicly on how fruitfully the marketplace of ideas had been stimulated.

As I stood looking at this statue in amazement, I witnessed a piece of the debate-as-education. Two white male students were arguing with a black female student.

"You need to lighten up," said one of the men.

"But . . ." said the black woman.

"Anyway, black women *are* graceful," said the other.

At the end, the black woman walked off in tears, while the white men laughed. There is a litany of questions I have heard raised about scenarios like this: Why should the university "protect" minority students against this sort of thing? Don't they have to learn to deal with it?

Let me pose an alternative set of my own: Why should universities be in the business of putting students in this sort of situation to begin with? Since when is the persistent reduction of black men and all women to their physical traits "educational" of anything? How is it that these sorts of ignorant free-for-alls are smiled upon by the same university officials who resist structuring curricula to actually teach the histories of minorities and women?

Syndicated columnist Nat Hentoff is very insistent that the solution to the campus multiculturalism struggle is to just talk about it, one-on-one, without institutional sanction or interference. But this solution makes only certain students—those who are most frequently the objects of harassment—the perpetual teachers not merely of their histories, but of their very right just to be students.

This is an immense burden, a mountainous presumption of non-inclusion that must be constantly addressed and overcome. It keeps us eternally defensive and reactive.

Nor is this issue of legitimacy merely one for students. The respect accorded any teacher is only in small—if essential—part attributable to the knowledge inside one's head. (If that were all, we would have much more respect for street-corner orators, the elderly, and the clear uncensored vision of children.) What makes me a teacher is a force lent to my words by virtue of the collective power of institutional convention. If faculty do not treat women as colleagues, then students will not treat women as members of the faculty.

An example to illustrate the dimension of this problem: A poetry reading at a school where I once taught, a casual event. A white male student in one of my seminars stood up and read a poem attributed to Rudyard Kipling, comparing the relative lustiness of white, brown, yellow, and "nigger" women. In the silence that followed his reading, I asked to go next. I read a short prose poem about my great-great-grandmother having been raped at the age of eleven by her master, my great-great-grandfather. I made no other comment.

The next day, the student went to another faculty member and complained that I seemed unduly upset by his reading; he said he was afraid that I would not be able to grade him objectively, and he would be subjected to the unfairness of my prejudice. The faculty member's response was, "I'm sure you two can work it out."

Now the one thing that this student and I could quickly agree on was that this was a deeply unsatisfactory resolution: in reducing the encounter to one-on-one, this suggestion ignored the extent to which what was going on was (for both of us) a crisis of power, a dislocation of legitimacy. This was no mere difference of individually held opinion, and it could not be resolved at that level. For the university community to act as though it could be was to abandon its function as a player in the moral debate about the propaganda of human devaluation.



The dilemma I face at this moment in the academic world is this: If I respond to or open discussion about offensive remarks from students in my classes, I am called "PC" and accused of forcing my opinions down the throats of my students—and of not teaching them the real subject matter. If I respond with no matter what degree of clear, dignified control, I become a militant black female who terrifies "moderate" students. If I follow the prevalent advice of "just ignoring it," then I am perceived as weak, humiliated, ineffectual, a doormat.

It's great to turn the other cheek in the face of fighting words; it's probably even wise to run. But it's not a great way to maintain authority in the classroom—in a society that abhors "wimps" and where "kicking ass" is a patriotic duty. In such a context, "just ignoring" verbal challenges from my law students is a good way to deliver myself into the category of the utterly powerless. If, moreover, my white or male colleagues pursue the same path (student insult, embarrassed pause, the teacher keeps on teaching as though nothing has happened), we have collectively created that peculiar institutional silence that is known as a moral vacuum.

And that, I think, would be the ultimate betrayal of forty years' worth of hard-won gains.

## The Multicultural West



REED WAY DASENBROCK



WHEN WE SPEAK of a common Western culture or, more narrowly, of a common European culture, we are speaking of something that took millennia to construct and consolidate. There was no common European identity two thousand years ago, just a collection of disparate peoples and cultures ranging from the world's most powerful and sophisticated, the Roman Empire, to the rude Germanic and Celtic peoples of the North. By now, it is those rude, uncivilized people who seem to stand at the center of European culture. Joseph Conrad's brilliant frame for *Heart of Darkness* reminds his British readers of 1900 that Britain, by then the very center of European civilization, was once also a "heart of darkness," considered by its Roman conquerors to lie at the outer edges of civilization.

What created the relative coherence of European culture we see today out of this multiplicity of peoples, cultures, and traditions? Contemporary thinking usually answers, *domination*—assuming that we always go on being ourselves until someone else overpowers us. However, though force undoubtedly played a role, Europe did not take shape primarily through conquest or forcible assimilation. (The Roman conquest of Britain left a few ruins but had little lasting effect.) It was created primarily by cultural imitation, the mysterious process by which one culture responds to the influence of another. Indeed, the key moment in the creation of a European culture was not the initial sudden emergence of essen-