As a black intellectual, I am both intrigued and horrified by the contradictory nature of the black presence in North American universities. We are, as students, as teachers, and as cultural producers, simultaneously visibly present in and starkly absent from university life. Although it costs approximately $20,000 a year to attend Yale and approximately $50,000 a year to reside in a New York jail, black males are being incarcerated at unprecedented rates. The press and the culture industry, having “discovered” the black woman writer for the first time in the 1970s, are now finding it increasingly profitable to market narratives of the lives of successful black men. Articles about black males who have “made it” are no longer to be found only in the entertainment or sports sections of national newspapers: musicians and basketball stars have been joined by black male film directors and academics in the pages of our Sunday magazines.

In particular, the very existence of black male professors seems to fascinate the New York Times. On April 1 1990, the Times ran a cover story in its magazine entitled “Henry Louis Gates Jr.: Black Studies’ New Star.” Stanley Fish, Chair of the English Department at Duke University, patronizingly described Professor Gates’s professional success as “entrepreneurial P.T. Barnumism.” Adam Begley, the author of the Times’s story on Gates, concluded that with “a phone in his Mercedes-Benz, a literary agent in New York, and an impressive network of contacts in the academy, publishing and the arts, [Professor Gates] seems more like a mogul than a scholar.” The Times article is, at best, ambivalent toward its black subject, and frequently adopts such an incisive tone of ridicule that one wonders if the newspaper’s editorial staff consciously decided to create an April 1 cartoon of Black Studies as a ship of fools. A much more serious, considered and sober article about Cornel West appeared in the same magazine, describing him as “Princeton’s Public Intellectual.”

In stark contrast to the attention paid to individual black professors, the glaring absence of any equivalent publicity accorded the fact of the paltry presence of non-white regular faculty in universities receives little attention: 3.8 percent are Asian; 4.1 percent are black; 0.4 percent are Native
American; and 1.3 percent are Latino.3 Derrick Bell, a professor at the Harvard Law School, argued that

a widespread assumption exists that there is an irreconcilable conflict between achieving diversity in law school faculties and maintaining academic excellence. . . . It serves as a primary reason why most college and university faculties across the nation remain all-white and mostly-male almost four decades after the law barred them from continuing their long-practiced policies of excluding minorities and women because of their race and sex without regard to their academic qualifications.

These “contentions,” Bell maintains,

are simultaneously racially insulting and arrogantly wrong: They are insulting because they insinuate that the old rules of racial segregation rightly correlated color with intellectual inferiority. They are arrogant in that they assume that all of those with upper-class-based qualifications are by definition exemplary scholars and teachers.4

Bell continued by stressing that “minorities who achieve are deemed ‘exceptions’” while those “who fail are deemed painful proof that we must adhere to hiring standards that subsidize the well-placed members of our society while penalizing those, white as well as black, from disadvantaged backgrounds.” The fact that more than 90 percent of all faculty members across the nation are white is a scandal but is not, apparently, a cause for journalistic outrage or newspaper headlines.

The percentage of black students in college populations has steadily decreased throughout the last decade, as has the number of BAs awarded to black students, even though the absolute number of bachelor’s degrees awarded has been increasing nationally. In graduate schools the proportion of American graduate students who are black is also decreasing, and the proportion of doctorates awarded to black people is also in significant decline. The number of tenured black professors has increased slightly but the number of untenured black appointees is decreasing.5 Clearly, if the black student population continues to decline at the undergraduate and graduate levels, the current black intellectual presence in academia, small as it is, will not be reproduced.

During the past two years debate about the introduction of the inclusion of peoples from a variety of ethnic, national and class backgrounds as appropriate subjects for educational study and research has become focused in a public way around the institution of what is now commonly referred to as the “multicultural curriculum.” Multiculturalism appears to be a controversial issue at all levels of the national educational system; debate about multiculturalism is not confined to universities. Despite the apparent uniformity of issues that are being fought over, in what I like to refer to as the “multicultural wars of position,” there are, in fact,
significantly different interests in play and at stake, as these battles take place regionally and in the public and private spheres of education. However, it is important to recognize that even though this debate is differently inflected at different levels, all aspects constitute a debate about contemporary meanings of race in North America. Indeed, I would argue that multiculturalism is one of the current code words for race, a code that is just as effective in creating a common-sense awareness that race is, indeed, the subject that is being evoked as is the word “drugs” or the phrase “inner-city violence.”

Since the fall of 1990, we have witnessed a barrage of journalistic attacks on both the concept of multiculturalism and attempts to institute multicultural curricula. These reports have either implicitly or explicitly acknowledged that multiculturalism is a discourse about race, and have frequently asserted that there are close and disturbing links between multiculturalism, affirmative action and threats to freedom of speech guaranteed by the First Amendment. In common-sense terms, affirmative action is no longer referred to by the media as a necessary corrective social policy, but, instead, as a social problem that itself needs correction. The press’s perceptions of the threats to freedom of speech and expression have shaped a moral panic about allegedly terrorist attempts to institute “politically correct” thought and behavior. Indeed, this danger is thought to be so real that it has elicited condemnation from President Bush himself. It is as if the historical contradictions between the original Constitution, which sanctioned slavery, and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments have returned to haunt us yet again, only to be dispelled by a form of executive exorcism.

The fundamental contradictions of a society structured by racial inequality since its founding moment have been shaped in the 1990s by an administration in Washington that is not only unsympathetic toward any demands for civil rights, but blatantly antagonistic to such demands. If we also consider the moral panics about affirmative action, anti-sexist and anti-racist codes of behavior, and multiculturalism in the pages of numerous journals like *Time, Newsweek, the Atlantic Monthly, the New Republic, the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, it would appear that liberal, as well as conservative, opposition to increasing cultural and ethnic diversity in higher education is becoming entrenched.6

For those of us who recognize the need for transformations in our educational systems, and in the ways in which we organize fields of knowledge, it is frequently dismaying to consider what is sometimes thought to constitute change in educational policy and practice. Departments and programs in many private universities, for example, will proudly point to an “integrated” curriculum while being unable to point to an integrated student body — except in photographs in their student handbooks: photographs that contrive to demonstrate “diversity” by
self-consciously including the pitiful handful of black, Latino, Asian, Chicano and perhaps even fewer Native American students on campus. As Nicolaus Mills argued in his survey of 1990 college publications, the contemporary college-view book presents an idealized world in which the dominant code word is “diversity.”

“Diversity is the hallmark of the Harvard/Radcliffe experience,” the first sentence in the Harvard University register declares. “Diversity is the virtual core of University life,” the University of Michigan bulletin announces. “Diversity is rooted deeply in the liberal arts tradition and is key to our educational philosophy,” Connecticut College insists. “Duke’s 5,800 undergraduates come from regions which are truly diverse,” the Duke University bulletin declares. “Stanford values a class that is both ethnically and economically diverse,” the Stanford University bulletin notes. Brown University says, “When asked to describe the undergraduate life at The College—and particularly their first strongest impression of Brown as freshmen—students consistently bring up the same topic: the diversity of the student body.”

In this context, Mills concluded, diversity means that “a college is doing its best to abolish the idea that it caters to middle-class whites.”

The varying cultural and political presences of black women in universities provide particularly good examples of the contradictions that are embedded in the various curricular practices that occur under the aegis of “diversity.” On many campuses, coalitions of marginalized and non-marginalized women, students and professors have formed alliances to ensure inclusion of the histories of black women and other previously excluded categories of women in the university curriculum. But the result has been a patchwork of success and spectacular failures. Clearly, the syllabi of some courses, particularly within Women’s Studies and African American Studies programs, have been transformed, and the demand for the establishment of programs in Ethnic Studies is both vocal and assertive. However, changes too frequently amounted only to the inclusion of one or two new books in an already established syllabus, rather than a reconsideration of the basic conceptual structures of a course.

Within Women’s Studies and some literature departments, black women writers have been used and, I would argue, abused as cultural and political icons. Regardless of the fact that the writings of black women are extraordinarily diverse, complex and multifaceted, feminist theory has frequently used and abused this material to produce an essential black female subject for its own consumption, one that represents a single dimension: either the long-suffering or the triumphantly noble aspect of a black community throughout history. Because this black female subject has to carry the burden of representing what is otherwise significantly absent in the curriculum, issues of complexity disappear under the pressure of the demand to give meaning to blackness.

Certainly, we can see how the black female subject has become very
profitable for the culture industry. The HarperCollins reprint of all the previously published books of Zora Neale Hurston, for example, has been an extraordinarily profitable publishing enterprise based primarily on sales within an academic market. We need to ask why black or other non-white women are needed as cultural and political icons by the white middle class at this particular moment. What cultural and political need is being expressed, and what role is the black female subject being reduced to play? I would argue that it is necessary to recognize the contradictions between elevating the black female subject as a major text within multiculturalism, and the failure of multiculturalism to lead students to understand the possibility of an integrated society or promote the integration of student and faculty bodies on a national scale. Instead of recognizing this contradiction, the black female subject is frequently the means by which many middle-class white students and faculty cleanse their souls and rid themselves of the guilt of living in a society that is still rigidly segregated. Black cultural texts have become fictional substitutes for the lack of any sustained social or political relationships with black people in a society that retains many of its historical practices of apartheid in housing and schooling.

The cultural, political and social complexity of black people is consistently denied in those strands of feminist and multicultural theory that emphasize “difference” and use it to mark social, cultural and political differences as if they were unbridgeable human divisions. But this theoretical emphasis on the recognition of difference, or otherness, requires us to ask, different from and for whom? Black texts have been used in the classroom to focus on the complexity of response in the (white) reader/student’s construction of self in relation to a (black) perceived “other”; the text has been reduced to a tool to motivate that response. The theoretical paradigm of difference is obsessed with the construction of identities rather than relations of power and domination, and, in practice, concentrates on the effect of this difference on a (white) norm. Proponents of multiculturalism and feminist theorists have to interrogate some of their basic and unspoken assumptions: to what extent are fantasized black female and male subjects invented, primarily, to make the white middle class feel better about itself; and, at what point do theories of “difference,” as they inform academic practices, become totally compatible with – rather than a threat to – the rigid frameworks of segregation and ghettoization at work throughout our society?

We need to recognize that we live in a society in which systems of domination and subordination are structured through processes of racialization that continuously interact with all other forces of socialization. Theoretically, we should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed in our political imagination as a racialized subject. In this sense, it is important to think about the invention of the category of whiteness as well as of blackness and, consequently, to make visible what is
rendered invisible when viewed as the normative state of existence: specifically the white point in space from which we tend to identify difference. Instead, we situated all North American peoples as racialized subjects in our political imagination, we would see that processes of racialization influenced all our work. But processes of racialization, when they are mentioned at all in multicultural debate, are discussed as if they were the sole concern of those particular groups perceived to be racialized subjects. Because the politics of difference work with concepts of individual identity rather than structures of inequality and exploitation, processes of racialization are marginalized and only given symbolic and political meaning when the subjects are black.

My argument for the centrality of the concept of race is not the same as the assertion—from within the politics of difference—that everyone has an ethnicity. I am not arguing for pluralistic research paradigms, nor for a politics of pluralism, the result of much work on ethnicity. But I am arguing for educational politics that would reveal the structures of power relations that are at work in the racialization of our social order.

As a final exercise in thinking about the ways that the female subject has been addressed and, to a great extent, invented within the curricular practices designed to increase “diversity,” I would like to question the marginalization of the concept of race in the phrase “women of color.” This phrase carries a series of complex meanings. It has its origin in the need of subordinated, marginalized and exploited groups of women to find common ground with each other and in the assertion of their desire to establish a system of alliances as “women of color.” But what happens when this phrase is then taken up and inserted into the language of difference and diversity? Does “women of color” have other meanings inflected by theories of difference and diversity? I know we are all supposed to be familiar with who is being evoked by this term, but do we honestly think that some people lack color? Do white women and men have no color? What does it mean, socially, politically and culturally not to have color? Are those without color not implicated in a society structured in dominance by race? Are those without color outside of the hierarchy of social relations and not racialized? Are only the “colored” to be the subjects of a specialized discourse of difference? And, most importantly, do existing power relations remain intact and unchallenged by this discourse?

We need to ask ourselves some serious questions about our culture and our politics. Is the emphasis on cultural diversity making invisible the politics of race in this increasingly segregated nation, and is the language of cultural diversity a convenient substitute for the political action needed to desegregate? In considering a response, we would be wise to remember Malcolm X’s words: “There is nothing that the white man will do to bring about true, sincere citizenship or civil rights recognition for black people in this country. . . . They will always talk it but they won’t practice it.” While the attention of faculty and administrators has been directed toward
increasing the representation of different social groups in the curriculum or the college handbook, few alliances have been forged with substantial forces across this society that will significantly halt and reverse the declining numbers of black, working-class, and poor people among university student bodies or faculty.

From one perspective, academic language in the 1980s appeared to be at odds with the growing conservatism of the Reagan years. It seemed, at times, as if life in the academy was dominated by questions about the monolithic (and mono-ethnic) nature of courses in Western civilization, about texts that constituted all white and male literary and historical "canons," and about issues of "diversity" and "difference." Students on campuses all over the country formed movements that condemned apartheid in South Africa and vigorously worked to persuade university administrations to divest their economic holdings in that country. However, we have to confront the fact that the white middle and upper classes in this country, from which these students predominantly come, have, simultaneously, sustained and supported apartheid-like structures that support segregation in housing and education in the United States. Comparisons with South African apartheid are a part of the language of black American daily life: the Bronx becomes "New York Johannesburg"; Chicago is called "Joburg by the Lake"; and the Minneapolis Star Tribune is known by black politicians as the "Johannesburg Times."

In Connecticut, the state where I live and work, the constitution provides for free public elementary and secondary schools, and specifically states that "No person shall be subjected to Segregation or Discrimination because of Religion, Race, Color, Ancestry or National Origin." According to a recent report, 450,000 children attend school in Connecticut and 1 out of every 4 is non-white. But 8 out of 10 "minority" students "are concentrated in 10 percent of the school districts. By the year 2000, minority enrollments in Hartford, Bridgeport, and New Haven public schools will be approaching 100 percent."

Such systems of segregation ensure that the black working class and the urban poor will not encroach on the privileged territory of the white middle and upper classes, or into the institutions that are the gatekeepers and providers of legitimate access to power — universities included. The integration that has occurred has been primarily due to class assimilation, and affirmative action has become an important mechanism for advancing a very limited number of black people into the middle class. Good examples are the admissions practices at Harvard University, discussed in a recent report on affirmative action:

Harvard has sought to avoid the problem [of attrition] by ensuring that most of its black students come from middle-class families and predominantly white schools. As an admissions officer explained, "It is right for Harvard and better for the students, because there is better adjustment and less desperate alienation."
Because entry into the professions is a major port of entry into the middle class, universities have been important and contested sites in which to accomplish the transformation of the previously outcast into an acceptable body for integration.

The social and political consciousness of the undergraduate population currently enrolled in universities has been formed entirely during the Reagan and Bush years, and the disparity between the groups that have benefited from, and those that have been radically disadvantaged by, the social policies of conservatism is stark. Public systems of education in particular regions have had to respond rather differently than overwhelmingly white private or public universities to questions of diversity and difference. In some schools and colleges in the New York City educational system, for example, the so-called minority groups are overwhelmingly in the majority and issues of difference and diversity are not theoretical playthings at odds with the context in which teaching occurs. New York public schools, which seem to have the most radically diverse and transformed curriculum in the country, find that this curriculum is now under vigorous attack by the New York Regents. At the same time, it is precisely the state and city educational systems with a majority population of black and Latino/a students that are disastrously underfunded. The withdrawal of federal funds and drastic cuts in state and city financing promise to decimate what is left of the promise of the city's schools and colleges.

Meanwhile, the National Association of Scholars, its friends and allies, and the media campaign against curricular reform have had significant effects in turning the general climate in the universities with money against educational reform and affirmative action. Not the least of these effects is the example of the $20 million donation to Yale University for the promotion of scholarship in Western civilization, a donation that was only one of four equivalent donations from the same family within one year. There is no equivalent donation that has ever been made to institute courses in non-Western civilizations that I have been able to find, but I can imagine the difference to the New Haven public school system that an injection of $80 million might make. In the public sphere, the most recent presidential educational initiative seeks to replace federal funding of the public schools with corporate funding. One has to ask: will this mean corporate control of the curriculum as well?

In the post-civil-rights era, one has to wonder at the massive resources that are being mobilized in opposition to programs or courses that focus on non-white or ethnically diverse topics and issues. One wonders too about the strength of the opposition to affirmative action when social mobility has been gained by so few black people, and black entry into the so-called mainstream has been on the grounds of middle-class acceptability and not the end of segregation. Perhaps it is not too cynical to speculate that the South African government has learned a significant lesson by
watching the example of the United States in the last two decades: some of the most important aspects of an apartheid system can be retained without having to maintain rigid apartheid legislation. It is in this social, political and economic context that I feel it essential to question the disparity between the vigor of debates about the inclusion of black subjects in a syllabus, and the almost total silence about and utter disregard for the material conditions of most black people.

From the vantage point of the academy, it is obvious that the publishing explosion of black women's fiction has been a major influence in multicultural curriculum development, and I have tried to point to the ways in which the texts of black women sit uneasily in a discourse that seems to act as a substitute for the political activity of desegregation. But it is also evident that in white suburban libraries, bookstores and supermarkets, an ever-increasing number of narratives of black lives are easily available. The retention of segregated neighborhoods and public schools and the apartheid-like structure of black inner city versus white suburban life mean that those who read these texts lack the opportunity to grow up in any equitable way with each other. Indeed, those same readers are part of the white suburban constituency who refuse to support the building of affordable housing in their affluent suburbs, aggressively oppose the bussing of children from the inner city into their neighborhood schools, and who would fight to the death to prevent their children from being bussed into the urban blight that is the norm for black children. For white suburbia, as well as for white middle-class students in universities, these texts are becoming a way of gaining knowledge of the "other": a knowledge that appears to satisfy and replace the desire to challenge existing frameworks of segregation. Have we, as a society, successfully eliminated the desire for achieving integration through political agitation for civil rights and opted instead for knowing each other through cultural texts?

1992

Notes

3. These figures are from the American Council on Education, Office of Minority Concerns, "Seventh Annual Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education," Table 13, as quoted in "Recruitment and Retention of Minority Group Members on the Faculty at Yale," the report of a committee chaired by Judith Rodin, Yale University, 1.

In the National Research Council's report A Common Destiny, the outlook for black faculty is gloomy: "Figures for 1977–1983 show a drop of 6.2 percent in
the number of full-time black faculty at public four-year institutions and of 19 percent at private institutions. Black under-representation is greatest at elite universities and at two-year colleges. There is little prospect for growth in black representation in light of the declines in both the percentage of blacks going on to college and the percentage pursuing graduate and professional degrees.


5. See “Recruitment and Retention of Minority Group Members on the Faculty at Yale,” p. 1.

6. There have been a number of articles in the national and local press that have been extremely critical of what is called “the hegemony of the politically correct,” and which have described attempts to transform the canon as “liberal fascism” or terrorism. See, for example, “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct,” New York Times, October 28 1990, sect. 4, p. 4; “Opening Academia Without Closing It Down,” New York Times, December 9 1990, sect. 4, p. 5; “Proponents of ‘Multicultural’ Humanities Research Call for a Critical Look at Its Achievements,” Chronicle of Higher Education, November 28 1990, pp. A5–A10). An issue of Newsweek even went so far as to inscribe the words “Thought Police” on stone on its cover (“Watch What You Say: Thought Police,” Newsweek, December 24 1990, pp. 48–55). In contrast the Boston Globe Magazine (October 13 1991) ran a much more sympathetic article on multiculturalism as a phenomenon of the “melting pot,” entitled “The New World.” However, it concluded with a negative article on multicultural education by Kenneth Jackson, “Too Many Have Let Enthusiasm Outrun Reason” (pp. 27–32).


8. Presumably influenced by the possibility of sharing some of the massive profits realized by the publishing industry through marketing the black female subject, film distribution companies have recently begun to vigorously market films about black women to university professors for course use. See Chapter 4 in the present volume.

9. I would like to thank Paul Gilroy for the many conversations we have had sharing our ideas on this issue. His influence upon my thinking has been profound.


14. Ibid.

16. Giving this extraordinary amount of money, $80 million, to an already well-endowed institution, needs to be measured against initiatives to support inner-city schools by using black churches as sites for supplemental educational classes and activities. The Association for the Advancement of Science has spent $800,000 over a period of four years for educational programs in 800 churches in seventeen cities. The largest donation by a private foundation for church-based educational programs appears to be $2.3 million spread among nine cities from the Carnegie Corporation. See the *New York Times*, August 7 1991, p. A1.