

Not Just a Matter of Course: Lillian S. Robinson Talks with Linda Brodkey

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Not just a matter of course

Lillian S. Robinson talks with Linda Brodkey

IN THE LATE SPRING OF 1990, as I prepared to move to the University of Texas at Austin for a year as Visiting Professor of English and American Studies, I learned of an exciting revision that was planned for the required first-year writing course.

The committee in charge of Lower Division English had voted to adopt a common one-semester syllabus to be called "Writing About Difference" and focusing on argumentation around the social inequities raised by discrimination suits. (It was not, as even sympathetic colleagues from other institutions often assume, a course in or about multiculturalism.) By midsummer, a campus campaign financed and orchestrated by the ultra right had become statewide, through media attacks and a wave of letters to the university administration, and the revised version of the course was postponed.

It was at my first meeting, in September, that the English Department voted 46 to 11 (with 4 abstentions) to uphold the committee's right to make and implement policy to meet the curricular goals of the first-year English course. Despite this expression of support (and a similar 52 to 2 vote from the graduate students), the administration took steps that fall to make sure that the postponement of the course was translated into effective cancellation.

Although much of the saga of English 306 took place while I was on the Texas faculty or getting ready to join it, I find it hard to sort out what happened here and what can be learned from it. (The phrase "don't know what hit us" comes inexorably to mind.) I do know that the Texas story belongs in any survey of the backlash against feminist and multicultural studies. This conversation with my colleague Linda Brodkey, former Director of Lower Division English at the University of Texas, Austin, is an attempt to clarify some of the issues that affect us all.

Lillian Robinson: At my first Department meeting, I heard the opponents of the new English 306 saying that what was needed was not all this politicization but a course in basic writing skills. So I got up and said "A lot depends on how you define basic writing skills. Because to me, respect for the student and the fact that the student is capable of having something to say is very basic indeed."

Linda Brodkey: But if you see writing as an intransitive verb, as I think the opponents do, as something to do, rather than doing something, that's the basis of the intellectual difference of opinion. I see our students as having learned that what you do in school is not to write, but to rehearse writing, with the point being to avoid the minefield of potential syntactical problems. The students we teach in this course, many of whom are practiced writers, but practiced writers of the five-paragraph essay, haven't experienced writing as we do it, as a chance to explore ideas, articulate claims, lay out cases and modify them in the light of the evidence. None of that happens if you think an essay is nothing but an elaborate test of grammar and usage.

LR: So "Writing About Difference" was deliberately chosen, first of all, to have content, and secondly to have content that would be provocative, involving something that everyone has opinions on, but where students would learn how to argue for their opinion. And that was threatening?

LB: To the opposition, it was. It wasn't threatening to us, because we knew that difference was free-floating in those classrooms, anyway. And we thought it was better to deal with difference institutionally than to allow it to free-float, thereby making it the responsibility of graduate student-teachers to figure out *ad hoc* a way to

deal with difference when it came up in the classroom. For the opponents, it was threatening because once the institution admits that difference is an issue, then in fact the institution may have to take responsibility for difference, as well as for syntax.

LR: Well, if it wasn't a course in multiculturalism, why do so many people seem to think it was?

LB: That's the way the media sneeringly represented it, as one of those silly courses in multiculturalism, by which they meant an attempt to indoctrinate students into a particular way of thinking about race and gender, which are the only differences the media ever managed to remember. "Writing About Difference" would have prepared students for multicultural courses. At the very least, students would have learned that their teachers expect them to be able to distinguish between an opinion and an informed opinion. And some would have learned that laws against discrimination do not eradicate discrimination, any more than laws against capital crimes eliminate murder. But they wouldn't have learned much about the cultures and histories of the women and men who file discrimination suits. "Writing About Difference" would have been a good writing course, but not a good multicultural course.

LR: Of course, the opponents think there is no such thing as a good multiculturalism course. (As far as they're concerned, the only good multiculturalism is a dead multiculturalism.) But it seems to me that there are a couple of reasons why they selected English 306 as the target for the campaign against multiculturalism. One of them is that it is required of all first-year students across all majors and schools of the university.

LB: That's right—all students who haven't placed out of it by examination or haven't taken the course at some other university.

LR: So that, once the case went public, the very fact of having a requirement could be made to look sinister and translated into something new, as well as some sort of lock-step conformity of thought.

LB: They were able to capitalize quite literally on that and convince the public that students would be victimized by their teachers. They managed this by ignoring the actual materials to be used in the course, Federal anti-discrimination law and court opinions, and pretending that Paula Rothenberg's reader, *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, would be the only material students would read for the course. We hoped initially that the book would supplement the legal opinions, contextualize them and give students a sense of the social and economic background of the civil rights movement. As we worked on the syllabus, though, we decided against adopting it, because we weren't able to use enough of it to justify the expense. It was a matter of fit, not a judgment against Rothenberg's reader. I feel I have to say that because now, eighteen months later, the opponents still rail hysterically against the Rothenberg text.

I'm convinced the other reason this course was targeted was precisely that it was a writing course. The opponents think of composition as the soft underbelly of the English Department and assumed that most of the regular faculty wouldn't be inter-

ested enough to fight for it. I suspect they were quite surprised to find out that, in fact, many of the full faculty were intrigued by this approach to writing. As you probably know, ten percent of them actually volunteered to teach it along with the graduate students, in order to help them launch it.

LR: Including some of the most distinguished.

LB: Including some of the most distinguished professors in the department. Jane Marcus, for instance, was very enthusiastic about teaching this course, and Ramon Saldívar defended it publicly on several occasions. These are two faculty members, by the way, who have since left the University of Texas.

LR: And both of them people who have worked directly in feminist or multicultural studies.

LB: They are also two distinguished theorists. You know, theorists have created a new climate of enthusiasm in the English Department, both among their colleagues and among the graduate students, about the importance of writing and the teaching of writing. It's the shift of focus that theory entails, the shift to the entire cycle of writing from production through reception, that has made writing as well as reading interesting to those in literary studies as well as in composition.

LR: Do you think the opponents' frustrated expectation of getting support in the department is the reason that they went public?

LB: When they saw how little support there was for the attack within the department, they mobilized people in other departments to sign a "Statement of Academic Concern" that ran as an ad in the campus newspaper. Only 56 faculty out of some 2200 signed it. They did best among those people who are either naive enough to think that they themselves are *not* operating with a theory—those in the applied sciences, for instance—or those from fields where theory is now challenging current methods, such as psychology and philosophy, and where feminists are making serious headway and people of color are starting to. So they went to those colleagues first. They also apparently tried some other channels in the university, where they were rebuffed. The more frustrated they were at the level of institutional support for their position, the more likely they were to take their grievances against their colleagues to what they call the public. This is very much in keeping with the current right-wing ideology, which is that if you cannot achieve your ends through work with your colleagues or on committees or governing bodies, then you have to go public. And that's what they did, the idea being that if they couldn't move the administration through internal arguments, they'd move the administration through negative publicity.

LR: And then they got to control the narrative presented to the public.

LB: Which is surprisingly easy to do, because then they're just dealing with spin control. They control the story. If they'd kept it in the department, then anybody in the department could potentially challenge their version of events. What shocked me is how uncritically the media fell for it.

LR: Didn't the *Texas Monthly* attack on the department come out before the English 306 controversy?

LB: It actually came out right when we were making the decision to change the syllabus. And it was a specious attack, which undermined the credibility of any of its members not identified by the magazine as

"traditionalists," which was the honorific they applied to the right wing.

LR: Several people showed it to me, because they knew I was actually going to this place. The article claimed the UT English Department harbored two subversive tendencies: one was an attitude of ironic iconoclasm toward things Texan, Texas nativism, and the other was—oh horrors!—multiculturalism. I'll never forget the paragraph that said with disdain that there are people in the Texas English Department who would rather teach the work of Sandra Cisneros in a course in American literature than an acknowledged classic like *The Great Gatsby*—with Cisneros being characterized as a "currently trendy young Chicana writer." Nothing was said about her work except that she was "fashionable" among us, was young—that is, still living—and a Chicana, and that was supposed to be sufficiently damning in itself. It struck me as particularly ironic, because if you were to set out to find an example of the volatility within the white, male American canon, Fitzgerald would be an excellent case in point. In my own time in the profession, I think he's been in and out of favor several times.

LB: But you'll notice, too, that white feminists almost never get singled out by name—we're just a hysterical collective group. They're careful to make sure that when they isolate a woman, she's a woman of color. Maybe they think that if they just sneer at Toni Morrison or Alice Walker or Sandra Cisneros, white feminists won't notice that they're actually saying that any author who isn't white and male and already in the canon isn't a real author. In fact, though, once there is that shift in theory from focus on texts, to focus on interactions between readers and texts, you can't just take the position that the canonical texts are in and of themselves wonderful.

LR: So just as, on one level, the backlash went from committee to department to the administration to the rest of the university to the population of the state of Texas, on another level, it went from local concerns at Texas to a national issue.

LB: When you start looking at it on a national level, you ask yourself: why the attack not only on this course but on other efforts that faculty are making to reform the curriculum on a larger scale, why this moment? And why was it effective? Because it really shouldn't have been. It shouldn't have been that easy to get *Newsweek* to demean faculty efforts to include new texts in classes or to recognize that the demographics are slightly different in most universities than they were ten years ago.

LR: The thing is that once you get into the mass media, they use a word like "obscure" or "unknown" to mean "justifiably obscure." If it's not already recognized as a Great Book, it shouldn't be known, and people like us are digging it up "simply because" of the author's color or gender. When *Time* took up the torch from *Newsweek*, for instance, they dismissed our colleague Shelley Fisher Fishkin's syllabus, which alternated canonical works of white men with works of obscure women writers so that students could see the American nineteenth century through what she called "the prison-house of gender." *Time* didn't make any other comment on this—as if in itself it was patently outrageous. The only reason they could do that is the assumption that any obscure woman writer of the nineteenth century deserves no space on the syllabus, which then is going to have to compress or eliminate some of the works of great white men that Shelley's contrasting them with.

The same paragraph continues by attacking me (neither of us by name, as you point out, since we're not Alice Walker or Sandra Cisneros) for having said in *The Nation* that adherents to the traditional literary canon treat culture as if it were a "stagnant secular religion." I happen to be rather fond of the rest of the context they took that out of, which speaks of the alternative, "culture as a living historical process," but taking it out of context didn't distort it. I do believe that this secular-religion attitude is part of the problem. I meant it in the sense of fetishizing sacred texts, but there's also a larger way in which they have secularized what started as a religious crusade within academic institutions.

LB: I think you're right. And it's a long process, when you realize that what we're looking at in the beginning of the nineties is something that William Buckley launched in the middle fifties, some version of *God and Man at Yale*, only in the secular version there's no distinction between God and man, we just have man as god.

LR: As long as he's the white color.

LB: You did say "the white color"? But what I find appalling is that some of these men are willing to sacrifice all the gains in academic freedom and responsibility that people have worked very hard for over the last 30 years, simply because they're in a pet over the fact that they lost some very critical intellectual battles.

LR: And one of the things that I find most infuriating is that they manage to take the high ground of academic freedom.

LB: They sure do. And, in the process, abridging ours, aided and abetted, here in Texas, by the President of the university. A president's first responsibility, as the chief academic officer, is to defend the academic freedom of the faculty, to protect them from precisely the kind of political attack leveled against us. William Cunningham not only failed to defend us against unwarranted charges, he refused to meet with the committee and delighted in telling the press that he had never even seen our syllabus—a distinction he shares with the other opponents of "Writing About Difference."

LR: All this happened when the code words for their side were "academic freedom," "indoctrination of students" (arising out of our "politicization of the curriculum") and "multiculturalism." In short, the struggle over English 306 occurred right before they picked up the other buzzword, Political Correctness, but clearly it's part of the same continuum. I said in the pages of this very publication a few months ago that the attack on political correctness seems to mean that they think it's worse to call somebody a racist than for that person to be one. I'm now convinced that what they are doing, in fact, is telling people that it's all right to be racist.

LB: It's only recently that the media have begun to catch onto that. It took the much more extreme form of David Duke for the media to see that some of these words are political code words for insiders, and that attacking multiculturalism is permission and in fact encouragement to sneer at people of color. Maybe we can expect, over the course of the next half-year, to see some of the popular press reconsidering the part they played in this. I don't think they'll ever do what I wish they would do, which is replay it and ask themselves how they got suckered into being dupes for the right wing, any more than they're going to talk to us at any length about how they managed not to warn us about the S & L crisis, even though, apparently, in retrospect, they now claim their reporters knew something was going down there. Now that they've broken the Duke code, though, maybe they'll notice that the more polite code of the university backlash is also authorizing racism and sexism. It's okay to be a harasser, as long as you're polite about it? A polite racist is no better than an impolite one.

LR: Since you mentioned the S & L bailout, I also said in these pages a few months ago that the major ways that higher education makes the front pages are the various budgetary crises and the assault on Political Correctness. I'm beginning to think that those are not really two different issues.

LB: In a cynical way, some people in the Federal government are simply looking for a warrant to justify withdrawing money from the academy. You'll notice that the sciences have also been getting bad press in the past eighteen months. What we're

seeing is various parts of the Federal government withdrawing support for higher education, having already massively withdrawn support for K through 12 education. There just isn't any place to gut in the educational system except higher education, and we're seeing it through the withdrawal of Federal monies for science, where, instead of just withdrawing the monies, they're also discrediting science.

LR: They're discrediting *research*.

LB: There's also the Secretary of Education's partisan attack on the Middle States Association and the voluntary examination of the affirmative action recruitment of students and faculty. This is important because accreditation is the basis for student loans. And then there's the attack on minority student scholarships. Revising those policies, if they get away with it, would effectively reverse social history by redlining educational institutions the same way neighborhoods are redlined. It would make it more difficult, though not impossible, for students and teachers to study difference or multiculturalism if there were no people of color or no disabled people on campus to remind them that college is a place for examining, not accepting, received wisdom about anything.

LR: Another of the ironies is that you and I believe anybody who doesn't learn to use the tools of the mind to deal with crucial questions like gender and race and class is an ignoramus, no matter how many years that person has spent in academic buildings—whereas the position on the other side is that that isn't education at all.

The thing is, though, that I see two different "theys," who at the moment have made common cause and in the long run are going to find that they are not really allies. There are the right-wingers who genuinely believe in the Great Books and the Great Ideas and, in fact, in debating ideas. I would put even the worst of them, the Allan Blooms, into that category. But there are also those who are enacting educational policy at the level of funding and institutional management, based on a notion of eliminating all theory and research and, in the long run, eliminating the criticism of ideas. These people think of education as the teaching of fundamental facts and truths, so that we end up with higher education as a series of techniques. You learn computer science, you learn how to be a functionary in an advanced technological society. But you don't learn to ask questions about it.

LB: It's true: Allan Bloom represents a critical position, although I don't agree with it. You could certainly call it a politically reactionary position, but it is different from the other one that you're talking about, which is something closer to reactionary fundamentalism, that non-critical component. I could imagine having an argument with Allan Bloom about this. I can't imagine having an argument with Lynne Cheney. That kind of reactionary fundamentalism sees children and young adults as some version of high-tech automata that we program by implanting skills.

This idea plays in very nicely with the kind of formalist-skills version of writing that we were arguing had no place at all at the University of Texas. We were saying that students here are expected to be critical thinkers and reasoners. Eighteen-year-olds are not just large children. They're young adults. If the society grants them the civic responsibilities of adults, the function of the university should be to help them apply the resources of the intellect to the problems that are plaguing our culture. A course like "Writing About Difference" presumes students are capable and willing to assume that kind of citizenship, and the committee I chaired assumed that democracy can only work if teachers are willing to teach students to confront real issues.

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