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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a reflection on multiculturalism, particularly within southern U.S. universities. An opening section reviews the types of confusion and difficulty encountered in trying to define multiculturalism and its place in higher education. The argument goes on to suggest looking for cultural diversity that merits reward and thereby fosters multiculturalism. This section includes a discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing quality scholarship from hype. Several examples from a graduate seminar at Tennessee University are offered to illustrate some of the issues and difficulties of genuine multicultural instruction, on the premise that quality inquiry is a powerful experience for students. In addition, this section suggests that the best approach will be grounded in traditional disciplines and focus on a specific text. Most crucial to the inquiry is to center on the process of awareness over the presentation of factual knowledge. The most difficult task for department heads and deans is to look constantly for ways to reward students and professors who achieve a breakthrough in critical thinking. The paper closes by emphasizing the special role that southern scholarship plays in encouraging true intellectual diversity. Includes six notes. (JB)

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*The Criticism of American literature has disconnected modernism, avant-
gardism and post-modernism from the development of African American literature in
the twentieth century. Too many scholars of these movements have focused almost
exclusively on white writers, while too many scholars of African American literature
have underplayed their international (and inter-racial) elements in pursuit of an
exclusively Afrocentric tradition.*

*For several pleasant years, he gave an annual birthday party for James
Weldon Johnson, young Alfred A. Knopf, Jr., and himself, for their birthdays fall on the
same day. At the last of these parties the year before Mr. Johnson died, on the Van
Vechten table there were three cakes, one red, one white, and one blue —the Colors of
our flag. They honored a Gentile, a Negro, and a Jew — friends and fellow Americans.
But the differences of race did not occur to me until days later, when I thought about
the three colors and the three men.*

*Carl Van Vechten is like that party. He never talks grandiloquently about
democracy or Americanism. Nor makes a fetish of those qualities. But he lives them
with sincerity — and humor. ² -- Langston Hughes*

Rewarding Diversity: An African American Inquiry

The epigraphs disclose some telling traces about a way to seek diversity in professional study. Though the first one allows for the nationalistic reading of white authors, it suggests also that African American writers must take on significance in global as well as in interracial terms. Indeed, the great black writers of the century would secure an acceptable meaning for the more Catholic or universal world only if their writings reattach themselves to the most important movements of the age. Only in the second epigraph can the importance of human worth be self-defined.

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In no way would suggestions of the kind be designed to offend African Americans. In fact, the second epigraph was preface just last week to a lead article by me in *MELUS* (the multi-ethnic literature of the United States), and the editors surely would count themselves among the most enlightened multiculturalists in the United States. In the next epigraph, Langston Hughes narrates a human community as natural among three friends. Hence, this one provides a nice clue to what possibly even the first epigraph makes most taboo — the compulsion to trace the conflict and difference that conceal themselves within even professional theory as well as within graduate study. It is a duty that must be faced so that human connections of diverse races and cultures can exist on honest grounds. One says human connections rather than race relations because the complexity of the experience cannot be reduced or trivialized into sociological terminologies. The bonds are, on the contrary, interwoven into the very fabric of the identity of who Southerners are and what they believe. What our scholarly discourse has forbidden us to conceptualize is that we must define and negotiate value as well as power within the most cherished Southern universities.

My title codifies the complexity of the negotiation. The word diversity plunges the reader into some temporary discomfort, and African American implies that the paper originates from *within* cultural difference. Where the speaker positions the self at the very moment of writing sets a decisive tone for the credibility of all that would follow. How do well-meaning scholars and deans circumvent tautology? How do they free thought from the language that forbids any true expression of the diversity they propose to seek? Propose suggests that the unconscious commitment to traditional ideology subverts the conscious will to reward change.

To avoid the trap, administration must perceive the distinction between cultural pluralism and diversity on the one hand and multiculturalism on the other. Though the first hardly ever insists that Hispanic or Asian culture, for instance, must naturally be a tangent to Western Civilization, the second view more likely legitimizes racial groups on the grounds of the various ways that they may be used to demonstrate established views. Whatever the recent rise of Multiculturalism as an idea, pluralism tests out as far more open to methodological change. What multiculturalism may disintegrate into for some traditionalists is a somewhat reactionary demand, herewith all dressed up

in new language, for the mainstream assimilation of cultural difference. George Santayana once said that those who do not understand history are destined to repeat it. Today it is clear that the earlier wording of desegregation was considerably more positive than was the term integration, for though desegregation implied that the old Southern order was in an enlightened state or in revision, it suggested no prescribed shape through which racial change would necessarily appear within universities. The leap in consciousness possibly went the wrong way. By the time integration had become the dominant noun, the mission had become to dissipate cultural diversity and richness within the mainstream of monolithic values and power. Once a brilliant math major at Tennessee opposed this proposition by saying that whenever an integer changes, so the sum of its parts changes automatically as well. Surely he was right. But culture and mathematics are quite different theorems. Whereas the former operates within the dimensions of consciousness and history, the latter preoccupies itself with formulations about testable properties in the physical world.

What is Multiculturalism ? Of the 214 titles searched on line at the University of Georgia, only three or four explore the subject regarding higher education. Almost none appears from university presses, though the works say much about various techniques to diversify instruction ranging from kindergarten to high school. Indeed, Multiculturalism proves mind-boggling as a concept: global studies, world health, bilingual education, home economics, women's studies, minority issues, human awareness, and classification of values. If a few fields are insufficient for even the brilliant researcher, perhaps some topics would quench a thirst for the interdisciplinary life on the scholarly edge. Such varied topics as racism, sexism, prejudice, discrimination, oppression and powerlessness, as well as power, inequality, equality, and stereotyping may provide ample water for the most gifted student to drown. Even more humorous is that so much of the work emerges from the British Commonwealth and Canada. Why look for a model of American diversity within the centered legacy of the Roman and British Empires? Why, indeed, think global diversity consciously, yet reinvent Western Europe as the center of human existence subconsciously?

Perhaps an answer would be to look for cultural diversity that merits reward.³ A candidate might be a teacher of American literature who includes figures such as Douglas, Dunbar, Hurston, Hughes, Wright, Brooks, Hansberry, Baraka, Morrison and others in a standard course, but even better would be those who have devised courses with innovative perspectives for at least a decade. Preference would go to those who have written and taught a great deal about the subject, and particularly attractive would be those who have helped instruct the graduate program and university about fine journals and presses that may have seemed quite marginal to the unschooled eye.

In many instances the rewards would be therapeutic because even the best of diverse scholars think and research under siege. Though the wording may seem exaggerated to some, the threat to the tenure and promotion of ethnic scholars is real. The barrier to appointments of distinction at and beyond the rank of Full Professor looms ever higher. Fortunately, the scholars who survive to tenure have learned to cope by necessity with the pressure to teach and publish well as creative outlets. For the vulnerable assistant professors and graduate students, however, mentors are still needed. Perhaps a case regarding faculty may best illustrate why. Even the Americanist who happens to be Black, for example, would find herself unspared. Enthusiastically she had added about five or six books of ethnic variety to her standard survey in American literature. Her African American mentor knew that a backlash would likely come, but thought she had prepared herself for the response. When the repercussions finally appeared in the form of an irate letter of protest to the Head, by a student who had usually come to class in army camouflage, she was personally crushed. For a while she even wanted to leave the university, though perhaps no other faculty member spends more time with white and black students. Especially as a mentor to Black women in graduate school, she is today possibly the least expendable member of the faculty in English.

What Southern universities need in the professional program is a reward system that diverts frustration of the kind. To parody scripture, where the African American professors are without vision, or presence, the Black graduate students perish. When the one letter or two comes

in from right-wing dialogues, the Head might (as the Assistant Head certainly did not do so) demand that the erring professor come immediately in to hear about her new raise. If the talented assistant professor ignores once more the demands by a few prescriptive students, she might simply be raised again for her refusal to ignore the discrimination and prejudice in American civilization. Perhaps a small fund should be set aside to award the most productive scholars, as well as bold teachers, who are most responsible for the production of cultural diversity. Often the recipients would be the best people without the best honors.

Perhaps, it will sound somewhat innovative to write that rewards for diversity might be reversed in terms of preferences. Quite likely a double standard of ideology applies. For instance, one famous literary critic studied as an undergraduate at one Ivy League school and, after a doctoral stay at a prestigious university in England, has gone on to stints at two other Ivy League institutions. In between he taught a class or two occasionally at one of the most renowned and privileged universities in the South. Generally, he is promoted as one of the foremost scholars in his field, hence equaled perhaps by only two of three others who may never rival his academic pedigree. Few Southern academicians probably know that the celebrated figure has published serious work in fewer than half a dozen refereed journals. Almost completely the personal fame, so promoted by the person and others, depends on two of the author's rewrites, one each of the Master's essay and doctoral dissertation published by a commercial press with an academic name. As with another scholar now migrated back north as well, the scholar has written to date no definitive essay about any significant writer. Almost, as if by magic, both of the popular critics seem sometimes to be publicly anointed as two of the greatest African Americanists ever to live.

Whether the talented person has earned six figures is far less consequential than that the African Americanist just across campus is probably worth more. Like the writer of the opening epigraph, the more promoted critics avoid the public taboo of perceiving racial difference. Though they voice the ideology as prescribed within the liberal academy from Washington to Cambridge, they fail to bring lasting diversity to their campuses; they may even betray their academic communities as well as American civilization, for they seek to leapfrog cultural conflict in ways

that are humanly in- , ssible. Without the recognition of cultural anxiety comes only the dishonest unity of cultures. Hence, any effort to overcome the cultural conflict by a short-circuited transcendence into diversity will likely fail because the Hunan process of transition would be so liberally incomplete. If the failure of the academic right is to propose that races are all different, the more subtle flaw of the left is to assert that they are all the same. Whatever the progressive claims of the latter, both camps neglect the vital role of culture in human life. Probably both are more concerned with the purity of their system than with academic truth. Among many of the valuable scholars in the history of African Americans --- George E. Kent, Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Frances Smith Foster, Barbara Christian, and many others--- have all achieved scholarly records that equal or surpass those of recent legend. Somehow Deans will have to distinguish between quality and hype.

A few examples from a graduate seminar at Tennessee might prove instructive. Of the six or so students reputedly loved most by the Department of English, one suddenly became active when the discussion turned to the gothic conventions in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglas*. Bored earlier with inquiry into what Douglas means by "What shall men remember?,"⁴ she was happy to be so comfortably on the real text. Now she would convince the professor that, as a far cry from her experience with him during her sophomore days in the introductory course, she was brilliant. More likely, the early assessment proved true. What she had never learned was to examine the process of her own critical thought and the assumptions behind it. Whatever her ability to take notes and memorize facts, she had never become an original thinker. For trying to make her one, the professor was wrong. Her best paper was about the Catholic rites in the "Diary of an African Nun" by Alice Walker. Almost always she would prove insensitive to any appreciation of greatness in the innovative techniques of gifted heathens or barbarians. What she would never have a feel for was a genius outside the canonical game. Initially her best friend and supporter seemed only willing to talk about the verbal structures that include the beginning and ends of stories as well. And though he would never become a raving inquirer into the bond

between the literary art of culture and the power that prescribes the critic to value it on traditional terms, he became far more self-conscious of his critical precepts.

Even better was the female student who wrote that the professor could theorize about why Janie Crawford kills the potential husband, Vergible Woods (Teacake), in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and why she never has children in the text but that the male professor can never really *know*. She asserts that gender consciousness can be sympathized with, but never empathized with. It was an honor that the young scholar of Nabokov's *Lolita* earned distinction for writing the best paper by a graduate student in English at Tennessee two years later. Her essay on Baldwin had also been good enough to publish. Elsewhere, two Master's students, both white women, confronted each other before a Good Samaritan, a Hispanic female, pulled away the rabid progressive. "I hope you won't be using anything from that class on the written examinations," had mocked the blond South Carolinian who would say almost anything with a good whiskey in hand, "because the professor teaches race --- not literature." Among a dozen or so of those who doubted cultural diversity most indignantly in 1990, six applied in 1993 to follow the professor to Georgia.

In a profession that sometimes values too much how anonymous teachers and administrators can be by playing it safe, it is often courageous to reward the scholarly teaching of academic difference in Southern universities. As suggested above, the efforts probably succeed most when they are grounded in a traditional discipline and focus on a specific text. Most crucial to the inquiry is to center on the process of awareness over the presentation of factual knowledge. For *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the question is not only how it is a good frame story, a neat opening and close, but the way it encapsulates a Black woman's posture about her protective shawl -- and her enfolding imagination. It is indeed a story of the narrator's own artistic triumph against the backdrop of Southern floods and the conscription of black male workers despite their will. What will be difficult for Department Heads and Deans to do is to look constantly for ways to reward the students as well as professors who achieve the break through in critical thinking.

What happens, for instance, if a graduate student asks if the African American literature course should be taught in a broader course of Ethnic Studies or in a traditional one of American literature? The answer might be a resounding yes because the omission of the subject would belie the cultural diversity and range of the United States, one of several nations in the Americas.

But deans would well be forewarned. Several years ago a hot debate about a new curriculum raged in faculty meetings at Tennessee. In a written response to a proposal, I said that Black literature, once deprived of current favor within the core curriculum, would be excluded from the package in American Literature. Because Black texts would have been integrated into the Mainstream course, and possibly even taught by traditionalists⁵, I was chastised by my very collegial Head, a conservatively decent man. What became clear in the talk, however, was that he thought black literature meant texts written in English by writers who happened to be black. I, on the contrary, considered Black literature to be the textual redemption of conflict and difference as African American vision embodied within literary forms. While he was talking about coverage, I was talking about substance. Silently we understood.

Though scholars who happen to be black may prove useful for the convenience of faculty and administration in the short run, they are unlikely to recruit distinguished African American graduates. Whatever the preferences of employers, they need to know that black students want African American scholars to help see them through troubled times. Indeed, the preference is often so intense that they still speak with passionate wrath about the other kind of professor nearly twenty years after graduation. Even a McArthur prize for the former professor serves only to increase the rage.

It is the other kind of professor who presses for lasting diversity in the core curriculum of graduate study. Useful to all would be a departmental program in African American Literature or Studies for four courses toward perhaps an interdisciplinary degree of six to eight courses coupled with a few classes in a traditional field. Once the rewards for diversity exist for the faculty, someone would have to celebrate the changes so that they are recognized. Few prizes exist

for the African American mentors of black students and others. Especially to someone trained in the great tradition of Western thought, the benefits would be invaluable. Within a department would emerge a new energy that accompanies fresh methodology. To arrange a state of the arts conference in African American scholarship, as, for example, Tennessee did in 1978⁶ and North Carolina in 1981, signaled an advance for Southern universities. Today they have begun to compete with Brown and Harvard for the ablest African American scholars in graduate programs as well as on faculties. From what researchers know, most of the successful Black students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels exist in direct proportion to the presence of Black faculty. What some graduate leaders at Duke or at North Carolina State or at Georgia would do may not always generate immediate fireworks. In fact, the distinction that Ohio State University, Brown University, and the University of Chicago still enjoy today, as distinguished producers of African American scholars, began in the late twenties and thirties. What Clarke-Atlanta and Clemson universities have done recently might earn just due by 2040.

To the degree that administration rewards faculty today for a significant diversity of kind --- rather than a cosmetic difference of degree --- it will have set the tone of leadership. It will have promoted pluralism in student as well as faculty pools, and it will have established a cultural resource for the state. Without constant professions of commitment, administration would have turned many heads and raised several eyebrows among state legislators, particularly those who represent nearly a third of all Georgians. As funds become more competitive among state rivals, some schools with ambitious energy have positioned themselves expediently as the public authorities in African American inquiry.

But in the end programs must be evaluated according to the graduate students they produce and the scholars who have challenged them to think with diversity. Just as we reward our foremost institutes and scholars in Shakespeare and Joyce, so we must recognize our Black scholars --- African Americanists and Africanists-- as being vital to critical thinking. Excellence of the kind points to a decisive commitment by the leadership of the university. It means national visibility for programs and, as Governor Miller says about the Georgia flag, it signifies a rare

chance to rewrite Southern history. Especially in the Northeast, even the greatest universities have rewarded cosmetic diversity. While they have some fine people, those at Jackson State and Old Miss have provided more forums for voices written on behalf of the African American masses. *Mississippi Quarterly* has encouraged more inquiry into American difference than has the *Harvard Review*. Perhaps the South simply conceptualizes diversity better; perhaps, it is too honest to repress the importance of conflict. If so, its own reward may be to lead the nation.

¹MELUS: *Black Modernism and Post Modernism*, 17 (1991-92) 1-2.

²Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (1940; New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1986) 254-255,

³Donna M. Gollnick and Philip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1986); *Multicultural Education and Ethnic Studies in the United States: An Analysis and Annotated Bibliography of Selected ERIC Documents* (Washington: American Association of Colleges for Teachers, 1976).

⁴Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; New York: Macmillan, 1962) 414.

If we ought to forget a war which has filled our land with widows and orphans, which has made stumps of men of the very flower of our youth, which has sent them on the journey of life armless, legless, maimed and mutilated, which has piled up a debt heavier than a mountain of gold, swept uncounted thousands of men into bloody graves and planted agony at a million hearthstones --- I say, if this war is to be forgotten, I ask, in the name of all things sacred, what shall men remember?

⁵White friends assured me that in many instances it would not be taught at all, but we could not say so in the meeting.

⁶R. Baxter Miller, *Black American Literature and Humanism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989)

For Your Information

R. Baxter Miller (Ph.D., Brown), Professor of English and Director of the Institute for African American Studies at the University of Georgia, was formerly Director of the Black Literature Program at the University of Tennessee. His diverse areas of specialization include critical theory and British Romantic poetry. Miller, who has been President of the Langston Hughes Society, has written or edited six books and monographs, including *The Art and Imagination of Langston Hughes* (Kentucky 1989), which won an American Book Award for 1991. His other works include *The Southern Trace of Black Critical Theory*, a specially commissioned study for the *Xavier Review* (1991); the internationally acclaimed *Black American Literature and Humanism* (Kentucky 1981), *Black American Poets Between Worlds, 1940-1960* (Tennessee 1986), *Reference Guide to Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks* (G.K. Hall 1978). Currently, Miller is completing a collaborative project, *The Critical Methods of African Americans* (Modern Language Association Research) and coediting *The African American Tradition in Literature* (McGraw Hill 1993), for which he has written a new introduction to the Harlem Renaissance as well as to the age of Brooks and Wright. Miller is finishing another book, "New Chicago Renaissance from Wright to Kent." He has written scores of chapters in books and of articles as well as reviews for professional journals.