On Thursday 4 April 1991, the conservative Washington, D.C. based American Enterprise Institute held a two-hour round table with Lynne Cheney, William Bennett, and Dinesh D'Souza, author of the recently published *Illiberal Education*. They were addressing an invited audience on the subject of “The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus,” which is also the subtitle of D’Souza’s book. Bennett and Cheney are, of course, former and present heads of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Bennett also filling in as former secretary of education and former drug czar. D’Souza is a former *Dartmouth Review* board member and was then the current darling of the New Right. Following presentations by the three speakers, there was a question and answer session with what was essentially a hand-picked and altogether friendly audience.
Both the panelists and the audience were thus well selected to speak collectively for all the moral panics the Right wants to use to consolidate its power and authority. They were also well selected to help stitch together state power and critiques of the academy, a highly visible project in America ever since the Reagan administration decided to politicize the National Endowment for the Humanities. (I learned about this politicization of NEH early on, after an NEH employee told me William Bennett had called a staff meeting to warn people that grants like two that had been just awarded to me—to direct a 1983 teaching institute and conference on Marxist cultural theory—would never get past him again.) I watched the round table event on television, courtesy of the C-Span cable network.

For the most part the panel exuded unanimity. The shared scare words of the hour were “deconstruction” and “multiculturalism,” terms that have had their nefarious character steadily reinforced throughout the 1990s. “Cultural Studies,” already on the academic scene but not yet visible to conservatives, was soon added to this list of intellectual misdeeds, as Cheney’s 1995 *Telling the Truth* demonstrates. In the lexicon of those members of the Right concerned with research and education in the humanities, the term “deconstruction” now functions as something like a traveling suitcase that can be crammed, among other things, with every prominent theory of interpretation over the last several decades; “multiculturalism,” on the other hand, serves for them as a convenient meeting ground for affirmative action efforts in hiring, along with every research or pedagogical effort to revise and rethink the dominant canon of literary texts. In the loose but effective configuration of the New Right it is apparently not necessary for everyone who cites these concepts to have any direct contact with scholarship that uses them. Once they get currency amongst conservative speakers and columnists, other journalists feel free to treat one another’s inaccurate definitions as gospel. What the terms actually mean doesn’t matter; what matters is what cultural and political influence can be gained by characterizing them in provocative ways.

With alliances between high theory and canon revision a rather new and tenuous feature of the critical scene, as I argued earlier, it may surprise some academics to hear that all these projects—from deconstruction’s efforts to track the internal contradictions in Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological writings to American colleges’ efforts to hire more minority faculty—are deeply implicated in one another. It would certainly have surprised the deconstructive critics at Yale, a group that believed scholarship was apolitical and who hardly wrote a word about an author who wasn’t a canonized white male. Such folks would find links between affirmative action in *hiring* and canon revision in *research* equally strange. Having to deal with people who play fast and loose with
intellectual concepts, who will link any cultural phenomenon with any other if they think they can get away with it (and if it seems like it will give them a chance to warn us of yet another alarming trend in higher education) is a rather new experience for most academics.

But for our panelists the connections were indisputable. Bennett indeed referred to all these institutional, pedagogical, and scholarly developments collectively as an “infection” that had taken over higher education and had better be stopped before it contaminated elementary and secondary education as well. A questioner from the floor (someone who no doubt will not receive a return invitation) advised him to remember that deconstruction and multiculturalism were different creatures. He accepted this as a friendly amendment to his bill of new un-American particulars, especially after D’Souza volunteered to explain their relationship: deconstruction, it seemed, had provided the philosophical underpinning for the projects of multiculturalism by arguing that all knowledge was reducible to political struggle and that no true and permanent values exist. Thus the legions of multicultural students could rise up, philosophically brainwashed, to demand equal time for Chicano authors or black faculty members because standards for quality no longer mattered.

Just how thousands of undergraduates were supposed to have been influenced by deconstruction, a now notorious but for most of its history rather marginal theory in literary studies and continental philosophy, a theory that relatively few undergraduates would ever have encountered in a classroom, is difficult to guess. And in any case Bennett et al. felt no need to pause and tell us, though I suppose characterizing it as an “infection” allows it to spread invisibly and on its own. Nor were they interested in proving links between affirmative action or multiculturalism and, say, noncanonical research in literary history. The links are there in teaching, to some degree, but the issues in scholarship are usually framed differently. To give an example of the kind of incoherence that can result from simply collapsing different cultural domains together, instead of interrogating their complex differences and relations, I might point out that I haven’t heard anyone insist on or complain about strict quota systems for who does or does not get mentioned in literary histories. On the other hand, we do now recognize that the relative absence of women and minorities from literary histories tells us more about scholars’ biases than it does about history itself.

As for affirmative action in hiring or admissions, D’Souza, in another panel a few months later, one I will comment on toward the end of this chapter, put the Right’s position succinctly: “the problem is that universities talk about equal opportunity but behind closed doors they practice racial preference—both in student admissions and in faculty hiring.” In fact universities have every right to decide that it is part of their social mission to compensate for the current...
deplorable state of inner-city social life and education generally and admit black students to special programs that can increase the number that receive college educations. It is less a matter of answering for past inequities than of facing America's current need to move more blacks into the middle class. Affirmative action in hiring is another matter. In 1963 a woman who had just received her Ph.D. from Ohio State was one of two finalists for a job in the English department at the University of Washington. The department head there called her unabashedly to bring her up to date: “The two of you were equally qualified, so of course we offered the job to the man.” Two years later a young woman who had just received her Ph.D. from Yale approached her advisers to ask if they thought she might be able to get a job at the English department at the University of Illinois, where her husband had just been hired in another department. They all gave the same answer: Illinois doesn’t hire women. Actually, Illinois occasionally did, but they didn’t make a habit of it. That year the Illinois English department hired twelve people, all men. These stories happen to come from two of my colleagues, but such stories are legion; they represent in miniature the world affirmative action sought to change. In fact it was not until the 1970s that jobs were even publicly announced and advertized. The pattern now is that men and women compete equally. Given roughly comparable candidates, however, it is perfectly appropriate for departments to hire women or minorities when they are underrepresented. One reason is that it is important that students not receive all their instruction from white men. Some students benefit from professorial role models of their own sex or race. All students lose if they are led to believe that only white men are capable of being professors. Are standards sometimes lowered in hiring and promotion decisions? Yes. However, based on nearly thirty years’ experience in colleges and universities—experience that includes reviewing hundreds of sets of promotion papers covering almost every department that exists, from Accounting to Zoology—I can say with assurance that even now, when departments make special cases, when they bring out the crying towel and lower their standards, in the overwhelming majority of cases it will be on behalf of a white male. That remains the best kept secret in all discussions of affirmative action.

In fact these panelists were not concerned with describing cultural conditions with any care. They were responding to targets of opportunity. Deconstruction, for example, has been scandalized by the revelations of the late Paul de Man’s Nazi past. For many of us, of course, the key figure in deconstruction remains its founder Jacques Derrida, who happens to be a Jew, not any of deconstruction’s American interpreters, neither de Man nor anyone else. No matter. The media took up the de Man issue with a frenzy. Academics responded ineffectively, certainly not in ways that would work outside the university, and the battle was
lost. As damaged goods, deconstruction now serves as a conveniently vulnerable figure for the whole range of critical positions, for all those “Marxists, feminists, and people who read Marvel comics instead of books,” to quote Bennett again. Similarly, references to affirmative action quotas, with their air of standard-free militancy, provide a way of scandalizing every effort to study and teach a broader range of literary texts. Indeed, one of the marvels of the Right’s attack is their success in some quarters at linking efforts to expand the canon of American and British literature with wholesale condemnations of the heritage of the West. Just who are these forgotten American and British women and minority writers if they are not part of the Western tradition? Intruders from outer space? The work being done to expand the canon is partly an effort to expand our memory of and knowledge about the cultural history of the West.

To charge these efforts to broaden and deepen our knowledge, say, of American literary history with being anti-Western is to assert that only the traditional white male canon is truly of the West. That would amount to a more explicit racism and sexism than even Bennett would be willing to exhibit. In any case there is no lack of white males excluded from the canon because they wrote on unacceptable subjects, so an expanded canon will increase their numbers as well. Solidified by white male critics during a period of political repression, the postwar canon excludes much literature that mounts an uncompromising critique of American culture and most work by women and minorities. Some of this work fails to meet the narrow aesthetic criteria set by these academic servants of the dominant political culture; other work—significantly—does meet those aesthetic standards but gets excluded because it treats unacceptable topics in unacceptable ways. Thus poems that urge racial harmony are fine, but poems that indict the culture as deeply racist tend not to enter the canon; that pattern is certainly confirmed by the poetry anthologies I criticize in the previous chapter and in chapter 2.

Unless we recover such work we cannot pretend to have an adequate knowledge of our cultural heritage. That is perhaps the first rebuttal to make to the New Right, since it is an argument that changes the context of the debate. For decades literary history has been both written and taught by telling flattering stories about the very tiny percentage of literary texts canonized after the Second World War. In many periods literary history has thus encompassed no general knowledge about what was being written, read, and debated. Whatever else one can call this enterprise—stories about our favorite poems and novels from the past—one cannot call it history. At the very least, literary history must try to account for the general conditions of literary production and reception in a given period of time. To study or to teach literary history thus requires us to go well beyond the selective memory embodied in the canon. Even though secure
knowledge about literary history is impossible, as I argue in chapter 3, the astonishingly narrow modern poetry canon that reigned for decades barred us even from glimpsing literary history’s unstable diversity.

But the Right is exercised not only over what texts are studied and taught but also over the intent behind their selection and in the attitudes displayed in changing the curriculum. All the panelists claimed support for a limited “multiculturalism” that remained positive about the existing canon but slightly expanded its reach. Cheney warned that there was both a “right” and a “wrong” way to expand the curriculum. Multiculturalism must be “generous in its spirit.” What they all rejected was expanding the canon in the context of an attack on the masterpieces of the West or on the moral failures of American history. On one level their first concern can be met. There is no reason why a college or university has to attack Plato or Shakespeare in order to offer minority and third world literatures in its curriculum. One of the things the Right has done is to conflate interested attacks by small groups or individuals with far more neutral institutional changes. Thus a college that adds a course on Chicano literature can be accused of knuckling under to a few students who, in the heat of the moment, say they want to do away with all dead white males. In 1994 a cheerfully racist English department faculty member in New Haven told Yale’s alumni magazine that it was time to teach the great works of the canon rather than “some novel that some Chicano wrote yesterday.” This despite the fact that enrollments in traditional courses at Yale and elsewhere remain high.

The conflation of individual positions with institutional change is clearly dishonest, but the issues are not so simple for individual teachers and researchers. The canon is sustained and promulgated by an interpretive tradition that is deeply conservative and sometimes sexist and racist as well. For many people that interpretive tradition is part of the problem and needs to be acknowledged and resisted. The texts of the canon, in other words, have a history of sexist and racist use. They need critical reinterpretation if they are to serve other purposes. So a cheerful multiculturalism that ignores this history—which is what the Right seems to want—is not really intellectually sustainable. What Cheney proposes—the “happy family” multiculturalism I described in chapter 2—may be appropriate for an elementary school but hardly for a college. Rather than deal with the intellectual challenges appropriate to postsecondary education, however, the Right makes another strategic conflation—confusing efforts to reinterpret texts with efforts to remove them from the curriculum. It seems fair to say that the chair of NEH has no business policing interpretations. She can only get away with that by pretending to address the false issue of whether or not texts are taught.

D’Souza takes a somewhat cruder approach, arguing that you cannot simply
add to the curriculum. “Students can read a limited and defined number of texts,” he would claim in September, “if you add new works in, you’ve got to subtract something from the existing list, so it is a fantasy to assert that no choices have to be made, that if someone comes in, no one gets out.” D’Souza has built his whole career on misleading simplifications that will sound persuasive to a popular audience. What is disturbing about him is that he knows better. Perhaps he has decided that his position is so just that any means are warranted in winning popular consent for it. Or perhaps he is not a very honorable fellow. In any case, there are at least two kinds of curricular issues being conflated here. In a departmental curriculum there is plenty of room for additions because there is substantial duplication. An English major may read Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* in an introduction to literary study course, read it again in a course on the short story, and read it yet again in a survey of modern literature. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it is hard to see how Western civilization will be brought to its knees by substituting a work by a black writer on one of those occasions. If all that is at stake is a single course, then certainly only so many pages can be read. But no single survey of Western thought or survey of American literature can be complete or representative in any case; all it can be is a very partial sample. Treating a single course as the battleground for the future of civilization, as the Right has been doing, is pure demagoguery.

There is, to be sure, good reason to debate as well what a universally required core curriculum might be. Despite Bennett’s and D’Souza’s allegations to the contrary, many humanities students and faculty—including the campus radicals that the Right excoriates—could easily agree in principle on an expanded core curriculum that included both the traditional canon and its alternatives. At large universities the resistance to this obvious compromise is unlikely to come from campus radicals. It is likely instead to come from professional schools—Engineering, Commerce—who rightly say that their students can get jobs without studying literature, art, or philosophy. At Illinois one prominent engineer was fond of repeating his boast that he didn’t see why a university needed a philosophy department in the first place. Of course the Right is not about to dwell on that reality because that would mean criticizing the ideology of American business.

People committed to the traditional canon could, however, make more productive contributions to these debates. If NEH had been willing, for example, to play a more appropriate role of negotiating between positions, it could have helped us realize that, as students and faculty begin to discover what has been excluded from their education—and excluded thereby from having an active cultural life in the present—by the narrow canon of major works, their first reactions include not only considerable excitement at the variety of texts
now available to them but also a certain shock and anger at decades of effective cultural repression. That anger has been visible in the well-publicized struggles at places like Stanford, and it has simultaneously threatened the Right and given them another target of opportunity. Yet it seems unlikely that these struggles over the curriculum could have occurred without such anger, for some anger at an education that has been substantially distorted is more than warranted. Nonetheless, one finds few faculty members arguing that the traditional canon should be entirely abandoned. It too is part of our cultural history. It needs to be reread, preserved, and understood—affirmed and challenged as people see fit—both as part of a selective tradition and as part of a much wider cultural field. To seek to block any of these alternatives—as NEH did during Republican administrations and as Lynne Cheney's and Jerry Martin's National Alumni Forum now seeks to do—is to mount a basic attack on academic freedom.

At least for a time, however, all texts will be partly charged with a sense of their status in these debates, with a sense of their recent history of privilege or marginalization. That history may not be a permanent part of the baggage these texts carry with them, but it is part of the baggage they bear now. It is better to deal with that history openly (and recognize its potentially transitory character) than resent it (as the Right does) or pretend it is an eternal feature of a text's identity (as the Left tends to do). At the moment, then, we read an expanded canon either in the aftermath or the very midst of these struggles for broader cultural representation. Neither the expanded canon nor the expanded curriculum will necessarily emphasize the signs of that struggle in the future. Yet successive generations do need to learn a lesson from these debates: they too should pose for themselves those basic questions about what they are reading and why they are reading it; they too should interrogate the social meaning of the curriculum they adopt.

For some on the far Right this very self-consciousness about research and about the curriculum is unacceptable. They want faculty and students to display an unqualified patriotism and an unreflective enthusiasm about the dominant traditions in Western culture. That does not mean—as some have assumed—that the Right imagines the celebratory discourses of research and pedagogy will remain unchanged, repeated like ritual incantations down through succeeding generations. For those on the Right who realize that history changes, it is clear that scholarship and teaching must adapt as well. The task for a properly docile university is not, therefore, to say the same words decade after decade but rather to adapt its message to changing circumstances, to find the new words necessary to rationalize power and privilege in changing times. This is especially important because the young are susceptible to idealistic ferment. It is the university's job to do the work of continuing reinterpretation, the work of intricate rearticula-
tion of aspiration and materiality, that makes it possible to idealize the dominant traditions of the West.

Of all the speakers at the American Enterprise Institute it was Bennett who was most unyielding in applying these unstated aims to his critiques of university life. With his tendency to collapse differences and generalize on the basis of scattered anecdotes, his mask of avuncular intimidation did little to hide the fact that he is a genuine demagogue. Among his more frightening arguments was his assertion that black students should encounter nothing in their education that reminds them of their history of oppression and discrimination in America. The argument is supported by anecdotes of colleges, say, encouraging minority students to choose socially conscious majors rather than supposedly race-neutral areas like the hard sciences. Most of us, I think, would object to that sort of coercive advising. But Bennett expands on stories like this to argue that any curricular foregrounding of a history of slavery and racism inevitably humiliates minorities. In putting together a syllabus, then, we presumably must select poems about racial harmony and exclude the many powerful poems about lynchings in the South. All this Bennett couches in arguments about the need to fully abandon discriminatory practices and adopt a race-neutral form of education. In Bennett's model we abandon any reflection on how historical injustice bears on contemporary affairs.

This was the one place, however, where the panel's unanimity broke down for a moment. Bennett opened his presentation by remarking how balanced the panel was—a woman, a minority member, and a white male. He conceded that the white male was regrettably not dead, but reminded the audience that time would eventually take care of that. But the panel's gender and racial diversity—D'Souza came to the United States as an exchange student from India—also led to the one point of difference. It was quickly papered over, derailing the proceedings only for a minute or two, but it revealed a contradiction that may not open much chance for dialogue but does give us a place for productive counterarguments.

What happened was that Cheney felt it necessary to say that she had found it immensely helpful and liberating to read women writers while she was in college:

I don't know if there's a difference here or not. At the same time that ideas do not have color or gender, let me suggest that experiences do. And I can remember as a graduate student coming across for the first time some writings of nineteenth-century women that I'd never heard of before who had remarkable things to say to me because their life as a woman had parallels to my own experience. A writer who had a life as
a man did not speak to me in quite the same way. It was a remarkable experience. It opened an avenue of intellectual exploration that I continue to pursue. In the same way I can well imagine that a person of color would feel the same kind of epiphany on first coming across—I've heard Skip Gates, Henry Louis Gates, talk about reading James Baldwin for the first time. You know here is a realm of experience that you hadn't heard reported on before. That is a wonderful thing. There is a great difference, though, between opening up the world so that people can explore all of these pathways and prescribing reading lists by quota. I do want to get the notion in here that, while ideas have no color or gender, experiences sometimes do, and I think this is a useful educational tool for all of us to use.

Ideas may have no gender or color, she emphasized twice, echoing statements by Bennett and D'Souza, but experience sometimes does. Bennett was speechless, having just declared that “when people are told that they must focus on that part of themselves which has to do with their ancestry, the color of their skin, they are of course insulted.” But D'Souza hastened to add an observation that fractured the proceedings somewhat further:

I think it was W. E. B. Du Bois who said that his experience as a writer was always to view the American experience through two different sets of eyes. He viewed it on the one hand as an American and, on the other hand, as a black American. And that these two perspectives are not the same. And it's certainly true that the experience of blacks in this country is distinctive. Many times they are lumped together with other immigrants. And of course they were not immigrants. They were brought here in chains. And so it is certainly the case that universities should encourage intelligent young black students to face these questions. To what degree is it possible to be patriotic or to embrace uninhibitedly the declaration or the constitution? But the problem is that they don't do that; universities don't engage on that kind of intellectual voyage, which I think would provide a true liberation.

Whether Cheney or D'Souza realized it or not, they had given away the game, opening the way to a curriculum self-conscious about race and gender and about the cultural and historical politics of knowledge. What kind of "liberation," one wonders, would D'Souza consider warranted by such an intellectual voyage? Does he realize that this "voyage" metaphor is itself the mirror image of the middle passage? It may be that both Cheney and D'Souza felt a
moment of inner panic. Hence Cheney’s irrelevant reference to quotas in reading lists and D’Souza’s false assertion that universities don’t encourage this sort of speculation. What Cheney’s anecdote acknowledged, whether she realized it or not, is that there is a sound basis for something like an affirmative action curriculum, that one reason to add women and minority writers to the canon is that we have women and minority students who can use these works to confirm and articulate the validity and social basis of their own experience and as an especially relevant point of entrance to a still larger field of study. The same argument, indeed, would apply to the need to hire female and minority faculty members, who presumably could share some of their distinctive experiences with students. Since then D’Souza’s position has hardened, as evidenced by his astonishingly reactionary *The End of Racism* (1995), but here he acknowledged that a history of oppression still has bearing on blacks’ identities and on what the Right now falsely claims to be an equal opportunity society. Contrary to the argument implicit in Bennett’s heavy-handed erasure of history, we are partly what our national history has made us be. One reason to open the canon is to recover the full textual evidence of that history. The canon we have now often succeeds in hiding it from view.

Although these three speakers wanted to include every critique of the canon under the umbrella of political correctness, there are many of us engaged in canon revision who have no interest in demands for political correctness from either the Right or the Left. I myself have no interest in joining the apoplectic cries to remove all dead white males from the curriculum. For one thing, there are too many dead white males on the Left now excluded from the curriculum because their politics were unacceptable. Part of my own project, as I explain in detail in the previous chapter and in chapter 8, is to recover and teach their work. But the most entrenched canonical works also continue to be read in ways that give them new and unexpected life. It is not the business of universities to curtail that rereading.

Does this mean that we have nothing to learn from critics of campus research and teaching? Quite the contrary. Bennett, Cheney, and D’Souza were all capable at moments of issuing challenges of real value, though they often used them to implicate people in positions they do not necessarily hold. At one point Bennett mentioned that there now exist in universities not only separate lunch tables for black and white students but also separate seating sections in football stadiums and libraries. “What’s next?” he asked, “Wash rooms? Drinking Fountains?” The demagogic element in the question was his willingness to let audience members think universities had segregated these facilities, whereas these are instances of student self-segregation. That let him imply the problem could be solved by a bit of strong talk from university authorities, whereas the problem is
embedded in (and partly inseparable from) race relations throughout the culture. Where Bennett is right, I believe, is in arguing that such practices are deeply troubling and in arguing that university faculty members and administrators should respond to these practices and encourage open debate about them. That will not guarantee ready solutions, but it will make the issue an appropriate ground for education. Where standards of political correctness stifle such debate they are doing universities no good. Interestingly enough, the expanded canon offers us considerable opportunity to encourage discussion of these matters. For in earlier periods both white and black authors were sometimes willing to take up issues of race in far more open and diverse ways than we are easily able to today. That is just one way that a recovered past can help us in the present.

But what is to help us in dealing with these attacks from the Right, attacks that are continuing in various forms in the late nineties? And why, finally, is the Right conducting them? It should be clear by now that silence from progressive college and university faculty will not suffice. Silence simply leaves the terrain of public common sense to the Right. And it is essential to realize that even wildly irresponsible and hyperbolic claims about the state of American campuses will seem plausible both to nonuniversity intellectuals and to the general public. If the Right is allowed to continue dominating media representations of campus politics, then we will eventually face a curtailment of academic freedom. That possibility is significantly enhanced now that the Supreme Court is well on its way to abandoning its role as a guarantor of civil rights and civil liberties while deploying notions of individual rights to undermine progressive social policy. Abortion is in this respect a pivotal issue in the effort to make some rights a matter of state-by-state debate and regulation. If academic freedom becomes substantially a matter of state law, with little practical grounding in national constitutional guarantees of free speech, its value will suffer everywhere, not just in those states most inclined to narrow its reach.

It is now widely recognized that the debates over political correctness have made cutting university budgets a great deal easier. A delegitimated university is easier to defund. A delegitimated university is also easier for state governments to ignore when making basic policy decisions about higher education. Thus the California Board of Regents felt no need to consult the faculty when it decided in 1995 to end affirmative action admissions. The attacks on faculty political correctness strike at the heart of faculty members’ social status by suggesting that we are incapable of independent thought or reason. Why would one consult political automatons when deciding whether to abolish tenure, end affirmative action, or shut down the philosophy department? The attacks on political correctness are thus nothing less than the leading edge of an effort to deny the
faculty any powers of self-governance and any say over state higher education policy.

But the danger to campus life is no more important than the effects on the general culture. We tend too often in academia to mock our own potential for political impact; it thus seems hard to believe that an irrelevant and powerless institution like the university should be the focus of so much antagonistic energy. Yet we forget that universities are, if nothing else, a continuing source of arguments that are a genuine inconvenience to the far Right in its project of constructing a homogenous, dissent-free public culture. That role is even more important now that newspapers across the country are cutting back on their investment in serious investigative reporting. The Right realizes moreover, even if the Left does not, that at least in an extended crisis universities could again be sources of substantial dissent. As global power is realigned, opportunities for the exercise of American authority will arise. Not all these opportunities can be fulfilled in four-day wars. On the other hand, an increasingly impoverished and disenfranchised underclass in our own country provides other bases for discontent. These are just a few of the reasons why some on the Right want to take this opportunity to discredit every progressive impulse on campus.

No one strategy will suffice in this struggle. For this is not exclusively a debate by way of reasoned argument in classic academic fashion. It is a political struggle in which the Right has no intention of playing fair. While it is necessary to point out the inaccuracies and distortions in work like Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals* and D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*—the best efforts at that to date being Michael Bérubé’s fine essay in the *Village Voice* and John Wilson’s *The Myth of Political Correctness*—that kind of honorable counterargument will not suffice. Careful refutations can, once placed on the public record, help prevent some people from being persuaded by the Right’s lies. But it would be naive to imagine that people like Bennett and Cheney would be troubled by having inaccurate claims exposed. They will simply continue to lie as long as they feel their claims are getting more coverage. Certainly the Right feels free to repeat discredited stories in new arenas; when particular arguments or examples are effectively countered in a given discussion, they simply shift ground. These are not, therefore, people to engage in a dialogue with the hope of changing their minds. Public dialogue is only useful if it has the potential to reach other people.

One of the more notable efforts at an exchange between the Right and the Left on these issues was a two-hour “Firing Line Special Debate” held at the University of South Carolina and broadcast on many Public Television stations on 7 September 1991. The topic of the debate was “Resolved: Freedom of
Thought is in Danger on American Campuses.” Participants included William Buckley, Glenn Loury, Dinesh D’Souza, and John Silber on one side and Leon Botstein, Stanley Fish, Catharine Stimpson, and Ronald Walters on the other. The format, which restricted statements to ninety seconds, confirmed again that television’s idea of in-depth coverage is to give us a full two hours of sound bites.

Neither side was altogether served well by the arrangements or the participants. Buckley, once someone to be reckoned with, a saboteur in the service of the far Right, has been effectively repositioned by history as a representative of the establishment. He is left with his cat’s grin without his wit. Fish, often articulate, is not entirely dependable on these issues; with little previous interest in politics, he has, in effect, in this context been brought to prominence by social and political forces he does not understand. As a result, he meekly defends every politically correct position whether or not he believes in it. Thus he supports campus restrictions on speech because he thinks that is his duty, instead of demonstrating that the Left is by no means in agreement on such practices. Like many people engaged in canon revision, for example, I do not, as I show in the next chapter, support campus restrictions on speech. In this program Fish was also challenged to defend the new politically correct notion that blacks cannot be racist because they are oppressed. Instead of stating simply that there are different kinds of racism, that racism is not a uniform existential condition that one does or does not occupy—and that the racism of those in power is indeed different from the racism of the disempowered—Fish did his best to urge us to call the former racism and the latter prejudice. The one person who was impressive was Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, who refused all caricatured positions, mapping out his own thoughtful arguments on all issues, though Botstein has since been drawn increasingly toward the corporate model of ruthless governance at his own institution. Silber spent his time complaining about efforts to encourage nonsexist usage and assailing those who did not accept that it was no problem to transcend the perspectives of race and gender. Buckley, increasingly muddled, treated us to the news that “McCarthyism is largely a historical fiction.”

The program did not suggest that a real exchange of views on these matters has much future, at least for those whose careers or public image is tied up in the debate. It did, however, demonstrate that the stark presentation of the opposing sides is both powerful and risky, the risk being enhanced when the Left represents itself as being far more uniform than it actually is. The Right seems determined to try to present a unified front, which is exactly what the Left should not do, both because it isn’t true and because it confirms the very charges of political correctness being leveled at us. Unlike the Right, moreover,
the Left has no consensus about a common general cultural program in which this struggle plays a part. That is one of the reasons why efforts to sustain progressive counter-National Association of Scholars groups have partly failed. But the Left has no chance of winning this debate unless it at least positions its actions within a wider cultural context.

The current attack on universities is part of a struggle for power and influence in American culture. That partly explains why the Right amplified a few rather trivial incidents over political correctness into a national trend. (The real pressures on political expression are scattered throughout American culture—in religious institutions, in industry, and in numerous social and political groups on both the Left and the Right, including some on campus—and have no monolithic university incarnation.) The struggle for power and influence in American culture proceeds, like all hegemonic conflicts, by way of articulating diverse cultural forces, images, and discourses into new configurations that constitute possible ways of understanding our culture as a whole. Merely taking issue with local claims can have only limited use; we must also take on the larger cultural vision that is at stake when dealing with local issues. One of the things the program at the American Enterprise Institute suggested, however, is that the contradictions and competing interests in the Right's own high-profile constituency are one place to start. We need to seize opportunities to work on those contradictions whenever they arise, to expose the differences underlying the Right's surface unity. Beginning with the Reagan administration, the Right began to assemble its own multicultural, multiracial front. The April 1991 panel was another instance of that effort. But that sort of project covers over real differences and real competing interests. Now that the Right has taken that risk, we need to exploit it. Every such opportunity comes as a result of the necessarily continuing project of rearticulation by which political interests try to win popular consent. Every such missed opportunity signals more ground lost to the Right.

One opportunity has arisen as a result of the growth in campus-based conservative hate magazines on campuses across the country. Supported by a national network that supplies boilerplate conservative rhetoric and stories to be reprinted, as well as the names of "National Advisory Board" members like D'Souza and Pat Buchanan, these magazines are increasingly following the lead of the granddaddy of all such publications, the Dartmouth Review. Following that lead means adopting sexism, racism, and homophobia as standard positions. Like the current conservative effort in other cultural domains, it also means trying to get the last mileage out of the red baiting tradition. What is most troubling for many campuses, however, is the first local experience of the
Dartmouth Review's ruthless ad hominem attacks. Academics are far more accustomed to attacking positions than attacking people. The damage to the campus climate that can be done by hyperbolic, distorted attacks on individuals is difficult to overstate. Some campuses may find it necessary to mount counter efforts by detailing accurately the racist and sexist histories of those putting out such magazines. In other words, in order to move the debate back to issues, rather than individuals, it may be necessary to make individuals pay a price for their invective.

The genuine opportunity such magazines present, however, is the opportunity to expose the absurdity of national claims about political correctness and about attacks on Western culture. Based on distorted reports about a few scattered incidents on a few campuses, the Right has succeeded in creating a national moral panic that threatens to undermine progressive scholarship and teaching everywhere. When such magazines look for local evidence, however, it usually is not there and thus has to be blatantly manufactured. Even people within the university find it easy to believe there is a problem on other campuses. So the absurdity of local claims has real educational value when we draw attention to it.

At my own university, the University of Illinois, a somewhat clumsy local effort, The Orange and Blue Observer, published its inaugural issue in August of 1991. One of the cover headlines reads “Banned from Campus?” and prints pictures of John Locke and William Shakespeare, among others. On an inside page, I am featured as one of three faculty members on the “loony left,” a phrase put in circulation by Margaret Thatcher:

An instructor of modern poetry and poetry criticism, Professor Nelson epitomizes the “Tenured Radical.” To Prof. Nelson, virtually no poetry of any worth exists before 1950 or after 1972. His mission as an instructor at the University is to forever annihilate the traditional literary canon (i.e., that body of dead, white European male authors such as Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, and Shelley who, solely because of racism and sexism, have regrettably emerged as “great”).

There didn’t seem to be much point in trying to tell these folks that I have been focusing for some years on poetry before 1950, let alone show them any of my relevant publications on canonical poets, since such defenders of the West are not known to be great readers, so instead I wrote a piece for the main campus newspaper pointing out that it wouldn’t be easy to find an English professor here or anywhere else on the planet who wanted to ban Shakespeare.
On that point, it may be worth publishing a public conversation one of my colleagues had with a young woman recruit at the Observer’s booth on campus:

He: It would be terrible if anyone was trying to ban Shakespeare.
  Who’s trying to ban Shakespeare?
She: Lots of people.
He: Is there anyone here trying to ban Shakespeare?
She: Oh, yeah. Lots of people.
He: Who?
She: Lots of English professors.
He: Who?
She: Well, Professor Cary Nelson hasn’t had anything nice to say about Shakespeare.

The point, of course, is not only that a concern for accurate reporting is not exactly a hallmark of the Right, but also that credible local evidence supporting the moral panic about campus values is not easy to find. Nor is it as easy to reveal the comic implausibility of the Right’s claims at the national level. John Wilson’s definitive book The Myth of Political Correctness (1995), however, successfully discredits the stories the Right has publicized to date.

But new panics continue to be produced. My own entirely local Shakespeare story was supplemented by a brief media frenzy in the winter of 1995–96 when Cheney’s National Alumni Forum managed to produce a Washington-based sensation over Georgetown University’s English department deciding to drop its Shakespeare requirement. What the department actually had was a Shakespeare, Chaucer, or Milton requirement; it never needed a specific Shakespeare requirement because all its literature majors took Shakespeare anyway. So it dropped the requirement as irrelevant, with the expectation it could offer more Shakespeare courses that way. But when Cheney’s new organization contacted the Washington media with this travesty, they lapped it up nonetheless.

The effort to demonize the project of opening up the canon, the only project with a chance of giving us the more diverse common culture we now need, is now—in the wake of the fall of communism across Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union—being articulated to a more ambitious effort to discredit the whole American Left. What the Right is unable to recognize is that the common culture of a uniformly idealized American history and a narrow canon of idealized white male authors cannot survive the impact of the new social movements and new immigration of the past decades. The product of the Right’s campaign can only be an America of antagonistic ethnic and
racial groups looking for advantages over one another. As a result, the concept of democracy will gradually lose its progressive connotations and the United States will be an increasingly less admirable place to live. We cannot let that happen.