Teaching What You're Not

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This collection is poised between a revolution and a counterrevolution. It emerges at a critical moment in American higher education—when the momentum of liberalization that transformed higher education in the second half of this century is decelerating in the face of conservative forces seeking their own brand of transformation by the opening of the next century. The story of the revolution begins fifty years ago, with VJ Day and the return of hundreds of thousands of GIs eager to receive their due and enter the elitist club of American higher education. Their example was followed in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s by veterans of Korea and Vietnam. Throughout this period, the dramatic growth of public institutions helped convert higher education from a privilege available to a few to a right accessible to all. With the victories of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, including affirmative action legislation, the growing student population became increasingly diverse. In 1993, which may turn out to have been the watershed of university diversity, minority enrollment accounted for 26 percent of the total college and university undergraduate enrollment.¹

Wooed and welcomed into institutions where they nevertheless re-
mainly distinctly marginal, African Americans and other minorities banded into campus communities whose badge of membership was a particular marker of “otherness”—color, accent, physical characteristics, and so forth. During this period, the term “identity” underwent a telling reconceptualization, evolving from its 1960s association with self-absorbed individualism à la Holden Caulfield to a signifier of group affiliation. Identity was no longer a personal, individuating matter, but a function of those phenomenological characteristics one shared with others. As their numbers grew on campus, minority identity groups began to articulate identity-based interests and submit identity-based demands that were, in many cases, met by administrations often unprepared to negotiate such delicate matters. The speed and effectiveness of the revolution was indeed remarkable: in the space of a generation, minority students saw those same identity markers that had always guaranteed their powerlessness and under-representation develop into sources of considerable influence and control. With the formation of the first black studies program in 1969 at San Francisco State University, “identity politics”—the negotiation of and for power derived from minority group affiliation—had become an operating reality within American academia.

The opening of the university to minority groups clearly set the stage for the phenomenon of identity politics. Less clear is the nature of the relationship between the rise of identity politics and the contemporaneous development of poststructuralist thought. Whether connected through causality or mere coincidence, the two movements have a good deal in common: both live, move, and have their being in the “deconstructability” of received truths, including, of course, the canon of white Western knowledge. While there are also crucial theoretical differences between the two, it is worth noting that the iconoclastic operation of identity politics found friendly soil in the irreverence of poststructuralist theory. Certainly, the simultaneous development of both projects contributed to the creation of a university climate in which knowledge, authority, and relationships are rou-
tinely exploded, politicized, or, to use a popular neologism of the 1990s, problematized.

In a setting where little was safe from interrogation, where ideologies were discovered behind every brick and ivy leaf, it was only a matter of time before white faculty—guardians of the now thoroughly problematized trinity of knowledge, authority, and tradition—were challenged. The most provocative of these challenges revolved around the issue of identity: within the last few years, minority constituencies on campus have begun to scrutinize the relationship between professors’ identities (again, as determined by race, sex, ethnicity, etc.) and their claims to professional authority and expertise. This debate over identity-based credibility (teaching what you are versus teaching what you’re not) is currently the most visible expression of identity politics in higher education.

Until fairly recently, there were few grounds on which a professor’s authority could be impeached. Students might complain about a course’s workload or a professor’s teaching style, or in egregious cases about his or her professionalism (which more often involves inappropriate behavior than questionable expertise); fellow scholars might question the validity of a professor’s scholarship; but for the most part, charges of pedagogical malpractice were unthinkable. The recent demographic changes in student and faculty populations, the radical revisions of canons and curricula, and the politicization of identity, knowledge, and authority have changed all this, introducing an identity-based definition of credibility as an entirely new precondition of professional authority.

As understood by the challengers, credibility goes beyond disciplinary expertise to include affiliational and experiential components; one is a credible professor/scholar in a particular minority studies field if one can claim origin and experience within that minority culture. The recent challenges to credibility are voiced by minority students and professors alike, and they identify a variety of pedagogical and scholarly offenses conceivable only within a context of politicized
identity. Those being challenged are for the most part white men and women in the humanities and social sciences who teach and/or write about identity groups that are not only different from their own, but also historically oppressed by their own—for example, men teaching women’s studies, whites teaching black studies, heterosexuals teaching queer studies, and so on.

At a time when faculty are being accused of willfully ignoring external challenges to what they do and how they do it, these internal demands for credibility have commanded their full attention. As the essays in this anthology demonstrate, faculty are not dismissing the credibility issue as an outrageous academic fad; on the contrary, they are taking it very seriously, formulating a variety of positions on the issue with fairness, intelligence, and probity. Teaching What You’re Not: Identity, Politics in Higher Education is a collection of these positions, composed by individuals at all levels of the professoriate: prize-winning researchers, senior scholars, untenured professors, and graduate students. Written from a wide variety of identity perspectives, and in some cases impelled by firsthand experience with credibility challenges, the essays in this collection are a testament to the seriousness with which we take our teaching and the courage with which we examine and learn from critiques of our performance.

The debate over credibility and identity that this volume documents is taking place at a time when those demographic and ideological forces that have transformed American higher education in the last few decades are themselves meeting powerful challenges. With the ink barely dry on new curricula, expanded canons, and minority club charters, an educationally conservative political right is deploying its supplies of Wite-Out wherever possible. The momentum of the multicultural revolution is being counteracted by a conservative counter-revolution with a formidable momentum of its own, in large part driven by conservative lawmakers. To borrow the title of a recent book on the subject, higher education is under fire.²
The challenges aimed at higher education constitute a familiar litany: tuitions are too high; faculty are lazy, arrogant, unaccountable, and averse to undergraduate teaching; knowledge and truth have become the handservants of political correctness; identity is replacing expertise as a primary requirement for faculty appointments, and so on. Many of the detractors of higher education have the political, financial, and ideological wherewithal to act on these complaints: the dramatic changes in state and national legislatures resulting from the 1992 elections have placed a fiscal ax in the hands of the detractors. In perhaps the most staggering example, Republican governor George Pataki of New York proposed a $290 million reduction (31.5 percent) in the budget of the state university system (ultimately reduced by the legislature to $185.6 million). At the federal level, the vote in the House of Representatives to discontinue the national endowments for the arts and humanities is only one of many sobering symptoms of the country’s bad mood about higher education. The defeat of affirmative action in California demonstrates the vulnerability of the entire multicultural movement, as does the ease with which educational conservatives were able to parody the principles of multiculturalism in the political correctness debate.

In short, the American university system is on the defensive, and the current debate about identity politics is up for grabs as a weapon in the struggle. On the one hand, university critics are perfectly capable of turning it, like multiculturalism, into a caricature of itself—ludicrous measure of just how removed faculty have become from the job of educating. On the other hand, those faculty involved in the debate—and this includes those on both sides of the issue—could use it as a means of demonstrating just how seriously faculties and their universities take the job of teaching a highly heterogeneous student population. Every contributor to this volume has put the issue of identity politics to good use, in each case using it as a springboard for examining his or her own motives, qualifications, and goals as teachers and as scholars. The image of the professoriat that emerges
from these essays powerfully belies the negative image currently circulated by its critics.

One might expect a certain degree of defensiveness on the part of those faculty whose credibility has been challenged. Surely for many "majority" faculty, the charges electrifying the air of "minority" studies touch a nerve much more sensitive than that of professional credibility. For those of us whose liberal political consciousness developed during the same period that incubated multiculturalism and identity politics, it is discomfiting to find ourselves identified as "them" in an "us versus them" scenario. The dissonance between our self-image as committed, card-carrying intellectual liberals and the challengers' view of us as underqualified cultural colonizers begs for resolution. In part, our responses to these challenges become the processes through which we resolve this clamoring dissonance.

But the essays in this volume are about far more than self-justification and conscience stroking: the issue—in some cases realized in painful personal confrontations—has driven all the contributors, and many more besides, to step back from their podium and ponder the teaching role, to reconsider and in some cases redefine the goals, methods, and informing ideological assumptions of undergraduate teaching. If for no other reason, the current debate over identity politics is momentous because it has elicited this attention to the business of teaching.

While identity politics may seem an unlikely catalyst for pedagogical review, it becomes quickly apparent to anyone interested in entering the debate that all responsible arguments must work from a clear identification of what one hopes to achieve through teaching and what methods are most likely to effect these goals. These do not sound like revolutionary questions, yet too few of us—trained as disciplinary scholars rather than educators—have seriously entertained them. Higher education is fortunate in its rich resource of dedicated professors, yet many of the most dedicated have neglected to subject their teaching to the same interrogations that have so dramatically
altered what they teach and to whom. To reiterate a crucial point: the current challenges to credibility are important to all of us because they contain those interrogations and require us to review our personal missions as educators.

The essays in this anthology are written from a wide variety of identity interfaces: an African American man teaching feminist theory; white men teaching women's studies; a straight woman teaching lesbian-bisexual material; white women teaching and writing about African American history; an able-bodied woman teaching literature by women with disabilities. The positions, strategies, and arguments communicated in the essays are equally varied, as well as enormously rich and comprehensive. As the anthology editor, I am grateful for this richness, but it does make the job of organizing the essays a challenging one and any principle of organization inevitably arbitrary. A reasonable model of classification is implied in the grammar of the anthology's title—Teaching What You're Not. The phrase implies at least four questions: (1) what does teaching consist of? (2) who is doing the teaching? (3) what is being taught? and (4) who is being taught? Virtually all the essays address all these questions in some way, but with varying emphases; it is according to the emphases that the essays are grouped.

The essays in the volume's first part, "Multiculturalist Pedagogies," report a variety of pedagogical strategies developed by professors teaching a multicultural canon in a multicultural classroom. These essays allow us to observe how and to what end a progressive (or to use bell hooks's phrase, "transgressive") pedagogy emerges from classrooms in which identities are mixed in some way. They demonstrate as well how the multicultural classroom and canon have expanded not only the objects of intellectual inquiry but also the skills and methods taught in traditional liberal arts courses. Indeed, for each writer, the subject matter of the course is as much a means as an end—a tool through which certain widely applicable skills and
perspectives can be developed. For Nancy J. Peterson, teaching American literature means more than teaching a particular set of literary texts and a particular critical idiom; it must aim as well to develop in students a multicultural perspective from which they can cooperate across divisive identity lines to effect social justice. Like most of the contributors to this volume, Peterson unblinkingly accepts the inevitable entanglement of teaching and advocacy. She teaches the skills of literary analysis not merely as tools for unpacking some transcendent textual meaning, but as methods of interrogation revealing the ideological foundation of representation—literary and otherwise. As Peterson's experience teaching a Toni Morrison course demonstrates, students are most likely to develop this perspective and these skills within a classroom that is a "learning community," where dialogue replaces monologue.

Working within a very different disciplinary and identity context, Barbara Scott Winker is also concerned with building classroom community as a means of achieving a "transformation of consciousness" within her students. Winker reports the strategies and methodologies she uses when teaching classes with a significant lesbigay component, both in content and in student population. Importing the feminist activist concepts of "coalition and alliance building" into her teaching practice, Winker demonstrates a pedagogical resourcefulness that is necessary to any teacher faced with the challenges of identity politics; Winker's essay is the first of many in this volume to demonstrate how the unprecedented circumstances of the contemporary college classroom are requiring faculty to look to unfamiliar disciplines and practices for suggestions about negotiating its complexities.

This resourcefulness is demonstrated as well by Janet M. Powers, who borrows methodologies far removed from literary study to help her maneuver in multicultural literature classes. Uncertain about her own motives for teaching what she is not, Powers is disturbed by the likelihood that her students will be influenced by her mode of "gaz-
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...ing at skin, language, habits of conversation, music, ways of relating that are different from my own.” By resorting to ethnographic theory and practice in her classes, Powers believes she has at least partially mitigated the polarization of identities inevitable in multicultural classes.

The fourth essay in part 1 is a joint project written by a male professor of political science and three of his students (two women and a man) in a feminist political theory course. Challenged by students and colleagues alike for teaching a feminist theory course, J. Scott Johnson argues that professorial identity is no more or less an issue in feminist courses than in any other course. The purpose of his political theory course was not to enable a particular perspective capable of drawing certain political conclusions, but rather to model a set of skills that would allow his students to make reasoned judgments about the strengths and weaknesses of feminism in general and of specific feminist theories in particular. That Johnson achieved this goal is enviably demonstrated by one student’s statement that “by the end of the semester, I understood and could defend exactly what I believed in.” Like theater director Tyrone Guthrie, Johnson sees his teaching role as that of an “audience of one” who reflects student input in order to encourage students to evaluate and refine their own thinking. The student contributions to the essay, which describe Johnson’s teaching method and reflect the independent thinking it fostered, are a testament to just how thoroughly the cooperative method succeeded—developing not only the skills of critical thinking, but also defusing the initially troubling issue of professorial identity.

The essays grouped within part 2, “The Class Roster,” identify a consideration that is crucial to the current debate surrounding identity and teaching: a reasonable, defensible argument for or against teaching what you’re not must take into account the question of who is being taught. These essays remind us of the numerous differences that exist in student populations—both within a particular class and,
more generally, from institution to institution. These differences are definable not only in terms of color, culture, and gender, but also in terms of aptitude, education, class, values, political sophistication, and so forth. To assume a monolithic student body is to risk a useless because absolutist resolution to the debate. Put another way, pedagogical strategies that might work perfectly well in one classroom or one institution could be utter failures in a different class or institution.

Christie Farnham relates a hair-raising instance of classroom identity collision set in motion by the strong political and religious views of some of her students. Farnham’s teaching of an African American history course at Iowa State University was repeatedly challenged by black students calling for a more Afrocentrist perspective. Convinced that Afrocentric history does not always meet historiographical standards, Farnham was unwilling to represent it as historical fact in her classes, despite aggressive student demands for its inclusion. In a situation that quickly escalated into an example of identity politics at their most extreme, Farnham’s teaching was publicly excoriated by her detractors as alternately racist and incompetent. What Farnham’s experience demonstrates is that “not all problems arising out of teaching what you are not—in this case, being a white woman teaching black history—can be reduced to pedagogy or personalities.” Farnham’s insistence on conforming to the standards of her academic discipline when determining what and what not to teach raises some provocative questions about the origins and functions of disciplinary authority. Her position also constitutes an interesting counterpoint to the broader-based pedagogical practices represented in some of the preceding essays.

Barbara DiBernard, an English professor and director of a women’s studies program, has had striking evidence of just how variable the most seemingly homogeneous student populations can be. She opens her essay with an account of an epiphanic experience in a women’s literature class that can serve as a cautionary tale for all faculty about
the complex identities of every one of our students. Like many essayists in this anthology, her practical classroom experience makes her wary of the essentialist assumptions implicit in identity politics. In her teaching of literature by disabled women, she has become acutely aware of the arbitrariness of most identity markers; yet at the same time she realizes that in order to be a "political ally" of disabled women, she must agree to inhabit the position of "able-bodied" and to think in terms of polarized identities.

Celeste M. Condit’s essay reminds us of yet another way a given student population can complicate a professor’s teaching practice. In her discussion of teaching communication courses to undergraduates at the University of Georgia, Condit inserts a sobering reality check into the conversation about enabling, student-centered pedagogy. For Condit, whose communication classes consist of significant numbers of white Southern men, the problems of teaching who she is not are not mitigated by the application of progressive teaching styles. To cede authority completely by becoming a participant-observer or audience of one would put her hopelessly at the mercy of students who, in her experience, “are not sheep that we decide to teach ‘actively’ or ‘passively.’ . . . [but] highly motivated, highly skilled, and enormously self-interested people who . . . intend to minimize the pain we cause them, and sometimes to maximize the pain they inflict on us.” Condit’s experience of classroom politics may, as she observes, be a function of the differences between a professor’s goals in teaching a course and those of her students in taking it. More fundamentally, her unhappy experience at the University of Georgia is an instance of a gender politics in which the woman—even if she is the professor—will always be the loser.

Part 3, “Professorial Identities,” reflects a variety of perspectives on the issue of the relationship between a professor’s identity and the material that he or she teaches.

Accustomed to having her scholarship challenged on the basis of
her racial identity, Jacqueline Jones, noted historian in the area of African American women's history, takes the uncompromising position that the single most important qualification for any professor in any field is expertise: "Whenever anyone expresses doubts about my work as a white woman writing African American history, I reply ... 'Let's begin the discussion with my footnotes, and go on from there.'" Jones goes on to point out the political risks of assigning or selecting scholarly and teaching specialties on the basis of narrowly defined identity, pointing to the decidedly negative consequences of the tradition in history of "white men of property and privilege ... writing about ... white men of property and privilege."

The next two essays pick up Jones's point about the practical and ideological consequences of identity-determined teaching and scholarship from a very different vantage point. Lavina Dhingra Shankar, after persuasively arguing the enormous complexities of personal identity, speaks to the professional straitjacket that many "minority" faculty are forced to wear in a multicultural university. Despite her decidedly Western(ized) education, Shankar's "postcolonial identity" has dictated her curricular affiliation as much as, if not more than, her professional interests and training. As Shankar puts it, "some are born with identities, others have identities thrust on them."

Indira Karamcheti, English professor at Wesleyan University, is also concerned about the commodification of identity in the multicultural university. As a member of a non-American ethnic group teaching primarily white American students, Karamcheti has always been different from the students she teaches. As with many of the white faculty contributing to this volume, the challenges that have been posed to Karamcheti's professional authority are a function of the phenomenological mismatch between her and her students; yet in her case, the grounds for those challenges have more to do with old-fashioned racism than contemporary identity politics. Karamcheti includes a number of passages from student papers that demonstrate the double bind of "non-Caucasian" teachers, who must contend
with, on the one hand, students' low expectations of their ability to teach authoritatively, and on the other, students' equally reflexive tendency to abandon all reasonable standards of judgment once they recognize that these teachers are not "handicapped" by their ethnicity. Both Shankar's and Karamchetti's careers have provided ample evidence of the limitations that the American academy places on the pedagogical strategies and scholarly preferences of the minority teacher.

The final essay in part 3 returns us to the site of a women's studies class taught by a white male professor. Craig W. Heller's essay is concerned with the excess of authority automatically conferred by his positions as white male and professor. "How contradictory is it," Heller asks, "that I may be convincing students of the viability of a feminist message by, at least in some part, fulfilling the patriarchal expectations that many students have of male teachers?" Heller's hope is that the tension between his positionality and his pedagogical goals can be resolved by a pedagogical strategy of silence, absence, and invisibility, but he also recognizes that his "hands-off" approach is capable of sabotaging his goals every bit as much as a more authoritative style.

Part 4, "The Texts and Contexts of Teaching What You're Not," focuses very directly on the "what" of teaching what you're not. Each of these essays presents in considerable detail the use to which a particular text or disciplinary context can be put in classrooms where identity is an issue. In their concentration on specific contexts, some of these essays offer a case study approach to the issue that reflects in each instance significant learning on the part of the professor as well as the students. Robert S. Levine, professor of English at the University of Maryland, opens this part with a career-long overview of his teaching of Herman Melville's novella "Benito Cereno" to shifting student populations. Levine's essay is as good a defense of faculty seriousness about teaching as any of us could wish for; his ac-
count of a twenty-year struggle with “a recalcitrant text (and students)” provides not only a “concrete account of the implications of the curricular, pedagogical, and demographic changes” in the academy, but also a testament to the willingness of faculty to adjust to these sweeping changes.

Gary L. Lemons contextualizes his teaching strategies in a course called Redefining Womanhood: (Re)writing the Black Female Self within a short story by Audre Lorde called “Tar Beach.” Lemons’s course is explicitly political in its aim, which is to teach students “how to interrogate and critically oppose the capitalist, racist, sexist exploitation of women.” Since his own intersecting positionalities as black, male, feminist, and professor can complicate or undermine the achievement of this goal, he has developed a pedagogy and a reading list intended to be liberating for both student and professor. By concentrating on Lorde’s erotic story of lesbian union, Lemons seeks to destabilize certain limiting and generalized constructs of race, gender, and sexuality—a destabilization that not only enriches the class’s view of womanhood, but also challenges their suspicions about their black, male professor self-identifying as feminist. In this course, Lemons manages to convert what might begin as the liabilities of his own identities into vehicles for achieving his liberatory aim. His essay and his courses are not about teaching what he is not, but, as he puts it “teaching what I am—an advocate of a feminist movement in which women and men . . . struggle to end sexual oppression.”

The third essay in part 4, written by Gerard Aching, a member of a Spanish and Portuguese department, combines a theoretical argument for the substitution of practice for identity as the defining component of credibility, with a contextualization of this new definition. Aching agrees that the “identity-based definition of credibility can be misleading and essentialist in a debilitating and counterproductive manner” and proposes that credibility be understood as “an area and range of competitive practices or strategies,” not as a function of race, gender, or ethnicity. The potential productiveness of transgressing
identity lines and disciplinary specializations is demonstrated within his account of student experiences in a study and service abroad program.

Donna J. Watson's essay offers the perspective, not of teacher, scholar, or student, but of black woman writer whose texts might become the object of "alien" scrutiny in a classroom or professional conference. Watson's essay is not an argument for or against teaching or criticizing what you're not; rather, it is a powerful representation of what writing and written texts signify within the black female culture. Her contextualization of black women's writing within a history of silence, oppression, fear, and paralysis reflects the importance of black women's texts to black women writers and readers. Watson does not subscribe to the ownership school of literary studies, but she does recommend that any academic writer (or, by implication, teacher) remember and be sensitive to the context within which black women's writing is created and read.

Mary Elizabeth Lanser's essay also contextualizes a resolution to the identity/credibility debate—not by citing a discussion of her teaching within a certain text, but rather by inserting the historical and political context of black studies into the discussion. Lanser insists that "it is virtually impossible to comprehend the territoriality that has developed among black scholars in black studies" without understanding "the roots of black studies as both an intellectual pursuit and a way of life" (emphasis added). The context Lanser provides is critical to a full understanding of the exclusionary position held by some minority scholars. In Lanser's case, this context does not weaken her career-long commitment to teaching black studies, but it does put into relief the passions, energies, and principles that drive this commitment.

The text under review in Renée R. Curry's essay is Julie Dash's influential film Daughters of the Dust (1992). Curry uses her viewing of this film by an African American woman about African American women as a way of demonstrating the disadvantages a white woman
brings to reading or viewing material emerging from a culture not her own. She recognizes that her own deafness to the historical, cultural, and semiotic resonances impoverish her viewing of the film. Yet she does not conclude that for this reason black texts should be the province of black women. Instead, she invites white scholars to use the reading (viewing) of texts by others to “undertake a spiritual as well as an intellectual and emotional transformation,” which must involve their naming, witnessing, and accounting for their whiteness in the same way that they account for other politicized identities. Curry concludes that such meetings between white viewer and black text must continue so that all of us can grow “older, wiser, and stronger through our interconnected pasts, presents, and futures.”

As members of the higher education community engage in the debate about identity and credibility, it is important that we remember the uneasy context within which this debate is taking place. The university is unquestionably under examination by those who, while perhaps lacking sound judgment, have a plentiful supply of political muscle and public support with which to act on these judgments. Axiomatic to any discussion of the future of higher education is the certainty that whether propelled from within or without, fundamental changes are going to be made to the enterprise of higher education—and sooner rather than later. Clearly, a target for change, if not extinction, is the entire multicultural project, which is threatened by economic exigencies as well as ideological disapproval. On the one hand, increasing tuition rates at private and public institutions and decreasing availability of state and federal aid are threatening to push access to a college education out of the reach of low- and even middle-income students. On the other, by caricaturing the curricular and canonical revisions of multiculturalism, conservative forces both on and off campus are moving the university ever closer to its earlier mission of teaching the dominant class all about itself and its sustaining ideology. Given this context, it is important to foresee any
implications of the identity/credibility debate that could be used as canon fodder by those whom Bob Levine refers to as "the monocultural polemicists." In closing this introduction, I would like to identify three of those possible implications.

The first of these involves the issue of essentialism. A number of essays in this volume address the identity-based challenges to faculty credibility by complicating the concept of identity, demonstrating convincingly that identity consists of uncountable characteristics, not simply phenomenological markers. The point is indisputable, yet we should be wary of the direction in which it might ultimately be taken. If identity is finally vastly more complicated than one's race or sexual preference or gender, then those very markers that have commanded for underrepresented groups the attention and support of the modern university could be deemed irrelevant. The gains that have been achieved through the multiculturalist project depend on a broadly generalized definition of identity, which must at some level be perpetuated if these gains are to continue. We cannot afford to problematize identity out of existence until these gains include a completely equitable society.

A second concern both implied and stated within this volume is the question of professional expertise. Minority studies (which include, for example, women's studies, African American studies, postcolonial studies, lesbigay studies, etc.) are comparatively young interdisciplinary fields—indeed, younger than many university faculty. When we add to this that graduate programs in them are few and far between, we begin to understand why so many faculty gravitate toward these fields after their formal training is completed. In order for these departments to be accorded the institutional support necessary to their survival and growth, they must operate with the same intellectual rigor common in more traditional departments. There are many, many reasons why a white scholar should become interested in African American studies, for example, but none of those reasons constitutes a qualification. These fields have developed the reputation
of “anybody-can-play pick-up game[s],” to use Ann duCille’s rather chilling phrase, which will have the effect of undermining the fields themselves as well as all the faculty who teach them—both qualified and unqualified. If credibility is the issue here, then we must understand that whatever else it may signify, credibility always assumes doing your homework, however variously that homework may be defined from specialization to specialization.

A final concern is the absence of essays that emphatically defend an identity-based definition of credibility. The “call for papers” soliciting submissions invited essays representing both sides of the debate. Having had my own credibility challenged at a major conference, I was well aware that there are many voices in the academy capable of voicing compelling arguments in support of “teaching what you are.” Surprisingly (at least to me), while this volume received a flood of submissions, very few of them advanced such arguments. Those who are particularly defensive about having their credibility impugned might use this fact as an indication that, finally, when the chips are down, there is no reasoned, defensible support of a position that is often expressed spontaneously and emotionally (as in my conference experience), or naively by undergraduates who lack the intellectual sophistication to see its full implications. But I would raise a more troubling possibility, which is that the arguments are there, but those faculty, many of whom are members of minority groups and hold junior, untenured positions, do not feel safe publicly advancing what are unquestionably unpopular views. When, in response to my experience at the women’s studies conference, I wrote a piece for the Chronicle of Higher Education that called for greater understanding and sensitivity on the part of white scholars working in African American studies, the responses (which were numerous) were both surprising and disturbing. They were evenly divided between those who disagreed with my conciliatory stance (some quite vigorously) and those who supported my attempt to understand the position of my challengers. Those in the former camp were almost
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exclusively white, those in the latter, African American. Most interesting (and troubling), the disagreements took the form of published letters to the Chronicle; the agreements (and there were many over a period of six weeks or so) were communicated to me privately by telephone and letter. One hopes that this striking segregation of response is not evidence of how effectively a still hierarchical academic system can silence minority views, of how impotent identity politics finally are.

NOTES


4. bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom (New York: Routledge, 1994).


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