

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

graduate students should be encouraged to pursue studies in African American literature and that universities should hire such students on completion of their degrees) and her third main point (that we need to be on the lookout for white interlopers in the field). The question that McKay fails to address adequately is how we can tell the white interlopers from the white noninterlopers. Who is to judge? What are the criteria, given that “time, energy, and commitment” are hard to quantify (367)? Perhaps universities are reluctant to hire a white to teach African American literature not just because they are hoping to hire a black but because they are afraid of hiring an interloper.

I write all this as a white scholar whose area of specialization is, in part, African American literature. I have been through the job interviews McKay alludes to where the only real question was the color of my skin; I have seen ads for positions I could fill return to the job lists year after year. Although no one in my graduate department cautioned me against working in African American literature, the job search process proved to me that it was not the most practical line of study I could have undertaken. The end result of my job search was that I found myself in the ironic position of being a white professor teaching African American literature (among other things) to a student body made up almost entirely of African Americans. I have spent the last six years at Fisk University, one of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that McKay leaves out of her discussion completely, other than to note that in the late 1960s white institutions took their brightest stars. In the current market as well, HBCUs have been particularly and adversely affected by the demand for black PhDs, whom these schools cannot hope to lure away from Ivy League universities and other elite institutions. HBCUs have been willing to hire white faculty members to teach African American literature largely because the other option, to leave it untaught, is not possible, given the schools’ mission and student bodies. I feel that in my six years at Fisk I have proved myself a legitimate scholar in African American literature, but, believe me, I felt like an interloper for several years, even though I was academically trained in the discipline. I still get into arguments with students who would take great exception to McKay’s statement that “[t]o learn [African American literature] is to ‘know’ it, and only those willing to learn will know” (366); these students would say that I may have “learned” African American literature but I don’t “know” it and never can because I am not black.

Reading McKay’s column left me with the uncomfortable feeling of being on the hot seat again, much as Phillis Wheatley must have felt facing her judges. McKay makes me question anew my status as a noninterloper. In

the final analysis, what she seems to be implying, or at least what I infer from her argument, is that the only people who can confirm whether a white scholar is a true patriot or an interloper are African Americans. Instead of eliminating the Wheatley court, then, McKay’s discussion leads her to reinscribe it in opposite terms: white scholars now have to be judged by their black superiors.

I don’t believe that this was the message McKay intended to deliver in her piece, but she should be made aware of how her comments could be interpreted.

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To the Editor:

As a white male professor of American and British literature who has taught African American literature intermittently in a small midwestern department of English since fall 1970, I agree generally with Nellie McKay, especially with her point that “[t]raining and learning” must be provided to scholars in order that anyone, regardless of ethnicity, can pursue the study of African American literature appropriately (366). However, I think she uses the term “Wheatley court” ill-advisedly.

McKay refers continually to the Wheatley court as that which must be “abolish[ed]” or “disbanded” before “a black pipeline of eager young scholars will flow as it should, and the walls of African American scholarly resentment toward white academic interlopers and of the fears of those guarding white, black, and all other intellectual territories inside our common property will come tumbling down around us. Then we will all be free to claim our full American literary heritage” (368, 364, 368). I believe she is correct in arguing that better-prepared scholars of African American literary works are needed, but I think that biased or uninformed critics, literary reviewers, and members of the public, not the judges of a Wheatley court, have been discouraging objective appraisal of African American literary efforts.

After all, as McKay reports, the Wheatley court declared in writing that “the works [were Wheatley’s] and, by extension, eligible for publication under her name.” Before this so-called court, says McKay, “[i]n a stunning repudiation of the white supremacy espoused by such Enlightenment luminaries as Immanuel Kant and David Hume, the Senegalese slave girl proved the skeptics wrong” (360). To my knowledge, we have not convened such a court today, but we still have biased readers and scholars in need of appropriate training and learning.

Further, when McKay writes that her “generation (the black studies generation) of African American specialists”