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# Forum

*PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, printed and double-spaced, that comment on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit Forum contributions and offers the PMLA authors discussed in published letters an opportunity to reply. Occasionally the Forum contains letters on topics of broad interest written and submitted at the editor's request. The journal omits titles before persons' names, discourages footnotes, and does not consider any letter of more than one thousand words. Letters should be addressed to PMLA Forum, Modern Language Association, 10 Astor Place, New York, NY 10003-6981 (fax: 212 533-0680).*

## Who Shall Teach African American Literature?

To the Editor:

*PMLA's* opening its Forum to a discussion of "who shall teach what?" (114 [1999]: 1105–07) virtually begs for another minority report and for a reminder that even an academic politics of identity defines itself by context, by what Sivagami Subbaraman calls "the complicated interplays of essentialisms and authority in the academic marketplace" (1106). Perceived authority speaks through institutions as well as through individuals, and my institution speaks with a voice somewhat different from and perhaps more subdued than the voices of more privileged ones like the University of Wisconsin and Macalester College. Missing from the list of sixty-five names and affiliations on the pages of *PMLA* prefacing its table of contents are not the names of persons of color but rather the names of those who teach at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

It is true that "they" (or "we") at HBCUs have an alternative to the MLA—the College Language Association. But the CLA is an organization with a social and political purpose and promotes people and ideas race-neutrally no more frequently than the names of HBCUs appear in *PMLA*. Hence, white academics at HBCUs find themselves marginalized in the one instance by race and in the other by institutional loyalties. Many nonblack faculty members at these institutions learned long ago the lessons of being a minority within a minority, and often these lessons are indistinguishable from a sobering enlightenment. The experience of "minority-ness" and all that entails in terms of exclusion, tokenism, and invisibility becomes a reason that these faculty members might possess special insights about African American literature. Socially and professionally they identify with the black experience, they have understandably and predictably developed pertinent sensitivities, they have studied and written about the subject—but most of all their being *white* brings home meanings of being African American. Certainly they have the advantage of being able to separate the strands of race-specific cultural phenomena from the social ones of minority status—strands that, it seems to me, are all too often and innocently tangled by many in citadels of academic renown.

But this advantage has seldom been acknowledged or profited from at any level. Subbaraman and Nellie Y. McKay agree that young and enterprising scholars should live in a world where they can feel free to engage "academic interests beyond their own ethnic identities" (McKay 1107). If not in the historically white institutions they mention, are the black colleges where this fantasy can be realized? In my experience, far from it. At my university essentialism is assumed,

unspoken, a default drive that brooks no challenge. Black institutions are as desperate for black faculty members as are white institutions—though campus talk frequently has it that whites can always have their pick of jobs. White-authored titles like Cary Nelson's *Will Teach for Food* would be thought comic if not downright offensive. The educational and social purposes historically served by HBCUs cannot be gainsaid, but insofar as times have changed and some of these institutions are technically public, perhaps policies should be reexamined. Some of my students want the best-qualified faculty, and they often discover faculty agendas that bear little connection with the scholarly life per se. Most students need exposure to literature of any and all types. Of course, it is true that as a white man I may be seen to have access to a larger world in which my colleagues are not similarly privileged and to be able to leave the university if I do not love it, but here I am writing about my actual life, my career, my desire to have a career, the psychological strategies needed to combat what Subbaraman calls "erasure" (1105).

Within my discipline the same essentialism prevails. In teaching American literature (I never teach the African American literature course per se, it goes without saying), I oddly enough feel pressure to focus on every writer except those of the ethnicity of nearly all my students. The thought that a subject might exist no matter who walks through the door to teach on the first day of class has few adherents among administrators and faculty members. A wide and inclusive interest in African American literature is not seen as validation in these turf wars. An old-fashioned faith in the universal is displayed by academics who contradictorily label black writing ethnic while denying ethnicity to white writing—thus unwittingly privileging white writing as universal and enabling other-race professors to teach it. Since those who teach have to be considered either black or white and placed accordingly, the writers studied have to be either black or white and consequently compartmentalized, no matter the resulting distortion of the subject or of the self-image of writers like Charles Chesnutt. Few question what Zora Neale Hurston calls "the gods of the pigeon-holes" (*Dust Tracks on a Road* [New York: Harper, 1996] 25). I do include individual African American works on my syllabi, but the thought of a white African Americanist would locally be considered laughable and a contradiction in terms. All I can explain to concerned students is that the subject is important, whereas I am not. The blind review practiced by reputable academic journals has allowed at least that venue for my writing about a major aspect of American literature.

We all have blind spots, and I would be the first to admit that we essentialize when we gain from doing so. "We all want the breaks, and what seems just to us is something that favors our wishes," as Hurston writes (228). After all, my being selected to teach American literature

abroad had a connection with the fact that as an actual American I must have been seen to possess some almost mystical insights into the subject—British, Finnish, and Dutch expertise to one side. (By the same token I was taken as a representative American—and thus lectured on Frederick Douglass at University College London, for example). Our lives are enriched by many experiences, are complex tangles of many elements defined by race, class, gender, and much else—including our individual pasts. It seems a shame and a waste not to be allowed to share and profit from these realities in academic as well as other settings. McKay writes of a subject's not being anyone's sole property: for everyone some subjects are grounded in experiences past forgetting.

BENJAMIN S. LAWSON  
*Albany State University*

### Valuing Nonacademic Jobs

To the Editor:

Elaine Showalter is right: expanding career opportunities for literature PhDs is a better way to resolve the job crisis than restricting graduate studies to a tiny elite (Presidential Address 1998, "Regeneration," 114 [1999]: 318–28). Yet it seems foolish to expect potential employers to recruit us without some kind of reciprocity. It would be wonderful if PhDs had a wide variety of jobs to choose from, in and out of the university. It would be wonderful if literature departments offered internships and encouraged their most talented students to pursue nonacademic careers. But nonacademic jobs will not be valued or viable options for literature PhDs until nonacademic professional achievements begin to count in the academy where it counts—in hiring and tenure. Having spent nine years on a PhD in literature (and loved every minute of it), I am faced with a grim choice this year: do I crack my way into a rare tenure-track position, or do I exile myself from literary scholarship forever? In a different universe, I might pursue my scholarship while rising through the ranks of secondary education, writing poetry, designing innovative government programs, reviewing new literature for newspapers, or publishing fiction and then return to university teaching at a rank commensurate with my skills and experience. Until such a return is possible in the real world, however, nonacademic employers will continue—unfairly but with good reason—to view their applicants with PhDs in literature not as highly skilled members of a thriving profession but as overqualified academic failures.

CAROLYN VELLENGA BERMAN  
*Brown University*